

The Blackest Mail

Maxwell Grant

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The Blackest Mail

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I.

A LAND where anything is more than likely to happen. A land of make-believe where the world's dreams are put on celluloid and sold...Hollywood! A land of Cinderellas and Prince Charmings, where fortunes are made.. and lost. And walking through that dream world is one who is turning the dreams into nightmares!

There was a fight going on. It was to be the biggest, most expensive fight that had ever been filmed. There were to be more breakaway chairs broken on more heads, more prop bottles shattered, more stunt men rolling all over the set, than had ever been done before.

The crowding, fighting men crashed down a flight of stairs, a balcony at the foot of a bend in the stairs gave way and dropped the experienced stunt men down onto a specially built table that held for a moment, groaned and then gave way beneath their combined weights.

Two men seated at a side table gravely played gin rummy. Neither flickered an eye nor gave the slightest evidence that they were aware of the mayhem going on around them. "Gin," said one.

"That's a schneider for me!" He looked disgruntled.

The winner picked up the cards and shuffled them as a flying bottle just missed his head. He gave no sign that he had even seen it.

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Lamont Cranston, standing to one side of the racing camera that was recording the scene for the moviegoers of the world, smiled. It was a nice touch, he thought, the card players so occupied in what they were doing that they were oblivious to the fight.

Sturm, the director, poked Lamont in the back with a riding crop. Then he pointed to a table at which a single man sat looking off into space.

Lamont looked in the direction of the pointing crop. The man, Richard Doster, was playing his role to perfection. In the film he was a man who was being blackmailed. He was sitting, drinking, trying to get up enough courage to refuse to pay the blackmailer any more money.

He looked as depressed as though he really were paying his fabulous salary out to a blackmailer. He twirled a swizzle stick in his drink and then, straightening his shoulders out with sudden determination, drained his drink off at a gulp.

The fight raged on around him and the card players. All, every human in the scene, was a bundle of fighting, exploding energy, all but the three men who played their parts so well. The card players laid their cards down as a shot blasted over their heads. A vase on the wall near them crashed in shattered shards. They didn't even blink. Doster, his drink consumed, looked around the room. He was obviously ready for his set-to with the blackmailer. The look in his eye boded no good to the man who was mulcting him. He stood up.

Cranston realized that the selectivity of the movie camera's eye was being used to focus on Doster. The swirling fight was now a background to the purposeful way that Doster strode across the wrecked room.

As Lamont Cranston watched the scene with an appreciative eye, the two puzzling questions that had teased him till they carried him on wings, across the continent to this place of fantasy, tickled at his mind. The questions were: why does the handsomest man in America fly a kite at midnight, and why did the most glamorous woman in America put a toy submarine out in the waters of the Pacific Ocean?

Doster was standing in front of a door now. It was obvious that it was going to take all his courage to face his blackmailer. He put his hand on the knob and started to turn it. Suddenly, and it was frightening in its departure from the norm, he stopped, straightened up and pitched forward on his face.

"Cut!" Sturm was raging mad. He threw his riding crop on the ground and then jumped up and down on it. Cranston grinned. This was the first real sample of Hollywood temperament he had seen. Sturm was raging.

"Imbecile! How many times must we re-do this scene? I have the directions given! Over and over I have them given! Slow, I say, fall slowly! Ten times I have so said! But when he falls, fast he must!"

Sturm bent over and picked up his riding crop which was scarred from previous bursts of "artistic temperament."

"I say we will again do it. This will be the last time. If that dolt, Doster, can't imitate a dying man better than that I shall a real actor get!"

A frown deepened on Lamont Cranston's forehead. The actor had not moved through all that tirade.

Flip Hiller, the special effects man, walked across the set with another drink. He was going to place it on the little table where Doster had drunk the last one! As he walked he looked down at Doster. His face, normally sullen, changed. It got more sullen. He said, "Hey, Sturm! I think you will have to get another actor!"

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"From you I do not need advice!" Sturm was determined to be nasty.

"Need it or not," was Flip's response, "Doster may have been a bad actor, but now he's a good actor! He's dead!"

Cranston was across the set and looking at Doster's strained, dead face before anyone else on the set had recovered from the temporary paralysis that gripped them.

The special effects man knew death when he saw it.

Cranston looked from the dead face to the purpling face of Sturm who was swearing under his breath in German. "To me these things have to happen! This means that we have to re-film all the scenes this nincompoop was in! Gah... it will be a better picture, for that!"

Genia Gladder whose pin-up pictures had adorned every G.I. barrack from Timbuctoo to Tsien Tsin, moved, or maybe trickled would be a better word, across the set towards the tableau that had grown around the dead man. Her face was set in a pose that in pictures would be the one she used when she was the poor widow sent out to the old ladies' home. She said, "How can you be so cruel, so unthinking? A young man, dead! How terrible! Of course he did have that dreadful habit of covering my face with his shoulder in every close up, but I could handle that..."

"Wonder what killed him?" Flip still looked sullen, but curiosity was getting the better of him.

Cranston had wondered how long it would take for someone to think of that. He was positive that Doster had been poisoned. For of all the experts, the highly paid technicians in Hollywood, Cranston was the specialist in the subject at hand. He knew death in all its varied manifestations. Knew them only too well. The awkward strained position that Doster had died in, the convulsed set of his muscles, even the rather horrible grin that pulled at the corners of his set mouth, added up to only one thing, cyanide.

Sturm, with a grimace of distaste, leaned down and sniffed at the dead man's mouth. He grunted, "Potassium cyanide, unless I my guess miss."

A new figure shouldered his way in. It was Tony Hunter, and he was excited. "I'm only the writer here, I know writers don't count for much out in this madhouse, but don't you think I should be told a few..."

His words tapered off as he saw the figure on the floor and Sturm's words seeped in.

"Cyanide? But... that tastes horrible! Why should Doster have swallowed it? He must have committed suicide! No one would swallow a dose like that without realizing that something was wrong."

"You just the stories write!" Sturm's voice was coarse; he was annoyed. "I will the thinking do!"

"While you're busy being a master mind, old fruit, maybe you better call the cops! They are very small-minded; they have a nasty habit of being annoyed if they aren't told about stiffs cluttering up the place!" Flip's voice was deliberately pitched so as to be as obnoxious as possible.

"I will the police call, yes. I was just going to..." Sturm got even more red-faced as everyone in the vicinity chanted the end of his sentence, "...was just going to think of that myself!"

Cranston realized that this was a procedure that went on continually. Sturm did not take to ribbing. Naturally, that made ribbing him all the better.

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"Police, reporters, this is going to be awful!" Genia was in a flutter. She was looking at her hair—do, an imposing pompadour affair, in a mirror as she spoke.

"Yes, I can just imagine how badly that will annoy you! Publicity is so distasteful, my dear!" Flip was being exasperating again. "As if you weren't the worst publicity hound in the business!"

"You're going to get another of your usual black eyes if you keep this up! My Donny won't stand for it!" Genia turned on her heel and walked away from the group.

Cranston juggled names in his mind and realized that Donny would be Don Barron, America's handsomest star. He hadn't known that Genia and Don were a twosome. There seemed to be quite a bit of background to find out about.

Flip's sullen face lost none of its sullenness. It became, if anything, more sullen, but overlaid was a new expression, one that came close to fear. He pointed at one of the flats, a side of the set that represented a saloon wall. There were pictures on it, a mural of sorts. In the center of the mural there was a blank area that was framed in dryads and nymphs. It was this area that Flip's trembling finger was pointing at.

All eyes followed his finger and then there wasn't a sound! People held their breaths as an icy finger of fear ran over the assembly. Only Cranston and one other person was impervious to the astounding thing that happened!

High on the wall, far from any human hand, a message was spelling itself out. The flaring klieg lights with their thousands of watts proved that no one was within twenty feet of the place that the writing was manifesting itself!

All eyes were glued to the flat as, letter by huge letter, appeared— "Doster thought HE could avoid paying me! This is the last warning..."

Even the periods were huge and black, jet black. Cranston's eyes were busy as he watched the various reactions to the astounding message. Flip Hiller was petrified. He seemed to be reading and rereading the message.

Apoplexy seemed close for Sturm, his red, fat face was vermilion. His fat bull neck tightened inside his stiff collar. He seemed ready to explode, implicit with violence.

Two soft, white, long—red—finger—nailed hands went to Genia's pompadour. She patted at it in that ineffectual way that women have. She was pale, even under the panchromatic #27 make—up that covered all her visible flesh. Otherwise, but for her slightly widened eyes, there was no sign of what she might be thinking.

"What kind of nonsense is this?" barked Tony Hunter. He looked annoyed, puzzled, but that was all.

"Yeah, what is it?" A new figure was on the scene, and the tones were the deep virile ones that thrilled practically every woman in America and in a lot of other countries too. Don Barron had the ability to make every entrance in life as dramatic as his screen ones. He commanded the scene, his magnificent black head of hair cocked at a quizzical angle. "Something new been added to Hunter's corny script?"

"Look who's talking about corn!" Hunter was annoyed and looked about ready to do something about it.

Genia was at Barron's side. She said swiftly, "Darling, I'm so glad... the most horrible thing has happened... Poor Richard Doster... He's...he's..."

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"Okay, kid, relax, I'm here. I'll look out for you.... Anyone been bothering you?"

Genia let her eyes flick over Flip's sullen face before she answered. "No... no one has annoyed me."

"I get it, that cheap carnival imitation of a hard guy's been at it! He's gonna get dumped soon and I'm the guy that can do it!"

"Why you..." Flip was set and sending a round house on its way before Sturm could move.

"Stop! Stop it!" Sturm had moved just before the punch landed. He grabbed at Flip's arm and stopped it so suddenly that Flip was thrown off balance. "Don't we have trouble enough, aber?"

Flip shook himself free of Sturm's iron grip and stalked off.

Trouble enough, indeed, thought Cranston. Death had struck quickly and silently...and the sound stage of Impressive Films, Inc., looked as if it held enough warring temperaments to guarantee more trouble and quickly. Tack onto that the curious circumstance of the method of death, and the even stranger writing on the wall...and, yes, it certainly was time for The Shadow to appear.

Rocking, rolling from out of nowhere came the veriest whisper of sound. It was so low as to be just the echo of an echo. But listening ears might have heard the laugh, the knowing laugh of the Master of Men, the Crusader against Crime, The Shadow—about to strike at any moment now.

II.

EFFICIENT as a fine machine, the police went about their duties quietly and with self-confidence. Cranston saw that they were quite sure they were going to nab the killer as soon as they gathered enough fingerprints, took enough pictures of the body and asked enough questions. They had already asked so many questions that tempers worn thin by the high pressure work they did, were starting to crack the movie personnel into warring groups.

It was unusual to be at the scene of a crime without Joe Cardona in the offing. No Cardona, no Commissioner Weston, and no rain. Despite all the fables about California weather, Cranston was impressed by it. It was a hot day. In New York, the hard working detectives would have been drenched with sweat. But here, the lack of humidity saved them.

It was all of five hours since Doster had died. Cranston cocked a weather eye out a window. The sun was still fairly high over the horizon and here it was seven o'clock at night. No one had eaten, and they were starting to get restive. Hunter was speaking.

"Look, Gestapo, how long do you think you can hold us this way, practically incommunicado?"

"Not much longer, please be patient. The quicker we clean this up, the faster you can all get back to normal. I know enough about movies to realize how true it is that time is money. It is to your benefit as well as ours to be cooperative."

The police out in this neck of the woods were certainly polite, Cranston thought. This Lieutenant Sherly was really on his toes and doing a good job. Still, the case was not a clean-cut one and the time might come when Sherly would be grateful for The Shadow's help. Cranston glanced down at his brief case which was at his feet and a curious smile played over his lips.

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"Lieutenant, I realize the truth of all the things you say, but really, I know nothing of all this." Genia looked ingenuous. She was seated with her back to the baffling message on the wall of the set. The others were grouped around in various positions. The calmness of the proceedings was in striking contrast to the wreckage of the set that the movie battle had caused.

"Let's see how straight I've got all this. The fight was going on..."

The lieutenant looked over at the table where the gin rummy players had sat. Tony Hunter was seated playing solitaire with exaggerated lack of interest and pretended boredom.

"The gin rummy players were there, where Hunter is playing solitaire.... Richard Doster was at the facing table with a drink in front of him. Who placed, it there?"

"I did. I'm prop man, special effects man, anything Sturm can think of to hang on me. He was disciplining me. Ordinarily that job would have been done by a thirty-buck-a-weeker."

Sturm nodded at the lieutenant's questioning look. "He was insolent, so I demeaned him! He is under contract, I cannot fire him..."

"My next contract's gonna have something in it about the extent of the jobs I can be asked to do and don't think it won't!"

"Your next contract?" Don Barron's voice was silkily questioning.

Flip half started from his chair and then thought better of it. "I've been in these parts a long time...longer than you, pretty boy. I have a hunch I'll still be here when you're back selling ribbons behind a counter."

Don's grin was irritating. "I guess anyone can stay here as long as they'll go down the ladder the way you have. Remember when he used to be the Humphrey Bogart of his time?"

"That was back in the days of Flora Finch and John Bunny, wasn't it, dear?" Genia's sweet voice poured acid on the wound that Don had gouged.

"Time! Back to neutral corners all of you!" The lieutenant was serious. "I'm never going to get this straight if you all make like prima donnas." He looked from the table at which Doster had taken his death potion and his eyes made a straight line to the door at which Doster had fallen. There was nothing left to show that Doster had ever been but a chalked outline. The stark, rough silhouette was somehow more tragic than the broken body had been.

"It's obvious that anyone would have had a chance to put the cyanide in the glass. Or would it?... How can we check and see who passed close enough to the table to drop the deadly mickey?"

"Why, that is so obvious! We can find out in the cutting room. I am sure!" Sturm fixed his monocle in his eye and surveyed the group. "After all, I am no quickie director, I use film."

"You certainly do! Now! What is going on! Speak up before my ulcers strangle me!"

Cranston looked the man over. It was no one; it could be no one but the fabulous president of the movie concern. His slightest sayings were quoted and mis-quoted all over the world. He had more affectations than even the most temperamental of his stars. If his will was balked in the slightest way, he would have a tantrum that out-did anything pulled since the days of Pola Negri.

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"Mr. Gainsworthy. I had no idea that you'd be back from Mexico today!" Hunter looked upset and Cranston noticed it, although everyone else was too startled to notice anything but the amazing Mr. Gainsworthy. His sport jacket would have made a color-blind man blink. His canary yellow slacks looked as if they'd been pressed by a steam roller. His sport shirt made Joseph's coat of many colors look pale. His tan face, his stubby, chewed-on cigar, all made an ensemble known the world over. His fingers were tapping against the side of his leg.

"Well?" Gainsworthy hung the word in the air and let it remain. He glared at Sturm.

Even that doughty character looked a little peaked. He finally said, "Why...uh... there has some trouble been!"

"You don't say so! I am blind? I can't take my eyes in my hands and look? I don't know there has been a murder? You think the newspapers they do not publish unimportant things like a killing on my lot?"

Sherly braved the storm. "Mr. Doster has died under curious circumstances. I don't like this throwing around of the word murder. It may well be a suicide for all we know. I am just investigating all eventualities before I make up my mind. The drawback is that no one in his right mind would drink cyanide. You'd have to know it. It has a strong, horrible taste... and yet Doster drank his drink without even making a face of disgust or anything of the kind. The handwriting on the wall, while baffling, may not have had anything to do with the death..."

"Handwriting on the wall?" Gainsworthy's eyes shot to the writing. "Who's been scribbling on my set? I'm made of money? Next I suppose mustaches will be drawn on my walls! Wait... it says something HMMMMM..."

Gainsworthy whirled and faced Hunter. "This is some new brain breaker of yours? In this script I don't remember this! It was not in the picture I bought from you!"

"Of course not, J. G. The killer had a hand in that. It's a threat to someone. The death of Doster was supposed to scare someone into paying somebody something!"

"This is as clear as one of your stories! Someone, somebody, something!" Gainsworthy bit the last half inch off his cigar. It was a battered wreck now.

"Who's that? Rubbernecks I have to have too?"

He was pointing to Cranston.

"But you invited him here yourself, J. G." Hunter sounded all upset. "That's Lamont Cranston!"

"Why, of course, I invited him. Nice to have you here. You are having a good time, I hope, Mr. Cranston?" He shook his head and then said, "What am I saying? How can anyone have a good time with corpses all over the place?"

"I am enjoying watching the fine police work of the lieutenant here." Cranston smiled at Sherly, who smiled back appreciatively.

"Police? What do they know? I know of your reputation, Mr. Cranston, any friend of Commissioner Winston is a friend of mine! That card he gave me... how many tickets in New York it has saved me you don't know."

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"If no one minds, I am going out and eat!" Genia patted her hair again and started to walk out holding onto Don Barron's arm.

"If she goes, I go!" Hunter was on his feet. The rest of the people were restive.

Sherly looked at Sturm. "I suppose I really can't get much further without looking over the film record of who was near the table. Suppose we put that first on the agenda. The rest of you can go on about your business. But no trips! You'll be watched. All of you! I'll have a tail on every soul that was in this studio today, if it takes every beat cop in Los Angeles!"

Cranston put his brief case under his arm and prepared to leave. He felt a little sorry for anyone who was detailed to trail him. He had a busy night ahead of him and he didn't intend that any alien eyes be on him.

"You can't go, Mr. Cranston. What would you think of Impressive's hospitality? Not a word! You come with me!" Mr. Gainsworthy was determined. He hooked his arm in Cranston's.

Cranston looked over his shoulder at the retreating backs of the lieutenant and Sturm. Perhaps Lamont Cranston was going to miss seeing the playback of that movie, but The Shadow wouldn't!

Gainsworthy was still speaking or speaking still. It seemed impossible for him to be still. He said, "You'll come with me and I'll have my cook prepare you a home-cooked meal you'll never forget. He can make oatmeal and cream taste like a steak if you give him a chance!"

Cranston smiled and then whistled as he looked at his watch. "Oh, I am sorry! I just realized I have to get back to my hotel for a New York call I am expecting. Will you excuse me? Perhaps we can make it another time?"

Gainsworthy's face fell. He was not used to having his wishes flouted. But he shrugged with fairly good grace and said, "Of course. Business first, that's my motto too. We'll have to make it soon, though."

Gainsworthy watched Cranston's figure disappear around a corner. Then he walked off.

It was Cranston who walked around the corner, but The Shadow who came back. For, once in the comparative security of the shadows that based the building, Cranston whizzed down a zipper in the brief case he had carried all day. A black cape fluffed up out of confinement. That went around his shoulders. A folded black hat came out of the brief case next. The brief case was thin and flexible. It disappeared into the darkness that shrouded the caped figure. No eye saw Cranston change. No eye saw The Shadow, as hugging the eerie darkness that clung to the building now that night had finally fallen, The Shadow stepped circumspectly out onto a street that led to the set where death had appeared as an unpaid extra.

The photographic memory of The Shadow stood him in good stead as he made his way across sets that ranged from the middle eighteenth century, to a pirate hold and thence out onto a cobbled street that ended in the set The Shadow was heading for.

Overhead in a lighted window, figures passed. The voices were those of Sturm and Sherly.

The lights, the overhead lights in the projection room went out. There was a moment of darkness, then the thin stiletto of light from the movie projector lanced down onto the screen. Sherly sighed and hoped that this was going to help him. Truthfully, he was baffled. The case was either too simple or too complicated, he couldn't quite decide. In any event, he didn't care for it.

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For a few seconds there were three pairs of eyes watching the screen: the cinematographer who ran the machine, Sturm and Sherly. Then, although no one in the room knew it, there was a fourth pair of eyes there. Eagle-like eyes that were all-seeing. Hidden in the darkness, The Shadow had climbed up onto the window sill. He sat there now, half in and half out of the window as the bizarre scene flashed across the screen.

There, a dead man lived, smiled, breathed. They watched as Richard Doster made his way in front of the camera and slumped down in the chair. The table was empty but for a shot-glass, a swizzle-stick and a highball glass.

All eight eyes were glued on the screen now. Doster poured the shot-glass into the highball and lackadaisically watched the bubbles rise as it mixed with the ginger ale that was already in the glass. Slowly he picked up the swizzle-stick, looked at it, placed it in the glass and stirred.

His attention was diverted and he watched a fighting man crash off a balcony and whirl through the air. At the other side of the screen a brawler grabbed hold of a chandelier and swung in a lazy arc across the scene. He landed on the far side on top of one of the brawler's necks.

The Shadow realized that this was a part of the picture that had been screened before he arrived. Now... there...Genia Gladder was walking across in front of the camera. Doster raised his eyes, looked at her appraisingly and then lowered his eyes to his glass again.

Then the melee at one side of the room erupted. Flying bodies crashed all around the stolid gin rummy players. They paid no attention. The Shadow realized that while this was happening, the fatal glass was out of sight of the all-seeing camera eye. The men's bodies screened it completely.

Then, and this brought a gasp from Sherly, the camera swiveled away completely. It showed a close up of an action scene. The fatal glass...anything might have happened in the five minutes that this bit of the brawl consumed.

Sherly's voice cut across the voices of the actors on the screen. "We can just forget about this giving us any help! There's not an alibi for anyone in this reel!"

"Why, oh why, did I have to divert the camera at just that moment! It is exasperating, no?"

Sherly smiled wryly in the dark and said, "It is exasperating, yes. May as well put the lights on. I'm going back downtown! This is a waste of time."

But one of the viewers did not find the screening a waste of time. A faint mocking laugh rippled through the room just before the lights went on.

Sherly said, "'Who was that?'" Then he looked foolish. There was no one in the room with him but Sturm. "Why did you laugh?"

Sturm looked outraged. "Me laugh? What about? I see nothing funny! I thought it was you who had a sense of humor that was perverted!"

Both of them looked up at the projection booth but it was soundproof. The laugh had not come from there...

III.

By the time the two men had reacted to The Shadow's laugh he was down off the window sill and on his way across the street. His black-draped figure was completely invisible. Years of experience had taught him just how far in the shadows he had to stay. He walked forward purposefully but carefully. He knew where he was going.

A huge building loomed ahead. The figure that was blacker than black stopped and looked up. This should be it. A door. There it was, a small side door. The door opened. It closed a moment later. But in that moment an unseen figure had glided in. Ahead there was a glare of lights. That was good. The brighter the lights the deeper the shadows on their perimeter.

A new Flip Hiller was seen in the bright lights. All his sullenness was gone. He was seated at a small table. Some paper-wrapped sandwiches were at his side. In front of him on the work table was a tiny, exquisite ship model. The mast, the rigging, all laid flat on the deck of the ship. A thread, fastened to the front of the base, ran the length of the model.

To one side a bottle, turned green by exposure to the sun, waited. The Shadow watched as Flip delicately threaded the ship into the top of the bottle. It just cleared. In the bottle, some green clay had been painted and swirled to look like an angry sea. The ship, inch by inch, went down into the bottle. Flip sighed as the sticky clay caught and held it.

That accomplished, he pulled the thread at the front of the mast. The mast, the sail, the jib, all the rigging, rose. Finally, Flip pasted the end of the thread to the front of the ship. He used a swab stick to do this surgeon-like job. The ship was perfect. Its sail and jib ballooned out in a breeze that never was.

Flip held it up at arm's length and sheer enjoyment lighted up his face. He took a bite of a sandwich and looked off into space.

The Shadow made his careful way around in back of Flip. It was sometimes very revealing to watch people when they were completely off guard, when they had no idea that any eyes were on them.

As quietly as he had come, as soundlessly as a falling leaf in a forest, The Shadow reversed his path. He was at the door. He looked back at Flip. He still sat there chewing his dry sandwich with every evidence of enjoyment.

Then, with shocking abruptness the lights went out. It was so sudden, so unexpected, that even The Shadow's cat-like eyes were useless for a split second. In that flash of time, there was a grunt of pain and then, the heavy sound of a human body hitting the floor.

Even with his eyes momentarily out of commission that sound was all The Shadow needed. He covered the fifteen or twenty feet that separated him from the work bench in two bounds.

Quiet as he had been, someone had heard him. A lashing arm wrapped around his neck. He dropped to his knees instantly, before a strangle hold could be applied. On his knees, he reached up and launched a blow at the spot where he thought his assailant's midriff should be. A wheezing exhalation, as well as the satisfying feel of flesh showed him he had landed.

He was on his feet instantly and looped a round house swing that should have ended the fight. But the bushwacker was no fool. He had shifted and the dynamite laden blow of The Shadow flailed harmlessly

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through the air.

It was like fighting in a nightmare where every blow lands with pillow-like softness. Holding his eyes closed for a moment The Shadow opened them suddenly. The momentary respite had aided his vision. To one side, almost out of reach, a shape was preparing to launch itself at The Shadow.

One attacking hand was misshapen by a blurred object. Ducking suddenly, The Shadow felt the weight of the hand and knew he was fighting against a blackjack. He twirled on his toes like a dancer and suddenly, to his opponent's surprise, was in back of him. He punched down at the nape of the neck that was near him. The blow landed but glancingly. The man—it was a man—lashed out again with the blackjack; this time only the quickness of The Shadow's reflexes and the double fold of cloth of the cape at the back of his neck saved him from a rabbit punch at the base of the neck.

The blow, a sure knockout if it landed, still did enough damage to make The Shadow reach under his cloak. Instantly, his hand reappeared, but when it did, it was full of Colt .45.

A creaking sound behind both of them froze them as they stood. The sound emanated from the door. The Shadow's mind raced. He had no desire to have it known that he was in sunny California.

His attention momentarily distracted, his silent opponent glided away. Two sounds came almost on each other's heels. The door slammed shut and muffled, almost hidden by the louder noise, The Shadow heard a window shut.

Whoever had opened the door was trying to find the light switch. At any second the lights might flash on and reveal The Shadow, gun in hand!

Tony Hunter came in—he was the writer—and grunted as he found the light switch. He wondered why builders seemed to put them in the least conspicuous place. He grunted again but louder this time as he saw, crumpled on the floor in front of the work bench, Flip Hiller's body. Surprise followed surprise. He had just taken in the sight of the sprawled figure when out of the corner of his eye a flicker of movement, a suggestion of black, brought his head around with a snap.

But when he focussed his eyes there, there was nothing. Just a shadow. He looked up at the ceiling light. Of course it would cast a shadow there.

He said to himself, "I'm getting as scatty as everyone else around here. Wonder who put the slug on Flip."

He hurried to Flip's side and knelt down. Probing fingers searched for and found a lump on the back of Flip's head. The fingers applied some pressure to the lump and Flip emitted a groan and opened his eyes.

They were pain-racked. "Wh... Hey! How'd you get here! My ship... is it all right?"

He swayed as he sat up and looked anxiously for his newly finished model. It was gone!

He got to his feet groggily and said, "I don't mind the clout on the noggin, but why would anyone swipe my ship?"

"Why, indeed?" asked Hunter.

"What in the name of the seven muses is going on in this studio? Last week I was scared stiff my option wouldn't be picked up... now I don't care one way or the other. If there's any more rough stuff, I'm going to do

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my best to get it dropped. I mean it. This business is getting worse and worse!"

Flip nodded in agreement and then moaned. "Wow, that felt as if my head was going to burst! This is just dandy. I come in here to do some work that I enjoy and forget the whole mess and what happens? I'm catapulted right back into the middle of it."

"I'll say you are, you're going to report this to the cops, aren't you?"

He started to nod in answer then thought better of it and said, "I don't want to, but I guess I better. He stared off into space as though racking his memory and then, "You know, I have a nagging feeling in the back of my mind that I heard some kind of a ruckus going on in here after I was slugged. I seem to almost remember hearing a tussle going on... but that can't be. Besides I can't really bring it into focus. I better forget it."

That was all The Shadow waited to hear. He had wanted to be sure that Flip hadn't come to at the wrong moment and spotted him. With that off his mind The Shadow looked around for an egress.

The two men made up his mind for him. Flip, leaning on Hunter's arm, walked towards the door. He said, "Will you help me to my car?"

As they headed for the door a fleeting form whisked across the floor behind them. The window eased up and... The Shadow was gone.

"Hunter! What was that? That... that laugh?"

"Boy, that clout must be a dilly! I didn't hear a sound!" Hunter looked puzzled. "Come on, I'll get you to your car."

IV.

AT the studio gate a sleepy guard stretched his arms and yawned. His eyes closed for a moment as he rubbed them. At that second a shadow flitted by. It is doubtful if even with his eyes open he would have seen the flickering motion.

When he had rubbed some of the sleep out of his eyes and looked around there was naught to keep him from boredom.

On the street outside the studio The Shadow, hugging the wall that encircled the studio like the battlement of some castle of old, looked ahead. Drawn up at the curb was a cab. A cab in Los Angeles that sported New York license plates. The Shadow's sardonic grin deepened. He moved to the door, opened it and in one motion was in the cab and seated.

"All right, Shrevvie, where do you want to go?"

"Awk!" Shrevvie swiveled his head and gaped at the figure of night that now was his passenger. "How... how'd ya know?"

"The Shadow knows!" This was the irritating answer. As a matter of fact The Shadow had read in the newspapers of the progress of several New York cabbies who had picked up G.I. travelers who had been in a hurry to get to the West Coast and could get no train or plane accommodations—so had chosen a cab as their covered wagon. The papers had played these up as freak pieces of news.

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"Aw right, be annoyin'! Burbank said ya might need me! So here I am!"

That explained why a particular cabbie had been willing to make the transcontinental trip at a time when some other cab drivers would refuse to go a mile for fear their cabs would fall apart. The Shadow leaned back and stretched his legs out.

"The nearest drug store."

"Check." His was not to reason why, his was but to drive. Shrevvie sank down in his seat and expressed his disapproval with the back of his neck.

The cab stopped in front of an Owl Drugstore on Hollywood and Vine.

Lamont Cranston stepped out of the cab and walked into the drugstore. He looked through a telephone directory, turning to the "H" pages. There it was: Hunter, Tony.

Cranston glanced at the address and returned to the cab.

"Get down to Olvera Street." Should he see Hunter as Cranston or again don the guise of The Shadow? The choice was open in Cranston's mind. While he thought this over the cab drove through broad lovely streets that were punctuated occasionally by palmetto trees. Cranston leaned forward as the cab halted.

"Whatcha want to go to dis sucker trap for? Dis is strictly fer tourists!" Shrevvie's finger pointed to the street that seemed to have been transported right out of Mexico. Cobble-stoned, with small curio shops and Mexican restaurants lining it, it was completely out of place in downtown Los Angeles. Men and women in Mexican costume meandered up and down the street with lazy pace and sleepy eyes.

Why Hunter, an extravagantly paid writer, would live here was a question. Cranston stepped from the cab with his brief case under his arm. His mind was made up. Cranston was the guise in which to operate, in this section. He was completely lost in the crowd of tourists who wandered up and down through the street. The accents of America assaulted his ear as he walked towards the house number he had found in the phone book. The nasal twang of New England and the soft slurring of the South were combined as America walked the street of the Chamber of Commerce's contribution to U. S. Mexican relations.

A grillwork that was a dream of wrought-iron intricacy led up a romantic stairway. The door that Cranston was looking for headed the stairs. At the top of the stairs, Cranston paused and looked around. His progress had attracted no attention whatever. He opened the door and entered the house. At one side of the vestibule, four bells with cards above them showed that Hunter lived on the top floor.

The entrance door was locked but was no obstacle to the key that Cranston inserted in it. He walked into a foyer that was as garish as a calendar artist's idea of old Mexico. Serapes hung on the walls, toreador's swords were crossed and made X's on top of the serapes. A grand piano in the center of the foyer was draped in as loud a shawl as Cranston had ever suffered his eyes to light on. Filigreed iron work wound around the spiral stairs that led to the second floor. The ascent was steep. Cranston heard no sounds as he reached the top floor. There, the door ahead, painted as a mural of high jinks in Mexico, was the door to Hunter's apartment. Cranston paused outside the door and eavesdropped. Not a sound came through.

The key that had made short work of the downstairs lock, made even shorter work of this one. The door swung silently open. The apartment was furnished in a helter-skelter style. Evidently Hunter hadn't been able to stand the all-pervading Mexican flavor and had supplemented the furnishings with odds and ends of his own. They clashed with the decorations. The difference in furnishings made the apartment look violent,

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dislocated as though the owner could not make up his mind about anything.

Cranston stepped around the room. Filing cases covered one wall. Reference books another. Three portable typewriters covered a broad desk. Used carbons were stuffed any old way into what must have once been a pretty Mexican vase. Cigarette butts were piled mountainously in dirty ashtrays.

One door led off the living-working room into a bedroom that shared the disordered appearance of the room Cranston had examined.

Long drapes cut off any light from outside. It was an ideal sleeping arrangement for anyone who slept late in the day. The bed clothes were disarranged.

Cranston had found out one of the things he was interested in. Hunter had a crowded, disordered mind if the apartment was any indication. A sound in the other room caught Cranston's ear.

One long stride carried him to the drapes. A quick movement and he was behind one of the drapes. The sound was louder now. Someone was moving around in the other room.

Cranston started to open his brief case and then paused as a crash sounded. Glass?

Then there were smaller sounds, tearing, ripping sounds. Cranston stepped from the concealment of the drapes and peered through the crack of the partly open bedroom door. Whoever was in the other room was just out of his angle of vision.

Crane his head as he would, Cranston could not quite see who it was. It was a figure and the figure was busy with something. But the bulk of the man's body, for a man it was, was between Cranston and the work.

The little tearing sounds continued. The man grunted; whether with pleasure or displeasure, it was impossible to tell. He moved, and Cranston left his point of vantage and returned to concealment behind the drapes.

The movements, as translated from the sounds, covered the man's walking around the living room and then the outside door creaked and slammed shut. The man was gone.

Cranston looked out the window that was behind the drape. It did not show him the front of the house. He would not be able to see who it was that had come and gone.

He walked out from behind the drapes, forward through the bedroom door and looked out into the living room. At first, he could see no change. Then, on the floor near the writing desk, a glint of green caught his eye.

He stood over it and saw it was a shard of glass. Green glass!

In a waste paper basket to one side of the desk, Cranston saw the remains of a ship model!

Crushed, torn, it was almost unrecognizable as the exquisite ship model that had so short a time ago been placed into the green glass bottle!

The hull of the ship had been torn apart by ruthless fingers. That had been the tearing, ripping sound that Cranston had heard. The rigging was as ruthlessly dismembered as the rest of the model.

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Cranston looked at the wreckage for a long moment, then turned on his heel and left the apartment as abruptly as had the man who had dismembered the model.

Back in the cab, Shrevvie said, "I don't suppose I'm gonna hear what dat was all about?"

There was no answer. Cranston's long aquiline face was thoughtful. Finally he said, "Did you see anyone go into the house I was in? Someone who was in and out in a matter of minutes?"

Shrevvie pondered and then said, "Nah, wasn't even lookin'. Why, is it important?"

"Not very. I know who it was."

The cab drove along for a space. Shrevvie broke the pall of silence that had hung, for long minutes. "I can drive around all night. We goin' anywhere in particular?"

"The RoTango"

Shrevvie looked around at Lamont Cranston. "Ya mean dat night-club dat all de stars hang out in?"

Cranston nodded.

A blare of jazz pounded at Cranston's ears as he walked into the nightclub. He thought idly that this was the first nightclub he had ever seen that even remotely looked like the ones that the movies pictured in their fabulous production numbers.

Murder or no murder, trouble or no trouble, the press agents had to have their material. At one table off to one side of the magnificent room, Cranston saw Genia and Don Barron. They were looking deep into one another's eyes as though alone on some desert island.

Flip sat at a table with a girl that Cranston had not seen before. She looked like what she was, a struggling extra who lived for the big day that might never come.

Sturm was waving his hands around his head and looking as apoplectic as usual as he spoke to Tony Hunter. Hunter was completely oblivious as he played solitaire on the tiny table. There was just room for the cards and the glasses. An extra glass would have been completely impossible.

Nevertheless Cranston strode up to the table. He smiled at Hunter, who was cheating and moving a red card to another pile. "I imagine solitaire is much simpler when played that way!"

Hunter looked up angrily, but changed the expression into a weak smile as he saw Cranston. "One of my weaknesses."

"One, he says! One of a great many!" Sturm was still red in the face. His bull neck was taut against his collar.

"Don't dally. Sit down, won't you?" Hunter looked glad for Cranston's interruption.

An obsequious waiter slid a chair under Cranston.

Hunter gathered his deck together to make room as Cranston ordered a bite to eat.

"You'd think we didn't see enough of each other in the studio all day, wouldn't you?" Hunter grimaced.

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"It iss those press agents. All the time we must be seen together..." Sturm's voice was satirical. "All of Impressive's employees are just one big happy family!"

"He's quoting good old Gainsworthy!" Hunter added unnecessarily. "I don't know about other families, but I could do with seeing a little less of this one!"

At the other side of the room there was a sharp crack of flesh against flesh.

Everyone peered over at Flip Hiller's table. Flip was on his feet and had just punched a man on the jaw. The man was annoyed.

"And I say you were flirting with this little lady, here!"

"You're nuts. I just said hello to her because I thought I knew her!" Flip was sending another punch on its way.

The man blocked Flip's punch and landed one of his own that sent Flip's body flailing backwards over his table. The table teetered and fell over. Flip landed on the floor and the table spilled over on top of him.

The man looked down at him thoughtfully, rubbed his knuckles and walked off.

Hunter sighed. "If Flip was tough as he thinks he is, he'd be the heavy-weight champ of the world. I've lost track of how many times this scene has taken place."

No one paid too much attention as Flip staggered to his feet and sat down. A waiter, with the ease of long practice was setting the table up again. New linen was brought and Flip sat and rubbed his fingers on his jaw. The girl sat silently.

Cranston picked at his meal and said, "I've eaten better food."

"Who hasn't?" asked Hunter. "But what can we do? Gainsworthy is interested in this joint. I wish sometime he'd buy into a place that has a chef!"

"And who said you had to eat here? I'm a Simon Degree?" Gainsworthy was behind them.

"Legree. Not Degree." Hunter didn't look too put out over his boss having heard him.

"Legree, Degree, who cares? Men I can hire who know these things." Gainsworthy's attention, fickle at best, shifted to his two glamour stars—Gladder and Barron. They still sat and gazed at each other. "Such a pretty picture. So many lines of publicity we'll get with this!"

Hunter looked at the twosome and sneered. "Make believe that pair aren't thinking of just that!"

Cranston looked around the room. On the surface, the air was filled with the raucous sounds of the band playing, the people smiling, eating, drinking, making merry in their own assorted way...while all the while, a somber brooding fate hung heavy over their heads.

Who had killed the actor, Richard Doster, and why? Who had written that bizarre message on the wall of the set, and how was it done? And what was behind the outrageous behavior that had originally set The Shadow on the trail? Why had Don Barron flown a kite at midnight... and why had Genia Gladder set a tiny submarine to sea?

These were the questions The Shadow had to answer!

V.

THEN started a night that The Shadow was to long remember. One after the other, within minutes of each other, Sturm, Flip Hiller, his girl, Tony Hunter and Genia and Don Barron left the night club.

Gainsworthy and Cranston were left in the club. He commented. "Those prima-donnas of mine, they have a train to meet? They all leave so fast?"

"I'm afraid I shall have to imitate their behavior," said Cranston, "I still have some work to do before bed. Good night."

Cranston was gone. Gainsworthy, left alone, sat and brooded. His thoughts were dark. He couldn't ever have reached his present status if he weren't sensitive to the behavior of his employees. Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong. Until it was cleared up the efficient organization he had built was going to be snafued. But bad, he thought bitterly.

In the cab, Shrevvie said, "What now?"

"Which way did Barron and Genia go?"

"They headed out for Beverly Hills."

"Follow them." Cranston leaned back against the cushions and relaxed. He had an idea that he would not have much more time for relaxation that night. He was right!

The cab slewed around a corner and on a long straightaway the rear light of Barron's car blinked far ahead of them. Cranston recognized the light because Barron had a specially made car whose lights were all in the shape of stars.

The red star blinked like a will-o'-the-wisp ahead of them. With the cab speeding after it, the night was still and quiet. Suddenly, the red light blinked out and was gone.

Cranston knew that there were no hills for quite a distance yet. There was only one explanation. The Pacific had sent in one of its pea-soup fogs.

Minutes later, Cranston's deduction was verified. Shrevvie grunted and leaned out of the side of the car. Cotton wool enfolded them. The cab's lights tried valiantly to pierce the fog, but failed miserably. All that could be seen was the whiteness of the fog. Shrevvie had to lean out and squint in order to see the white line that divided the road.

"This fog must be slowing them up as much as it is us. Head for Gladder's home, if you know where it is. I'm sure they won't go for any joy ride on such a night."

"Lucky I got a star map today." Shrevvie opened the map which was not of the heavens, but of the homes of the movie stars. The maps sold well to those admirers who were content just to see the houses which hid their heroes and heroines from the public's gaze.

"They must'a been headed for her home anyhow. This road leads right to it."

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Shrevvie paused and then asked, "What went on at the studio today? I read the papers and it sounds like a dilly!"

"As far as the police are concerned, Richard Doster either committed suicide or was murdered. Right after that, a threatening message spelled itself out on the set. It was quite eerie. The message was a warning. I think that this evening we will find out whom the message was aimed at!"

There were no more words spoken till the cab drew up in front of a Spanish-type hacienda. A glance over the box hedge showed that Barron's car was still parked out in front of Gladder's home. The fog was still thick and long tendrils of it reached fingers across the hedge towards a shadow that lurked near the hedge. The shadow moved through the fog with three-dimensional purpose. It paused near an open window.

"What now?" Shrevvie looked in the back of the cab and sighed to see that he'd been fooled again. Cranston's hat lay on the back seat. Otherwise the cab was empty.

In the warm, well-lighted room Genia walked back and forth with long strides. Gone were the affectations, the mincing model's walk. She turned on her heel and said, "It's getting more than I can stand!"

Barron sprawled out in a low, comfortable chair said, "You and me both. That message today gave me the horrors! But there's nothing to do. We just have to grin and bear it! Hey... it's one-thirty! I have to be there by two. So long, kid. I have to tend to my kite flying! Blast the press agents who made me president of the Kite Flyers of America! But I suppose if it hadn't been that it would've been some other insane gag like you and your toy submarine!"

Before Barton bade Genia farewell, the shadow that had been under the window flitted away.

A voice spoke into Shrevvie's ear. "Follow everything that Barron does. In this fog you'll never be seen! But stick to him till he's home in bed!"

"Trust me. You gonna stick around?" But Shrevvie was talking to naught but the fog. The dark figure was gone as silently as it had come.

Genia, dressed now in a dark riding habit, her hair bound up in a babushka, viciously put a cigarette out in an ashtray. She looked at the clock; it was one-thirty-five. Her appointment was for one-forty-five. She flipped open her purse and looked at an envelope whose edges were bordered in black. It was a standard mourning envelope. The card inside it was black. The message on the black card was written in bold white letters.

A door opened and a French maid in black with a white frilly apron poked her head in the room. The sudden sound made Genia start. With one motion she had the black card back in her purse and was looking off into space.

She said, "It's all right, Marie. I'll be back shortly."

"But, Madam, it is so late. The night air... the fog... you may catch cold!"

"Don't worry about me, I'll be all right. Now go to sleep!"

Genia was edgy and nervous. Her eyes flicked to the clock. It was time!

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She waited till the door closed on Marie, then after a quick look all around the room, she opened a cabinet and took out a small package.

She sighed and, putting the package under her arm, left the room.

Out on the lawn she looked around suspiciously but decided it was just her nerves; for a moment she had thought that unseen eyes watched her every move. She walked down a crazy–stoned path towards a sun dial that made a centerpiece for a flower garden. At each step she waited, listening. No sounds came through the thick blanket of fog. Over and over, she thought, it's getting tougher all the time. What will happen next? Will it stop at one murder?

At the sun dial she paused, and again looked all around. Two trees made uprights at each side of the garden. She looked at the inscription on the sun dial. It read, "It is later than you think!" She nodded agreement, looked at her watch, and gasped. There was barely time. Hidden in the darkness, a rope hung between the two tall trees. She opened the package she carried. A short length of rope dropped out of it. Tied to one end of the rope was a small box. She looked around a final time, then threw the free end of the rope up in the air.

In the darkness it looked like the Indian Rope Trick, for the rope flew up in the air and stayed there. One end looped down towards her, making a U. She tied the dangling rope to the box. She looked up at the barely visible rope that hung between the two trees.

A distant, muffled sound broke through the fog. She shivered and ran away. Then the little garden was still but for the menacing roar that gradually grew louder, and louder still!

One shadow, blacker than the rest, moved a trifle. Alert eyes peered through the fog. The sound was a real roar now.

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a grappling hook swung down through the air. It swung in a long arc. It was painted black, as was the rope it descended from. The prongs of the hook grabbed at the rope that spanned the distance between the trees.

A sudden lift and then, hook, rope and tiny box all vanished upwards in the fog. The roar overhead got louder as though triumphant. The time was exactly one–forty–five.

Then the night was still. The Shadow waited a few long moments. It had been cleverly done. A black helicopter, invisible in the night, had made a pick up as casually as mail planes pick up objects from just such a contrivance.

The evil, cunning brain behind this pall of terror was clever; matched against that cleverness was the wit of The Shadow. A mocking laugh rolled out across the stillness of the garden, and The Shadow was gone.

Two o'clock. Don Barron, the most handsome man in America according to the advertisements, and there were plenty of women who agreed whole–heartedly, paced back and forth on the roof of his sprawling, modern–style home. The flat roof, typical of this type of construction was as broad and flat as a tennis court. There were no uprights of any kind on it. Barron swore under his breath as he had to run backwards a trifle and let some more cord out. A hundred–foot length of fishing line, dyed black, went up at an angle. Almost obscured by the fog, a huge, black kite darted hither and yon up in the sky.

The prevailing wind was shifting and the kite was becoming correspondingly erratic in its movements.

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On the ground near the house, Shrevvie watched with incredulous eyes. From his point of vantage Barron's antics looked completely insane. Shrevvie had watched him go up on the roof, fasten a flat envelope to the underside of the kite with glue and then run back as he launched the kite in the air.

The air resounded with the same roar that had attracted The Shadow's attention earlier. From Shrevvie's angle, all he could see was what seemed to be a larger, blacker kite, swoop down over the wind's plaything that Barron had been flying. The larger shape paused in mid-air, a net, black as all else, swished down and Shrevvie saw Barron release the cord that he had been holding in his hands.

Both black shapes were gone!

Barron dropped out of sight through a door in the roof. Shrevvie turned on his heel and walked towards his well-hidden cab. He had an idea that that was it for the evening. The Shadow had told him to see that Barron was tucked in for the night before he drove to Sturm's house.

The cab idled up to the portico that framed the entrance to Sturm's castle. Shrevvie gaped at the magnificence of the place.

"Ssst... shut your mouth... you look adenoidal!" Shrevvie grinned weakly and clamped his jaw shut.

"Be ready for anything. I waited for you before going inside. The lights are all on, but I haven't seen any sign of Sturm. If he hasn't reached home yet, I shall wait for him..."

The Shadow was gone.

Inside the house, barbaric splendor almost hurt the eye. Mounted animals heads were placed in inapposite conjunction with crude, badly done water colors.

Bear rugs, stiff and ugly, were spotted around the huge room like islands. The polished, gleaming floor reflected patterns from the walls. Tapestries shouldered against glistening, modern glass ornaments. The room looked savage, tasteless.

A stiff-backed butler looked at an ugly clock on the wall and smothered a yawn. He didn't see a form pass across the wall that faced him. A long shadow cast by a suit of armor in a corner provided more than ample cover for The Shadow. His eyes took in the whole room. His arm, draped in the cloak, covered the white of his face. Only his deep-set eyes made any movement. He waited.

One, two, three. The ugly clock bonged out the hours in a weary voice. The butler was rubbing his eyes now. Suddenly he looked up. Through the ceiling came a subdued roar.

He straightened his shoulders, lance corporal style, and looked at a huge door that was the entrance to the baronial hall.

The door slammed open, and Sturm, red face redder than ever, stalked into the room. His monocle glistened in his left eye. One hand flipped up. His arm shot out.

The butler's arm shot out in unison.

Their heils were mere mumbles.

"Ugh... I am tired." Sturm shrugged out of his coat.

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The butler, taking it, said, "A drink, sir?"

Sturm nodded. "What a night the verdamte fog! Ach... this country!"

The butler bowed his way out.

Once alone, or what he thought was alone, Sturm put his drink to one side and made his way to a shield that hung on the wall. He pushed the shield to one side and a safe, dial glistening, was revealed. The Shadow's quick eyes saw and counted the revolutions that the dial spun to.

The safe door hanging open, Sturm looked at a packet of paper he held in his hand. His face was grimacing. He put the packet in the safe and spun the dial. The shield dropped back into place. He marched in his stiff-backed style out of the room. The lights out, the room seemed even longer, more empty, colder, and even less lived in.

The Shadow's hand was on the dial of the safe. He spun it three times to the right, once to the left, three more times to the right. His black gloved hand picked up the packet which Sturm had just placed there.

With scarcely a rustle, The Shadow opened the packet. Inside it was another packet of paper. These were copies of the New York Times from the preceding day. All were the same date, there was nothing hidden in them! The Shadow glanced over the headlines. They were irrelevant.

Then and only then, The Shadow threw back his head and his mocking laugh sounded. The huge room played with the laugh sending it bouncing back again and again.

The Shadow replaced the mystifying copies of the papers in the safe and locked it. The shield was back in place. In two more seconds the room was really empty, untenanted but for the ghosts of The Shadow's laugh.

The Shadow knew what the papers meant.

VI.

THE cab was speeding along North Arden Drive in Beverly Hills. The Shadow tapped Shrevvie on the shoulder and motioned for him to draw up in front of a small house. A man picking his teeth with a match looked up incuriously as the cab halted.

Cued by The Shadow who was invisible in the back of the cab, Shrevvie asked, "Sherly wants to know if Hiller's been out tonight."

The man chewed the question over in his mind just as he did the match in his teeth. Finally he said, "Nope and lucky for me he didn't. With this fog I'd a lost him in a minute."

Shrevvie waved his hand in thanks and the cab started slowly away.

"Where now?" he asked.

"Right around the corner. I want to verify this."

In back of the house, The Shadow stalked from the cab and effortlessly drew himself up and into a window that was wide open in the back of the house. He wondered if the detective had taken this into his calculations.

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A tiny flashlight, its small bulb covered with adhesive tape till only a cross of light could flicker through, played around the room that The Shadow was in. It was the kitchen. On a Dutch shelf around the molding of the room there were some of Flip's ship models. They were in bottles, and they were all a little dusty.

Out into the living-room without a sound, The Shadow moved purposefully.

Nothing and no one.

Upstairs, The Shadow made his way. It was quiet, too quiet. He looked into the bedroom. There, on the bed, a form muffled in blankets lay still.

There was no sound. Not even the faint sound of a sleeping man. The Shadow walked to the side of the bed and stood there staring down. He reached out and slowly pulled the covers down. There was no one in the bed. Some pillows had been bulked up so that any eye glimpsing the form through a window would have been deceived.

So the detective was positive that Flip was at home. The Shadow chuckled. Very few of the people in the case were paying much attention to Shervie's warning that they were under surveillance.

Another look around and The Shadow made his way out of the bedroom. He had re-arranged the covers so that Flip would never know that his dummy had been discovered.

Down the black and silent stairs to the living-room. The Shadow flicked his cross of light around the room. More ship models, some in bottles, others, larger, exquisite in their tiny detail, covered all the available space. It was a comfortable lived-in looking house.

The Shadow left the house as silently as he had entered it.

Dropping from the window The Shadow heard the sound of feet. He froze immobile completely invisible in the patches of darkness that emanated from the trees that were behind the house.

The sound was that of feet. They came closer. The Shadow waited. A flashlight flicked on, illuminating the back of the house with its glare.

The hand that held the light washed the side of the house with the white light. Then the feet moved closer to the house. The Shadow saw a chewed match stick thrown in the circle of light that now flashed at the open window on the ground floor. Evidently Shervie's question had stirred the match chewing detective into activity.

The Shadow heard him say, "Whew! An open window. I better take a look-see."

The Shadow was down the street now, getting into the cab as the detective climbed into the window. He was finally, at this late date, going to check on the whereabouts of Flip Hiller!

In the cab The Shadow considered. The cab drove along quietly in the night.

"What goes?"

"Back downtown to Olvera Street."

"Oh, Hunter's dump, huh? Let's go." Shervie hummed "Here we go off into the wild blue yonder."

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Downtown Los Angeles was fairly busy. They swung past the Brown Derby and continued on. Men and women, young girls and old, walked along. All seemed to be buoyed up by something. The good looking ones were hoping hope against hope that some day some director, some talent scout, would notice them while buying tickets or in a five and ten cent store. The older ones just hoped.

Past honky-tonks and burlesque theaters the cab drove. The streets were quieting down now. Soon Los Angeles, like many another town, would be closed down, dark and quiet as some little widening in the road, pop. 1700. There was not the night life here that The Shadow knew in New York. Here all the bars closed at twelve o'clock and except for a few, a very few after-hour spots, the city went to bed at the witching hour.

Olvera Street was dark and dismal. The cab stopped and The Shadow slid out. There was not a soul in sight. To the door and through took but a moment, and not a pair of eyes had seen The Shadow's swift progress.

Up the stairs, pausing at each landing, The Shadow could hear the sound of sleepers in the quiet house. Then on and towards the door that was his goal.

On the top floor, The Shadow looked out a window that was next to the door. There was a tiny ledge there that led to one of Hunter's windows. He slipped out the window. It was the work of a brief second for The Shadow to slide out and along the narrow ledge.

Inside the room he could see the studio apartment as messed up as it had been before. The Shadow watched as Hunter, who sat at his work desk with the inevitable deck of cards in front of him, laid the cards out in solitaire form.

It seemed to help him think. For he was not paying too much attention to the cards. Search as The Shadow could with his eyes, he could not see any sign of the wreckage of the ship model. All evidence of it had been cleaned up.

Hunter sighed and concentrated more on the game. He saw where by cheating just a little, the game might work out. He cheated the little bit. The game did work out.

He looked as satisfied with himself as though the game had really worked out, as he placed the cards one by one on top of the aces at the top of the table. Ace, two, three, four, the game ran out to its appointed course.

Hunter mumbled to himself. "That's a little more like it. This is the first time today that even cheating, the blasted game worked out."

He picked up the stacks of cards that ran from ace through king. Clubs, hearts, spades, diamonds. The deck was complete. He tapped the edge of the deck of cards on the table top and gasped. His face changed color, became livid. He gasped. Then he shut his eyes and looked again. He looked care-ridden and old.

And well he might, for written in a bold hand on the edges of the deck was a message that had appeared there like magic!

The message read, "Get it up! This is your last chance! Five grand in the usual place or... remember Doster!"

The message ran all around the deck. Hunter looked at it and thought, "But if this was written here before, why didn't I see it? I've been handling the deck all day!"

He examined the writing, there was no doubt about it. The message was scrawled in black crayon. He looked at the deck for a long time and then, cursing, he threw it at the wall. The deck landed with a splat and the

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cards cascaded down all over the floor. He sobbed with exasperation as he looked at the mess of cards on his floor. He turned on his heel and almost dived through his bedroom door.

The sound of the jouncing of bed springs proved his whereabouts. The Shadow bent and in seconds had scooped up the scattered cards. He was out of the room and in the cab in a few moments.

The only way that Shrevvie knew of his return was that the springs of the car depressed a trifle. He looked back and saw The Shadow fanning a deck of cards and going through them reversing and righting the ones that were upside down.

"This is a fine time for card tricks," he croaked. "Do I take a card?"

The Shadow smiled and said, "No, I think Lamont Cranston is due back in his bedroom at the hotel. It's the Beverly Plaza."

Lamont Cranston left the elevator and walked towards his room. As he walked, he stretched his arms and yawned. It had been a full day. There was just one thing to do before bed claimed him as it had all the others involved in the tragic farce that was unfolding.

In his room he sat on the edge of his bed, and laid the cards out on an end table. He set the cards in order as a deck first. He tapped the deck on its edge and smiled when he saw smudges, black smudges there.

He then laid the cards out numerically and in suits. From ace to king, in each suit. Finally, he picked up each packet of thirteen cards, spades, clubs, hearts, diamonds. The message reappeared. It read again, "Get it up...." and the rest of the threatening words.

It was quite obvious what the writer of the message had done. He had set the deck in rotation just as it was now. Then, he had written his diabolical message on the edges of the cards, so that the message ran all around the edges of the deck. Finally, he had shuffled the deck, destroying the message until such time as the cards were again in the correct order. For then, and then only, would the message appear.

Cranston relaxed back onto the bed. The cards had been—where? These were the very cards with which the actors in the fight scene had played their game of rummy.

They had left the cards scattered on the table when Doster's death had put a fatal stop to their scene. Cranston re-ran the scene over in his mind. The cards remained on the table until Tony Hunter rambled over and, as was his usual custom, immediately began to play solitaire.

Thoughtlessly, or deliberately, Hunter had dropped the deck in his pocket when they all left the studio for dinner.

It had been this deck that he had been playing with at the RoTango when Gainsworthy was with him and Cranston had joined them. Or was it the same deck?

Cranston pictured the backs of the cards in his mind. If there had been a substitution, the substituter had taken the precaution of matching the rather unusual backs on the cards. This seemed improbable on the face of it. No, the deck had stayed with Hunter all the time from the death of Doster to the scene in Hunter's bedroom that The Shadow had just seen!

Was it possible that the cards had not borne their message for Hunter? It was a question that was soon to be answered!

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The deck with the message on it was one of the neatest delayed-action devices that Cranston had ever seen! As he turned out the light preparatory to sleep he thought, whoever rigged the deck knew Hunter well, knew of his solitaire hobby and his habit of cheating. All these were used in the idea of the deck. The sender knew that it would be quite a time before Hunter worked out a complete game. Knew also that he would inevitably, at some time or other, work out the game, because he cheated. It was neat, as neat as it was diabolical, was Cranston's last thought.

Dawn Came; the sun rose over the city of old people who had come to live out their few remaining years on their pensions, on the young people who lived from hand to mouth, day to day, hoping and yearning for that big break, for the people who had had the big break and wondered how long they'd be able to stay on top. To poor people and rich, to happy and to frightened ones, the sun brought the new day.

And one there was in that sprawling city who woke to the new day and grinned. Grinned an evil, lonely smile. Grinned to think of the bounty that was due that day. Grinned because of power that was like a drug, power to command the powerful ones.

Later, hours later, Gainsworthy, eyes heavy with sleep, made his way to the patio where breakfast awaited him. His mail and the papers were stacked to one side of his table. He grunted as he looked through the mail hurriedly. Nothing that amounted to much. He broke up a piece of toast in his soft boiled egg and unwrapped a parcel that the butler had left on the table. It was addressed to him in block letters.

The package held some newspapers. Gainsworthy wondered why the clipping bureau could conceivably have sent him papers instead of sending them to the publicity bureau. The papers were dated from two days before. They were all identical copies of The New York Times. His curiosity aroused, Gainsworthy looked through them for a pencil check that would indicate what was relevant. There were no marks on any of the papers.

Even more curious, he read the headlines on the front page. Nothing that concerned him particularly. It didn't make sense. He ran through the paper carefully, thinking that perhaps he had missed something. But in all the pages there was nothing that had any connection with him.

He ate his egg, now cold, while he stared at the papers. Suddenly, his eye lit on the name of the page. The New York Times!

His eyes wider now with a curious glint of fear in them, he picked up the individual papers and counted them. One, two, three, four, five!

His face furious, he crumpled up the papers and heaved them from him. He said, "No, I won't! This is too much! I don't care... I won't... I won't..."

But all the time he raged and swore, he knew he was going to...

Cranston left the hotel and hopped into Shrevvie's cab.

"Straight to the studio, please. Lieutenant Sherly just called me."

"What's with him? He got the whole case solved?"

"Not quite, but he's awfully anxious to get moving. It seems a lot of pressure is being brought to bear on his higher-ups by the movie people!"

"That oughta get the wheels spinnin'!"

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The wheels were spinning but not getting anywhere. Sherly was despondent. Here he was, faced with the biggest case of his career and there was nothing for him to get his teeth into. He sighed and faced the people in the case. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lamont Cranston enter quietly, inevitable briefcase under his arm, and sit down in the rear of the studio.

Sherly looked down at his feet. He was standing near the chalked outline of Doster's form.

"Ladies and gentlemen..."

Flip said sotto voce, "... and all the rest of us?"

"The P.M. has shown that Doster did die of cyanide poisoning."

"Ach, we knew that yesterday!" Sturm looked indignant.

"We guessed it yesterday. Today we know," Sherly said patiently. "We know a few more things. We found out from Doster's bank that he was broke. Flat, stone broke! Any comments?"

Gainsworthy was incredulous. "Why, that is impossible! All the money I paid him! He spent it all? Every cent?"

"Every last living cent." Sherly looked down at the chalked reminder of a man and went on, "We've checked on his mode of living. For a man in his position he lived very moderately. His bank book shows huge entries, followed always by equally huge withdrawals! It can only, I think, add up to one thing— blackmail!"

Cranston sighed. It was about time someone said that word out loud. Everything about the case screamed of blackmail. It explained so many things. But Sherly was speaking.

"The blackmailer is evidently a thrifty soul! He used the murder, for murder it was, to warn some other blackmail victim that the time had come to pay up. That of course, was the reason for the message that appeared up there."

All eyes followed his gesture. They re-read the warning that had magically spelled itself out the day before. And then, without warning, dramatically, the message continued!

This time Cranston did not even follow the words as they spelled themselves out, instead he watched the faces of the beholders. There were many emotions displayed, but the paramount one was fear! Fear that spread out over their visages just as the message spread on the wall. Fear, that clammy-handed, twisted at wrought nerves and sent screaming warnings up to worried brains. Fear. It was heavy in the air, almost palpable, almost solid enough to reach and hold. Fear.

And these people had so much to fear. Their positions, precarious at best, made horrible by fear of what? Exposure? Death? Disfigurement? Or a combination of all three?

Finally Cranston looked up at the flat. The addition to the message read, "Well done! But don't forget that it is later than you think... next week..."

"Stop it! Why doesn't somebody stop it?" Gainsworthy was frightened and it showed. He was near hysteria. He turned on Sherly.

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"What do you stand around for? What do I pay taxes for? Traffic cops? Or so I should be able to do a little business? Why don't you do something?"

Before Sherly could answer, Genia's voice came out clear and a little shrill. "Yes... please... do something! I can't take much more of this... I can't... I can't..."

Sherly held his hands up for quiet. "Please, take it easy everybody!"

"Yah, take it easy!" Sturm looked daggers at him. "Take it easy while the picture it gets not done?"

"I'll be out of the way in a moment and you can go on with the shooting, but first..."

Cranston watched Flip who was scowling at the handwriting on the set.

Sherly said: "The fog helped a couple of you people last night! I know some of you were out! My men lost you because of the blasted fog! But don't try it again! Not any of you! This is a warning!"

A new figure entered the scene. It was Don Barron. Sturm whirled on him and blasted, "The first day on my set and you come in late! This I am to expect from you?"

"You don't seem to have gotten much work done! What's all the fury for?"

Barron had been prevailed on to take over Doster's role. He had his script with him. He looked from Sherly to Sturm and said, "Well?"

Sherly made a face and said, "Oh... get on with it! I'll see all of you later!"

One of the assistant directors yelled out: "To your places, ready to start shooting!"

He had no idea of how near the truth his command was to be!

VII.

"I WONDER if I can be of any assistance?" Cranston was with Sherly, and both of them sat on some camp chairs at the very outer extremity of the set.

"I'll be grateful for anyone's help." Sherly shrugged his shoulders. "This comes closer to being a perfect kill than any I've ever heard of."

"This is just a guess on my part but have you examined the glass swizzle-stick that Doster used in his drink?"

"Uh huh."

"Was there a slight hollow in one end of it, or both?"

"Both ends!"

"It's as I thought then. The killer took no chances. Was there any of the poison left in either end?"

Sherly looked respectfully at Cranston. "Yes, there was! How'd you know? It was just by accident and

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because I leave nothing to chance that I found out about the swizzle–stick!"

"It was the only way I could think of that would account for Doster not noticing the smell, the strong, rank smell of the cyanide. Doster mixed the fake liquor with the ginger ale; he might have smelled the poison at that point. The killer had both ends of the swizzle–stick loaded so when Doster put the stick in and stirred he was adding the poison to his own drink no matter which end of the swizzle–stick he used. The killer knew from the rehearsals that after the drink was mixed the script called for Doster to gulp the drink off at one gulp. It was the only way that such a strong distasteful poison could have been used."

"That's nice deducting. If that's a sample of your wares, I'd like some more."

"I have an idea how the message appeared on the set, but that can wait. It was obvious of course, from the beginning that this was a blackmail case, pure and simple."

"Impure and unsimple if you ask me, but go on, Mr. Cranston."

"The biggest risk that a blackmailer runs, all other things being equal, is that he may be trapped sooner or later by someone who would rather kill than pay any more. In order to prevent that, many blackmailers never let their victims know who they are. Our blackmailer is wary of that and wary, too, that police may be set on his trail at any time.

"Humans are too variable an equation for anyone to predict how long anyone will pay quietly. Therefore, this blackmailer has expended considerable ingenuity in the way he contacts his victims to ask for the money and in the way he picks up the money. Either of these things might lead to his capture or death.

"So far our blackmailer is invincible, for he is an unknown quantity! I will wager that not one of his victims, and there are more of them than you realize, has the vaguest idea who the person bleeding them is!"

"I thought that there might be one or two people who are paying through the nose, but you think there are more?"

"Many more. However, we know these things: the blackmailer is ingenious, someone who is getting pleasure out of the pain and mental suffering that is being inflicted, and who is afraid of the slightest hint that might tie him into this whole affair.

"That's the reason for all the bizarre things that have been happening. What better way to contact the victims than to somehow cause the writing to appear in a place where the blackmailer knows that all concerned will be sure to see it or hear about it?"

Sherly looked even more depressed. "This blackmail ties me up more than the murder, for with the blackmailer pulling the strings, none of these people will help us; as a matter of fact, the blackmailer can force them to lie for him!"

"This is just another idea." Cranston made it sound as if he were just guessing, "but have you ever thought of what an ideal device a helicopter would be for the blackmailer to use in picking up the payments?"

"A heli... whew! What an idea..." Sherly looked thoughtful as he remembered the helicopter he'd seen parked in Sturm's huge garage. "The blackmailer can use various methods to snare the money from the air. In the dark, or in the fog, he is sure of a getaway."

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As Sherly said this his mind kept returning to Cranston's words. He kept tying the words up with a picture of a riding crop, Sturm's riding crop.

"An anonymous note I received this morning said something interesting." Cranston waited until he had Sherly's full attention, then continued, "It said, although there's no reason for you to believe it, that Sturm had stolen a ship model that Flip Hiller had made and, of all things, that Sturm had been seen in Tony Hunter's apartment breaking the bottle and smashing the model to bits."

"Flip said something to me about the model being stolen. Now why would Sturm do anything as cruel as that? Why destroy a model that he knew Flip was proud of, unless, as you say..." and Sherly again thought of Cranston's words: "One who enjoys the mental suffering."

"The most constant surveillance of the people concerned will not, I fear, give you much of a lead, for the messages which they receive are so cleverly sent, that you might watch the messages appear and still not know where they came from"

Sherly thought that Cranston meant the handwriting on the wall. Cranston was thinking of that, but also of the crayon message on the edges of the deck of cards and the five copies of The New York Times.

Sherly didn't look happy. "Doesn't give us much to work on, does it?"

He looked even unhappier a moment later, for a shot blasted across and on top of the varied noises in the studio.

Cranston and he were on their feet instantly. Both grinned a trifle sheepishly at each other when they realized that the shot came from one of the guns that was being used in the movie that was being filmed. They sat down again.

"Curious," said Sherly, "I don't see Sturm anywhere. Strange for a director not to be directing..."

Cranston looked too. There was no sign of Sturm...

Sherly beckoned to one of the assistant directors who hurried towards them. "I never could understand the number of assistant directors they use out here. They're like vice presidents in an insurance company, or office boys in a bank."

Sherly said as the man ran up, "Where's Sturm?"

"He said he was fatigued. He went to his room to lie down for a while."

Sherly arched his eyebrows. "Isn't that a little unusual in the middle of shooting a picture?"

The assistant shrugged and answered, "In a Sturm epic you can depend on the undependable. His room is over there to the right, if you don't mind being blasted for interrupting the maestro's rest!"

Cranston was at Sherly's heels as Sherly knocked on the door of the roomette. All the stars had them for making up.

Concurrent with the sound of Sherly's knuckles on the door there was a blast. Cranston looked at Sherly and said, "That was a shot and it did not come from the set! It sounds as if it came from inside the room!"

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Sherly twisted the doorknob, the door opened a trifle, but then something stopped it.

Sherly and Cranston leaned on the door, there was slow, giving resistance, but the door swayed and finally gave inch by slow inch. A body was lying in front of the door, jamming it.

The room was pitch black. They could just make out the vague outlines of the body on the floor. The body gasped in pain. A voice, low and indistinct, mumbled, "This has gotta stop. Another whack on the head and I'm going to be punchy!"

Both men bent down and dragged the body out into the light. It was Flip Hiller and he was touching gently, with the tips of his fingers, a bump on his head the size of an egg.

"What happened?" Sherly's voice was crisp.

"I... I don't know. I went into Sturm's room and as usual he had all the shades down and the lights out. His temperament demands blackness, he says. Well, I opened the door expecting him to heave something at me, and that's all. Say, maybe he did heave a book or something and it conked me."

"No book made that bump!" Cranston was didactic.

"Then, I don't know. I opened the door, and zowie! Lights out!"

"Then you didn't hear the shot?" Sherly was getting nervous. He kept looking at the partly opened door. What lay behind it?

"Shot? Good grief, no! What now?" Flip was curious.

He was getting groggily to his feet as Cranston and Sherly simultaneously walked towards the partly open door.

He scowled and felt the bump on his head as he watched them.

Inside the room, Cranston's searching hand felt for and found a light switch. He pressed it. There was a click, but nothing happened. The room stayed dark.

"The light's out?" Sherly asked. "Here, I have a searchlight with me."

The probing finger of light moved restlessly around the room. It made a searching circle that probed in ever widening arcs. There was blood on the floor—a lot of it.

The searchlight found, lost momentarily, and then found again, the source of the blood. Sturm, body arched in pain, lay on the floor, next to a chaise lounge. The blood welled from his shoulder.

His fingers were grasping at it, even though his eyes were closed in unconsciousness.

Cranston stepped to the windows and released the blinds. They whipped up with a racket and light flooded the room. The light showed more than Sturm. To one side on the floor, right next to an end table, there was a gun.

Sherly looked from the gun to Sturm. He then circled the room, scanning it with all his powers of concentration. "Would you call a doctor?"

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Cranston left the room with a curious smile on his lips.

Sherly, left to himself, stepped over Sturm, who was moaning a little in pain. He looked at some books that were on the end table. They lay in a peculiar pattern.

They made a rough sort of horseshoe shape. On the floor to one side of the gun lay a book, open, on its back. Sherly looked from the book on the floor back up to the pattern of books. The books were laid out in such a way that a gun could have been set in them. A book in front of them would have held the gun as though in an extemporaneous vise. Of course, the recoil would jar the books, knock the one in front off the table, knock the gun itself off the table perhaps.

Sherly looked for a piece of string and found it in Sturm's breast pocket. He looked for the string, because, caught on the trigger-guard of the pistol, there was the tiniest wisp of cotton that Sherly thought must have come from the cord.

Sturm opened his eyes in time to see Sherly, one eye closed, squinting in a straight line from the books on the table to the door knob on the door. Sherly nodded to himself—the string was long enough so that a loop would have extended from the door to the gun and around back again.

"My shoulder! Shot I have been. I lay down on the couch and there was a sound. A man came into the room from the window. I could barely make out his outline in the dark. Suddenly, I leaped off the couch, meaning to run for the door, but as I so did, there was a terrible pain in the back of my shoulder. And... that is all."

Sherly looked at Sturm. He smiled. "A strange figure in the dark... a shot in the dark. Everything is in the dark, eh, Sturm?"

"You forgot about the... ah...dark figure clouting Flip Hiller in the dark, didn't you? I wonder... do you think there'll be some of Flip's hair on the barrel or butt of that pistol that the man in the dark so carelessly forgot to take along?"

"Flip? What has he to do with all this?"

Sturm, who had tried to raise himself up, groaned and fell back on the floor as Cranston hurried in with a man following him.

"Lieutenant Sherly, Doctor Place."

Sherly nodded to the doctor, who instantly got on his knees beside Sturm. His probing fingers told him the story. He said, "Nothing to worry about. Seems to have gone straight in the back and on out the front. I don't think this will take long to take care of."

"Providential, wasn't it, Sturm, that the gunman hit you in such a...shall we say, un-vital spot?" Sherly had found the bullet deep in the far wall of the room, the wall away from the end table where the books were.

The bullet was embedded in the wall, but Sherly's pen-knife gouged it out. He juggled it in his hand.

"I think we can take you right to the hospital, Mr. Sturm. I'll call the company ambulance." The doctor hurried from the room.

Sherly still juggled the bullet in his hand. "Company hospital, company ambulance, company doctor, quite a little town, this studio is." Cranston was looking from the books to the bullet and back again.

The Blackest Mail

A matter of minutes and Sturm was leaving the room on a stretcher. As he was taken out of the room, Sherly said, loud enough for him to hear, "What do you think, Mr. Cranston? Wasn't it providential that the gunman was so careful to avoid hitting a great man like Sturm?"

Cranston's wry smile matched Sherly's. "It was indeed. Seems almost as if fate had a helping hand, doesn't it?"

This indeed was a case for The Shadow! When fate helped out a man who, in the privacy of his own home, heiled the servant as though Hitler still lived, then another fate was due! An avenging one! One that criminals the world over knew and feared as they feared little else! The Shadow!

VIII.

ON the set, the cast was ready to remake the parts of the picture that Doster had been in. Gainsworthy himself was on the set. A harassed assistant director looked ready to tear his hair out in handfuls.

"Stars I have killed on me, directors get shot away! Anything to hold up production. If this keeps up, it will be the most expensive non-epic ever made!"

Gainsworthy turned on the assistant director. "Get a wiggle on. See how much you can do until Sturm is out of the hospital!"

"I will, J. G., I will... you'll see how good a director I really am."

Cranston thought: Sherly looks a little relaxed for the first time.

Somehow, the process of making a movie went on. Cranston couldn't help thinking of the motto of the U.S. Postal Service, the one about neither rain, nor storm, nor gloom of night...

But the malevolent force here was more to be dreaded than primeval forces like wind, rain and storm, for this was the doing of that most dreadful of all things, evil man.

More to be feared than a jungle animal was man when he went off the track. Here was the most cunning, vilest, most dangerous of all forces... man!

The fight scene was being shot over again when Cranston noticed that Gainsworthy was in a whispered conference with, of all people, Flip Hiller.

The odd duet left the set. Unnoticed, Cranston, brief case under arm, followed. Quite a bit of the day had slid away. The sky overhead was overcast. Looked like the gags about sunny California were starting to come true. A blacker-than-jet cloud scurried across the sky.

Flip led his boss into a room at the end of an alley that led off from the company street. A sign on it read, "Prop Dept! Keep Out! This Means You! And We Do Mean Absolutely!"

Cranston could not have followed the pair unnoticed. Therefore, Cranston vanished. A moment later, inside the prop department, a shadowy form lurked in a corner.

"I know it's none of my business, J. G., but what in the world do you want it for?"

"You're right!" was the ungracious answer.

"Huh? Oh. You mean it wasn't any of my business. Okay."

The place was fascinating. At any other time The Shadow could have spent half a day meandering around looking at the bizarre and outre things that crowded the huge room. Every conceivable gimmick in the world that could possibly be asked for by a writer was there, plus a few no writer had ever had the temerity to demand. From floor to ceiling, swords, armor, objets d'art crowded shoulders with ragamuffin clothes, strange guns, engines, glassware. The list was literally endless.

Flip led his employer through the crowded alley that crossed the cluttered room. Above, suspended by wires from the ceiling, were things that The Shadow realized were papier-mache dummies. At least, it was to be hoped they were, for there was a full size Tiger tank, a whale and shark, as well as an old, historical model, full size, of the first plane that flew across the English Channel. It was a Bleriot.

Flip paused under the Bleriot and with unerring eye reached down in a clutter. He said, "You wouldn't believe it, but I know exactly where everything is."

"I wouldn't believe it." Gainsworthy was impatient. "Can't you hurry it up?"

In all the clutter of the place it was no problem for The Shadow to make his way up behind the pair of men. Gainsworthy grunted as Flip handed him a torpedo-shaped object.

"Now the inner tube and a sharp knife."

"Right away, J. G."

The torpedo-shaped object was, The Shadow peered at it, a miniature, scale-model of a real torpedo. It was about three feet long.

"There you are."

Gainsworthy took the inner tube, the knife and the torpedo and stalked off in silence. Flip followed him out with his eyes, shrugged and turned to his work bench.

Gainsworthy was in his private office. The desk, clear but for ten telephones, was the recipient of his treasure trove from the prop department. He used the knife to cut a long band out of the inner tube.

When he had a long strip, the length of the tube but about three inches wide, he turned in his chair and looked out the window. The bookcases that lined the wall of his room were in shadow. One shadow, darker than the others, held The Shadow in its encirclement. He watched as Gainsworthy performed a seemingly insane action. He tied one end of the rubber strip to a knob on the drawer of his desk.

He looked up from his work. His eyes incuriously passed over that deep shadow that faced him and went up to the top of the bookcases where a clock ticked quietly.

He looked from the clock back out the window. Next he stood up, walked a few feet and tied the other end of the strip of rubber to a door knob that projected from a clothes closet. That done he sat down. He lit a dollar cigar, puffed on it, looked at it accusingly as though it had turned into a cabbage and then sat back.

Seemingly he was prepared to sit with the rubber sling all set, for quite a time.

The Blackest Mail

But this wasn't true. Two puffs on the cigar, a quick look at the clock on the wall, a reassuring look at his wrist watch and he opened a drawer in his desk. He took out an envelope. It was black bordered like the one that Genia Gladder had used the night before.

He opened still another drawer and took out a roll of scotch tape. He ripped off a length of the tape and used it to fasten the black-bordered envelope to the tail of the torpedo.

That accomplished he took another glance at the clock, sighed, and picked up the torpedo, set it in the middle of his huge impromptu sling shot. He pointed the torpedo at the open window.

He was so preoccupied that The Shadow risked a look out the window. To do this he had to step out into the light. Out the window The Shadow could see the high white wall that surrounded the movie factory. That was all he could see, so a moment later found him back in the protection of the shadows.

Gainsworthy, looking strangely like a fat boy engaged in some childish game, drew the rubber taut. A final glance at the time, a sigh, and there was a humming snap. The torpedo sped out the window.

Instantly Gainsworthy busied himself removing all signs of what he had been doing. In seconds the rubber strip was safely in a drawer, the cigar was re-lit and for all the world could see there was a prominent business man at work.

He picked up one of the multitude of phones and snapped. "You can let calls come through again, any time now."

The door opened and a frantic looking secretary came in. She was all upset about some matters that had come up that only J. G. could handle. The open door took The Shadow away and left the great man to grapple with his business.

Outside the wall, The Shadow looked up and down the street. No sign of Shrevvie's cab. That was good. The Shadow waited. Five, ten minutes passed and then, tired and squealing, brakes complaining, the cab appeared.

The Shadow was in it before it quite stopped moving. "Well?"

"Gee, dat was funny... not ha ha... the other kind of funny!"

"I know what kind of funny you mean, what happened?"

"I'm waitin out here like you said I oughta. Nothin' happens for a long time. Then, all of a sudden like, I see sometin' come tru de air! It looks like a shell, see?"

While I'm blinkin', a car comes around the corner. It sorta slows down, and I just get a gander at what looks like a fireman's net. Ya know, de kind dat people jump outa buildings into, stuck out the back of de car, it's hung on some poles. The timin' was the nuts. The car stops—a second or two—and the shell drops into de net and de car is off!

"I'm right after it. I can just make out some jerk in the front seat. He's speedin' along pulling the poles and de net into de car. He's a busy little bee, on acounta his whole shoulder is all bandaged up! It reminded me of a one armed paperhanger wid de hives!"

"Get to the point. Where did the car go?"

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"Well, dats where de sad part comes in. I'm on top of him, see, like he was draggin' me wid him on a tow chain. All of a sudden he cuts through a red light. I try to follow and a cop gets me! Look!"

Shrevvie held up a traffic ticket for The Shadow to look at. Shrevvie said proudly, "De first one I ever got in dis town!"

He knew who the man in the car was, of course, but he had wanted to know where his hideout was. Blackmailers are not too fond of banks and it was a ten to one chance that the hideaway held all the money he had mulcted from the people who were being blackmailed.

He had to reassure Shrevvie, for he looked ready to weep about his failure. "It doesn't matter, we have other strings to our bow. Head downtown. I'm curious to see what, if anything, Sherly has found out."

At the police headquarters. Cranston, who had changed in the cab, walked into the station house. He thought that all police stations had a family resemblance, from the architecture to the smell which was a composite of people and old dead cigars.

Sherly walked towards Cranston, a smile splitting his face. "Hi, glad you found your way through the concrete jungle. Sit down."

"Anything new?"

"Just that Sturm refused to stay in the hospital. He had his shoulder bandaged after they cleaned out the wound and carried on till they let him go. The doctor warned him that it wasn't a smart thing to do, that it might have repercussions."

"I see."

"He said something under his breath about not being a decadent democrat like most of the people here."

While Cranston chatted amiably in the safety of a police station, a strange telephone conversation was being carried on. Two men were speaking; one said, "Can I talk to you?"

The other said, "You ain't said anything yet, bub."

"I'm saying it now. I'll pay ten grand if you can do it!"

"Fer that much cabbage, there ain't many things me and the boys can't do."

"Here are your directions..."

Cranston shook hands with Sherly and left the police station. Sherly sat still for a long time after Cranston left. He felt that he was in some kind of morass. Every turn was blocked. He couldn't make any progress. Somehow he had a great deal of faith in the quiet certainty of Lamont Cranston that the killer would fall into the hands of the police. As far as Sherly could see, the blackmailer-killer was in an impregnable position. Nothing led to him, with anything that even remotely resembled evidence.

Back in the cab, Cranston switched into the cape and black slouch hat again. The skies were fulfilling their promise. A down-coming torrent made a blanket of rain.

The Blackest Mail

At the moment that Cranston ordered Shrevvie to drive back to the studio, a series of men in trench coats, braving the rain, were circulating along the street that ran past the side of the studio.

None of the men spoke. They moved with the air of men who had rehearsed their roles, and performed them a hundred times. There was a certainty to the way they moved.

Their hands jammed into the deep pockets of the trench coats, slouch hats pulled down over their faces, they paced off the block. There were ten of them. The positions they took spaced off the area so that they commanded it perfectly.

The Shadow had not wanted it known he was in Hollywood. But there was one man who, hearing the faint faraway sound of The Shadow's sinister laugh, had realized what was up. To this man, a threat of The Shadow's kind was just something that was taken care of in the due course of certain moves. The time had come for those moves to be set in progress. Therefore, ten men stood in the pouring rain with their hands deep in their pockets. It was as simple, to the man who had ordered it, as two plus two.

The Shadow was a threat to his designs, therefore The Shadow was to be wiped out. Knowing that the studio was the crux of all maneuvers, the man knew that The Shadow sooner or later would appear at the studio. The men, rain drenched, were prepared to stay there till they killed The Shadow.

A cab careening in the rain sped up the street. It slammed to a halt. As though connected by invisible threads, the ten men became taut. Through the rain-soaked cloth, the outlines of the guns they held showed silent promise of instant death.

The door of the cab opened.

IX.

ONE of the trench-coated men, finger tight on the trigger, shot through the cloth of the pocket of his coat. He had seen a flurry of black start out through the door. The bullet slammed into the open door.

Shrevvie shouted, "Hey, what cooks?"

The Shadow, warned by the slamming shot, pulled the door to, and snapped, "Up onto the sidewalk...ride right through the gates!"

Since Shrevvie had not yet shifted out of gear, he rammed his foot down to the floorboards. The cab leaped forward. The Shadow, looking carefully through the rear-view mirror, saw the ten men converging.

One of them took a snap shot at the silhouette of his head.

But The Shadow had thrown himself flat on the floor of the car. Shrevvie bent way over the wheel, steering straight for the iron grill-work doors that barred the way into the studio.

On the street, the men, all pretence of suavity of action gone, had their guns drawn. Shots hailed on the rear of the cab.

Broken glass rained down from the rear window. The Shadow, hand on gun, eeled his way up the side of the cab and flicked a shot out through the jagged opening in the window.

The Blackest Mail

Across the street, a man groaned and fell.

One of the men yelled, "He's getting inside, get him now or else..."

The studio gatekeeper, gaping in astonishment, stood for a moment in front of the careening car as it drove at the iron gates.

"Hey! You can't do that!"

But they could. They had to!

The cab smashed down the gates which crumpled like paper in front of the bumper.

The attacking men advanced in a serried row. They were aiming at the tires of the cab now. One of the wheels slumped dispiritedly.

From the rear window of the car, The Shadow sent a fusillade. Two men dropped, one holding an arm, the other's leg swiveling out from under him.

Inside the cab, The Shadow dropped one of his guns, empty now. He instantly drew another. The cab slewed under him. The blown-out tire was not helping matters any.

The men were inside the gate now. One of them clouted the protesting gate-keeper with the barrel of his gun. Another said, "We got him! The cab's gonna climb that pole!"

Shrevvie wrestled the wheel wildly; the car seemed insane. With the traction of one wheel gone, the others slick from the rain, the car was starting a slow spin. It increased in speed.

Wheeling around like an amusement park attraction, the car slammed to a halt against one of the pretentious street signs that dotted the studio streets.

Inside the cab The Shadow spoke briefly. "That doorway... I'll cover you."

The cab, bent around the pole, came to a sudden jarring halt. One of the doors slammed open as though forced to by the crash. The door opened right towards the protection The Shadow pointed to. Shrevvie crouched down. There was an unprotected three feet to cover.

The Shadow, kneeling on the back seat, commanded the situation. The car's back was at an angle to the attacking gunmen as they ran up.

"Now!" The Shadow's word was a command. Shrevvie leaped from his seat through the door.

The Shadow opened a barrage on the men. They halted, looked for cover.

Shrevvie's leap carried him into the safety of the doorway. From there he watched as the men, scurrying for cover, dropped behind stanchions, slid behind outcroppings of walls, and made ready to finish the job they had started.

They were five now, who had been ten.

The Blackest Mail

Shrevvie jumped as a hand descended on his shoulder. A voice asked, "What makes? Somebody on location in the street?"

It was Flip. He looked through the door, took one look at what was going on and faded back. He said, "Come on, this is no place for meatballs like us."

Shrevvie stepped back further into the protection of the door as a ricocheting bullet sped by his ear.

In the cab, The Shadow hunched way over in one corner and laid his gun on the smallest unexposed section he could find. There was silence for the moment.

But the men were just waiting for some chance to get him. It would have been suicidal for them to have shown themselves until there was some kind of diversion.

It came!

Across the street stepped Genia Gladder. She had come out of one of the Administration buildings and from her calm, unhurried walk it was obvious that she had not heard, or if she had, paid no attention to the sound of gun fire.

She walked directly into the no man's land that stretched between the back of the cab and the cover that the men were crouched behind.

One of them, covered by her body, snapped a shot at the cab. The Shadow, powerless to return the fire, ducked.

Genia, eyes popped wide in horror, screamed.

In an instant one of the men leaped from cover, threw an arm around Genia and dragged her down behind his barricade. Her head projected up above the ash can.

Her screams poured out in a never-ending crescendo.

The Shadow, unable at the moment to go to her aid, concentrated on an arm that he saw projecting from the angle of a building. He sent a bullet smashing into the arm. The arm fell, then, as in slow motion, the man to whom the fractured arm belonged fell slowly forward and onto his face.

Genia's voice, hoarse with horror, made an obbligo to the crash of the bullets. The man who held her forced her arm up behind her back in a hammer lock, then, the pain mastering her, he forced her to stand erect. With the flesh of his human shield before him he paced slowly forward.

From the street outside the studio, the whining, keening sound of a police siren cut through the rain-laden air.

Genia heard the welcome sound and screamed again, louder.

The Shadow was helpless as the gunman stepped nearer, ever nearer the cab. Genia's body covered all but sparse inches of the man who crouched behind her. The Shadow didn't dare risk the superhuman, accurate sharp-shooting that would be necessary to sink a bullet in the man's flesh.

Through the smashed studio gate police poured.

The Blackest Mail

A sudden silence descended.

The man who used Genia as a defense, said suddenly in a low carrying voice, "Tell them to get out quick, or I'll kill this gal!"

The police, guns drawn, were hesitant. The street before them looked like a scene from a gangster movie, the crashed cab, the guns, the bodies lying helter-skelter, and the man who held Genia Gladder captive. It was an impasse.

The man poked his gun up through the space between Genia's arm and her body. He sent a bullet into the back of the cab where The Shadow was; then, slowly, ever so slowly, he began to step backward towards the police.

He spoke again. "You cops can shoot... but any bullet that hits me will tighten my finger the fraction of an inch it needs to send a shot through her!"

He was stepping delicately over the wreckage of the gate now.

The few others who still were functioning began to follow his retreat.

And then, when it looked like the impasse was unbreakable, Genia took a chance!

The man had relaxed his grasp on her arm just a trifle and it was this that she took advantage of!

She threw herself forward, on her face. The sudden unexpected movement caught the man off guard. Her weight carried her forward, breaking his hold. He was off step, caught off balance.

He stood a moment stupidly, looking down at the most glamorous woman in America, who sprawled in an ungraceful heap and then, regaining his wits, he turned to run, his gun up and pointed at the nearest cop.

It was then that The Shadow fired. The shot hit right where The Shadow had planned it, catching him behind the knees. He fell forward just missing Genia.

That ended the affair. The police collared the few remaining gunmen.

One of the police stepped toward the cab that had been the target of all the shooting. He was curious as to whom or what had caused the holocaust. But when he peered into the dim inside of the back of the cab, it was empty. The Shadow was gone.

The cop shrugged and turned to see his aides handcuffing the men who still stood. Ambulances were in order for the others. Genia stumbled to her feet Her hands, even in that moment, went to her hair in that feminine gesture of reassurance that all was well with her coiffure.

She stepped over the man who had held her prisoner and by some freak of fate stumbled in that step.

A strange and grotesque thing happened. Her hands still patting at her hair, clenched in the moment of stumbling, and her hair came off!

It was stunning in its unexpectedness.

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One second the most glamorous woman in America stood there—and the next, a grotesque, weird-looking woman with her bald head shining even in the crepuscular light of the rainy day, was there.

With the cessation of the shooting, curious heads poked out of all the buildings that surrounded the battle field. Eyes were everywhere, and all of them were focussed on that naked head.

Genia's face contorted. Her mouth opened but no sounds came out. Seemingly she had screamed her last scream. There was no emotion left to grapple with this last most unprecedented happening!

From a discreet corner, the blob of blackness that concealed The Shadow made a sound. It was an indrawing of breath. So that was the explanation! The Shadow laughed soundlessly. One more of the blackmailer's secrets was now revealed to the world at large!

X.

LIEUTENANT SHERLY, notified of the shooting affray by radio, leaped from the dolly car that had raced to the entrance of the studio.

He arrived just in time to see Genia, hands pathetically attempting to cover the nakedness of her pate, run off the street into the protection of a door.

He did a double-take and then surveyed the scene. The battle was secondary in his mind to what he had just witnessed. So that was the explanation of how the blackmailer had extorted money from Genia.

The slightest rumor that she was bald would have done more to ruin her glamorous reputation than any other thing in the world.

Don Barron walked up to Sherly. "Well, now the whole world knows about Genia. I thought from the beginning that she was foolish to let herself be blackmailed for that. After all, you know how it happened, don't you?"

"Not being a mind reader, no."

"It was that first U.S.O. trip she took. The one that went to the South Pacific. She caught a tropical fever there—the end results you just saw!"

Sherly nodded. "What a pity. For doing a patriotic duty, that dirty rat blackmailed her!"

Sherly walked away from Barron, shaking his head. He was beginning to conceive a deep hatred for the blackmailer in the case that went far beyond duty. He yearned to inflict physical violence on him.

"What is going on?" Sturm's heavy voice was inquiring.

Sherly, startled, looked at the director. His eyes went from the bandaged shoulder to the bull neck and then to the monocle that seemed glued in Sturm's eye. "You don't know anything about all this, I suppose?"

"Of course not. I was resting my wound when I heard a racket. Such a noise! It sounded like a battle! Gun shots, screaming! Such things, ach!"

Sherly clenched his fists and turned away. He watched an ambulance draw up in front of the studio and

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counted to ten before he spoke. "Everyone out of here till we get this mess cleared up."

In another part of the studio The Shadow watched as Shrevvie looked around the set with awe-struck eyes. Shrevvie was unaware that he was under scrutiny. He said to himself, "What a place... geeze..."

Flip Hiller was still with Shrevvie. He was evidently enjoying the impression the studio was having on Shrevvie. He pointed to the handwriting on the wall. "That appeared there, slowly, as though an invisible giant were writing it!"

Shrevvie was suitably impressed. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tony Hunter walk by. Hunter had a strange air about him. He looked hunted.

The Shadow noticed this air too. He followed, at a discreet distance, the trail that Hunter made. Hunter was careful, his eyes were everywhere. He looked over his shoulder repeatedly, but never noticed the shadows deepening behind him. At the end of a corridor he took a deep breath and, with an air of resolution, opened a door and went in.

The Shadow eavesdropped outside the door. He heard, "You fool! Why did you come here, of all places?"

Another voice, not Hunter's, said meekly, "But I had to see you!"

There was an undertone beneath the meekness, as though it were just assumed, that really the speaker was not meek at all.

The voice said, "This can't go on, we must get together more!"

Hunter, furious, said, "Of all times! Why?"

"You know as well as I!"

"Uh huh... but... not now!"

"We must discuss the murder... there are too many loose ends, and you know it!"

At this point the hard clatter of heels down the hall made The Shadow fade away from the door to the screen of darkness along the edge of the hall.

The heels belonged to Sherly. He paused at the door ready to knock, but then as the voices were raised in dissension he paused, and took The Shadow's place as eavesdropper. He looked astounded at what he heard. He listened for perhaps two minutes and then, without knocking, slammed the door open.

As the door flew open, The Shadow heard Hunter say, "Now beat it! The window."

Through the open door, The Shadow had a clear view over Sherly's shoulder. A fleeting form was at the window, one leg half over the sill. Sherly, gun in hand, said, "Stop! I want to talk to you!"

Hunter said, "Really, Lieutenant, aren't you exceeding your authority?"

The man, the meek-voiced little man, was gone.

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Sherly elbowed Hunter to one side and looked out the window, gun in hand. He shook his head. "I could have nabbed him if you hadn't stepped in the way, Hunter. I shan't forget this!"

"Since this whole thing is none of your concern, Sherly. I find your actions a little bizarre, to put it mildly."

Sherly caught himself just in time. No point in giving away the damning words he had overheard: "Tonight... we'll get together and kill him off; that'll clear the air a little!" And the voice had been Hunter's!

The Shadow was gone, a fleeting smile curving his lips, by the time that Sherly hard-heeled his way out of the room.

Sherly stomped off down the hallway, his mind in turmoil. Was it possible that, for all the evidence, Sturm was not behind this horrible mess of murder, mayhem and blackmail? Uneasily he reviewed his slender store of facts. Preoccupied as he was, he stepped out right in the full hard stare of a camera's lens. He had unknowingly stepped out onto a set where actors were busily at work.

"Cut! Mein Gott, was ever man so beset!" Sturm was in a rage.

Sherly apologized and got out of the way. He was a little surprised at the way the studio continued to grind out film, come what might.

All human evidence of the battle on the company street had been removed when Sherly arrived there. The gate was still smashed; men were at work repairing it. A tow-car was dragging the wrecked remains of Shrevvie's cab away from the pole it had wrapped itself around.

Lamont Cranston, impeccably dressed, an interested expression on his face, strode towards the lieutenant. "Quite a bit of excitement going on, eh, Sherly?"

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one, Cranston. Those thugs are being questioned down at the station, but I have an idea that we're not going to learn much from them. I imagine they were hired in the dark and given an assignment... an assignment of death.

"They seem to have fallen down on their assignment..."

"I can't imagine who they were gunning for. The gateman must have seen too many movies. He's gibbering about a man in the back seat of the cab who was dressed in a black cape and a big black slouch hat..."

"Curious... it was this stranger whom the gunmen were shooting at?"

"Seemingly. I've questioned the cab driver and he's strangely vague about the whole thing. Says he barely noticed the passenger in the cab and that he drove through the gate automatically, scared stiff by the gun play!"

Cranston smiled to himself. Leave it to Shrevvie to play it safe till he figured out which way the wind was blowing.

"Some new elements have entered the case, all of them confusing, at least to my addled brain."

Cranston couldn't blame Sherly for being mixed up. It was a confusing case. One that The Shadow was admirably adapted to!

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"I'm going to take this hackie down to headquarters for questioning. I don't like the idea of a New York cabbie coming here and immediately getting involved in a shooting scrape!"

"While you're at it, you might double your guard on the persons involved in the case. I have an idea that there may well be some activity this evening!"

Cranston had more than an idea about this; he knew the evening would hold excitement.

Sherly jabbed his thumb at a "black maria" that was out in front of the studio. One of the cops grabbed Shrevvie by the arm and guided him there. Shrevvie risked a look at Cranston. Cranston, face turned from Sherly, gave Shrevvie a wink of reassurance. Shrevvie visibly straightened up. He looked his old cock-sure self.

"What's de etiquette to getting' on one of dese? Do I go in before de cop or after?"

The cop was in no mood for gaiety and frivolity. He pushed Shrevvie into the black maria. Then he closed the door and locked it.

It drove away with Shrevvie looking out through the screening on the back door.

Cranston watched him go, then spoke to Sherly. "What's your plan of attack. Lieutenant?"

"Are you kidding?"

"You must have some rough idea..."

"Yes, I'm going to do my best to keep these characters from killing each other off. That's about all I can see to do at this time."

"If I were you I'd go on the assumption that practically all the principals in the case are being blackmailed."

"You think the killer is that powerful, eh?"

"I do indeed!"

They both watched Gainsworthy pace back and forth in his office. His body showed through his windows. He went back and forth, restlessly, like a caged animal.

Cranston and Sherly turned away from the scene.

"Seems a bit upset, doesn't he? Not that I blame him." Sherly didn't blame anyone for being upset.

"Yes, the company is losing money every minute that this goes on. He must have his stockholders on his mind. As well as a few other things!"

Later, much later, The Shadow moved through the darkened, cavernous, crowded prop department. He searched calmly and methodically for an object even more bizarre than any that had so far been used in this case. He found what he was looking for and handled a long rubber hose. A satisfied smile appeared on his face.

The Blackest Mail

He had one more thing to do and then he was going on the trail of the killer! That night, The Shadow was to meet his antagonist, hand to hand! And surely under the strangest circumstances that he had ever grappled with a master of evil machinations.

Under the blackness of The Shadow's cloak there was a large package. It bulked up uncomfortably. He shifted it from one arm to the other restlessly.

His vigil so far was an unrewarding one. He was on the beach of the Pacific down below Laguna. As far as the eye could see there was sand, water, and air. The rain had settled down to a gentle persistent fall that seemed due to last all night.

Suddenly a sound caught The Shadow's ears. He flattened down behind the sand dune that gave him shelter. A car drove off the road and out onto the sand. It was about two hundred yards away.

He watched as a figure got out of the auto. Something was roped to the roof of the car. The figure reached up, untied the ropes and dragged a small canoe off the roof.

Moments later, the canoe was in the water. The figure was in the canoe and a paddle dug deep into the fairly quiet water of the Pacific.

Then, and not till then, The Shadow opened the package that he had carried under his arm. His cape came off, followed by his hat.

There was no one there to see...but if they had, fear would have been aroused, for in seconds a figure that seemed to have come from another planet plodded heavily across the sand towards the ocean.

A huge round head of clear plastic looked carefully around and then the leaden-footed, rubber-suited figure went out into the water. Knee deep, then shoulder deep and finally the water was level with the big bulbous head.

The diving-suited figure of The Shadow vanished beneath the water.

A searchlight at The Shadow's belt cut a short swath through the water. The Shadow got his bearings and flicked the light off and walked through the water. Fronds of underwater vegetable life pulled at him. Frightened schools of fish raced away from the macabre figure that stalked like vengeance through their nightmare world.

It was a long hard struggle, but at its end The Shadow was directly under the canoe that was at rest about five feet overhead.

The canoer seemed to be having trouble in keeping the canoe in the sloughs of the waves; he was evidently set to keep the canoe there till some predetermined time. The Shadow looked around as best he could in the silent blackness of the sea.

About ten feet away there was an outcropping of rock. The Shadow made his way there and sank down behind it. He regulated the flow of oxygen from the tank on his back. He had purchased one of the most up-to-date suits that the Navy had developed. It made a diver a completely free agent capable of staying under water for hours at a time.

It was cold down there and The Shadow hoped the vigil would not be too lengthy. His eyes were getting a little accustomed to the strange grayness of the under water.

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The canoe up above still held to approximately the same location. If all went well, The Shadow should, in a matter of minutes, watch the killer, whose machinations were causing so much fear, come stalking through the water.

There in the murk, barely perceptible, another man-from-Mars figure came dragging its feet. The round metal head looked up.

It evidently saw the vague, amorphous outlines of the canoe above it. It got directly under the outline and waited, arms outstretched. Minutes passed, anxious, full of suspense, and then silently, for there were no sounds here, an outline came slowly down through the water. It was a box, made of metal about a foot long and ten inches high.

The diving-suited figure pushed the trailing hose that led to the back of the helmet out of the way.

It seemed to take hours for the box to sway its slow way down. It fell into the waiting arms. The figure instantly turned on its heels and walked, not towards the shore, but out to sea, heading seemingly for Japan!

The Shadow waited till the figure was almost out of sight—a matter of a mere ten feet—and then slowly followed.

It was a chase, an underwater chase that might lead to death at any moment!

Out, out till The Shadow began to wonder how long this insane Alice-in-Wonderland scene could continue!

Finally, the figure with the box under its arm stood still. It was evidently going to wait to be pulled up. But that didn't happen!

Instead, The Shadow lengthened his stride and descended on the figure. Gray, formless in the strange darkness, he paced towards the diving suit that housed the man behind the dreadful deeds, the man who had made a double feature of death and destruction in the fairyland of Hollywood!

The figure, momentarily paralyzed with surprise, for it was as unexpected as a bolt of lightning, didn't even move till The Shadow had grabbed the box from its unresisting arms.

Consternation gave way to rage! The figure whipped a long, razor-sharp knife from its belt and leaped through the water at The Shadow, who stepped back.

It was like a scene in a slow-motion silent movie. No sounds of combat, no heaving of strained lungs, just the eerie, all-pervading silence and the ferocious figure, hand, knife-fanged, whipping slowly through the water. But although the stroke was slow, just as slow had to be The Shadow's response, for the water was heavy on his figure. It took seconds to launch a blow and more eternal seconds for the blow to land.

The very tip of the knife grazed the side of The Shadow's rubber suit. In a motion like that of a bull fighter, who merely moves his hips in order to avoid the bull's lunge, The Shadow evaded the stroke.

The slightest rip in the protecting suit meant death—death by drowning!

The figure drew its arm back and set itself for another blow. The Shadow, metal box in hand, raised it like a shield as the knife tip came at his stomach like the delicate probe of a wasp's stinger!

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The box came up in front of The Shadow just in time. On land, a blow like that landing at right angles on a metal box would have shattered the knife blade to fragments. Here in this nightmare world, the knife slid off the metal box and by accident almost achieved what it had failed to do by design, for the ricochet carried the knife off the box and around at The Shadow's side!

XI.

CURIOSLY enough, while this duel to the death was taking place, The Shadow's mind, or part of it, was on something else. He was thinking, as he moved his hips the scant millimeter that saved his side from the fang of the knife, that he had been right: his thought as to why Genia had sent the toy submarine to sea had been correct.

She had been instructed to place the blackmail tribute in the toy and send it out to sea. The blackmailer had been under water in his diving suit waiting, probably with a net. When the toy had come through the water, it had been child's play to net the submarine and the money! What better cover for the blackmailer's identity than tons and untold tons of sea water!

But this was hardly the time for proof of the fact that The Shadow, as always, had known! The knife, the ever-present menace, was curving down in a stroke aimed at The Shadow's shoulder. He got the protecting box in the way at the last possible second and wondered how much longer it would take for his plan to take effect!

At just that second, the blackmailer's weapon came in and under The Shadow's guard! The knife tip touched, tore, and ripped through the side of the suit! Water took the place of beneficent air in the protecting suit!

Simultaneously, The Shadow's plan came to fruition; for without even grabbing the box that had now fallen from The Shadow's hands, the other diving-suited figure grabbed frantically at the guide-rope that was his exit to the world of air!

As The Shadow felt the swirl of cold water at his body, the other man was being dragged up through the water! It was obvious that he was in distress! His hands clawed at his throat! He dropped the knife!

It came down through the water slowly, like a plummet descending on the fallen box, that had been the prize in the deadly struggle.

Up above on the surface of the water, a man reached down and dragged the diving-suited figure out of the water. The rescued man's hands made feeble motions at the diving helmet and then fell limply at the figure's side. The helper unscrewed the butterfly nuts that had held the helmet in place.

The helper thought wildly, "Now I'll see his face! Something's gone wrong! He seems to have passed out!"

The helmet was off and beady eyes looked at the head that had come out from the protection of the metal helmet. The helper grunted, for the man had a cloth mask covering his face. His hands went out to rip the protecting piece of fabric free!

Under the water The Shadow struggled in the deadly embrace of the sea! It would never do to surrender to Neptune.

There was only one thing to do, and it meant risking the bends, for The Shadow had no idea how deep in the water the fight had carried him. He turned on the valve of the oxygen tank all the way. A huge blast of

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compressed gas spurting down and blowing out all around him. The shattered, ripped remnants of the suit ballooned out around him. A huge bubble formed that blasted him up through the water like a jet-propelled missile.

He burst through the water and out into the air. So it was that he was witness to a murder! For the first time The Shadow had to stay helplessly by, while death was doled out!

He shrugged as much of the suit from him as he could, and ducked his head under water, releasing the diving helmet and letting it slide off. Last and most troublesome were the diving boots; those heavy, leaden things that were trying to drag him back down to death below the surface.

In varied fragments then, like some phantasmagoric movie, in the short seconds when his eyes were free of the water, The Shadow saw various parts of a murder take place on the boat!

His first vision was of a man whose body was still in a diving suit but whose head was free, replacing a mask over his face. Another man facing him was drawing away.

Then it was under the water and up again. This time The Shadow saw the diving-suited figure raise a marlin-spike high.

The Shadow didn't see the blow descend. Instead, the next time his eyes were clear of water, he saw the man who had been hit on the head falling backwards off the deck of the boat.

That was all. The man never came up, and by the time The Shadow rid himself of the lead shoes, it was too late. The man was gone!

The Shadow was no sooner rid of his encumbrances than he began to swim for the boat. But again it was too late. There was a sudden splutter as the motor turned over; then it caught, revved up and sped away, far too fast for even The Shadow.

Pursuit would have been fruitless. The Shadow filled his lungs, realizing that his surge up from under the water had not been over twenty feet all told. Although at that breathless time it had seemed more like two hundred, he took a deep breath and dove under again.

He forced his way down with difficulty now that the weight of his boots was gone. Blinking his eyes in the salt water, he could just see the metal box lying on the sand. Powerful breaststroke by breaststroke, he made his way down to it. Then grasping it, he let the pressure carry him up.

His head broke water. It was quite a distance off shore and the water was getting rougher. But it was no task for The Shadow. Forcing the box into the top of his pants, under his belt, he made for shore using a seemingly lazy side stroke that was deceptively powerful.

On shore, dripping wet, The Shadow donned the cloak and hat and soon the beach was as silent and empty as it had been in primeval days before man came to break the silence with his puny plans.

In his hotel room Lamont Cranston, hair brushed, impeccable as always, donned a dressing gown and seated himself before a fireplace. At his side were an ash tray, cigars, and the metal box!

It was a puzzle box of some kind, for there was no keyhole. The lid made a fine line where it joined the box proper. Air-tight and certainly water-tight, it was admirable for what its purpose had been.

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Although Cranston knew what the box contained, he was still anxious to get it open. He lifted the box and shook it. There was no sound. Sometimes these puzzle boxes had a marble in them which had to be rolled into a specific position before the box would open. This was not such a one.

A razor blade made no ingress. Cranston stared at the box thoughtfully. There was no design to hide any moving slats. There could be but one solution.

He smiled as he picked up the phone. "Room service, please." He waited. Then, "I know this is going to sound a little peculiar, but is there a magnet anywhere that I might borrow?"

In a New York hotel, or anywhere but here in Los Angeles, such a request might have given a hotel employee pause. But not here. A bored, blasé voice asked, "How big would you like that, sir?"

Cranston grinned and said. "Oh, almost any size will do. Not smaller than three inches, however."

Ten minutes later Cranston answered a knock at the door. A bell hop stood there, silver salver held out. On a doily in the center of the salver was a horse shoe magnet about six inches long.

"Anything else, sir?" The bell boy's face was calm.

"No, that'll be all. Cranston flipped the boy a quarter and took the magnet.

As soon as the door was closed again, Cranston put the poles of the magnet against the side of the box. Nothing happened. Slowly he passed the magnet all around the box. Nothing.

Then in ever-diminishing circles, he moved the magnet around the bottom of the box. Finally there was a muffled click.

Cranston put the magnet down. He pushed the cover. It slid back. As he had known, it was jam-packed full of money. What he hadn't known was how much would be there.

It was a staggering amount. He counted out the money and arranged it in neat piles in front of him. One hundred thousand dollars in completely unmarked bills. Quite a haul. Particularly when one realized that it was a small percentage of the blackmailer's complete take.

Cranston stacked the money back in the box and closed it. He passed the magnet under the box causing the catch inside the box to lock again.

Here in his hands he had the wherewithal to trap the murderous malefactor.

The lights out, Lamont Cranston slept.

The sun that rose the following morning looked as if it had been placed in the sky by the California Chamber of Commerce. It began a day that was to see the culmination of the case of The Shadow versus the Blackest Mail!

Lieutenant Sherly was at his desk at headquarters. He was reading some typewritten reports. They were not very conducive to optimism. Sturm had left his house early the previous night and gotten rid of his trailer somewhere above Laguna Beach. Sherly wondered if that had any connection with the case.

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He was still wondering when Lamont Cranston, brief case under one arm and a package under the other, walked into the office and smiled a good morning.

He threw the package onto Sherly's desk and said, "Take a look in there!"

Sherly ripped the paper off the package and stared at the metal box that had responded to the magnet for Cranston, the night before.

"What's in it?"

"One hundred thousand dollars in coin of the realm. It's part of the blackmailer's boodle that he's missed out on!"

"How does it open?"

Cranston threw the magnet onto the desk. He showed Sherly how to use it. Sherly sat and stared at the treasure that was revealed. He let his breath out in a long susurration.

"Whew... this case is even bigger than I had thought!"

"It's not picayune, that's a sure thing." Cranston answered, as he picked up the report on Sturm. "May I?"

"Of course." Sherly wasn't very interested in anything but the box full of money.

"So Sturm was on the loose. Anyone else that we're interested in?"

"Flip Hiller, Tony Hunter—as a matter of fact, everyone but Genia Gladder and Gainsworthy were out and around last night. Flip, Sturm and Don Barron evaded our trailers, but Tony Hunter was followed all night."

"Tell me about it."

"He left his house... pretty crummy joint for a guy in his position, isn't it?"

"I think it's understandable when you realize that he may well be paying out most of his salary in blackmail!" Cranston answered.

"True. Well, Hunter left his house by way of the back window, if you don't mind. Luckily we had a man out back too. He followed Hunter way down towards San Diego. Oh, about fifty miles past Laguna, I'd say. There, another car started to trail Hunter's. Our car dropped back so that it looked like a game of follow the leader. Evidently neither Hunter nor his trailer knew about our car, for they both stopped at a motel with a cafe attached.

"My man, a swell worker, eased into the joint and snagged a booth in back of Hunter. In a mirror across the place, he managed to see the man that Hunter was with. He was a little meek-looking guy."

Cranston nodded, "Hmmm."

"Then, and this was infuriating, both Hunter and the meek guy lowered their voices so all my man could overhear were stray sentences. But what sentences! I'm all ready to throw Sturm overboard as my favorite suspect!"

"How so?"

"From what my man could gather, the meek little man was suggesting a murder method. Hunter had some objections—not to the murder, mind you, but the method.

The little guy said the way to rig the kill was to arrange for an accident where he, whoever he is to be, would trip down a flight of stairs. If they were lucky, he'd break a leg. That was all that was necessary for a perfect murder that the stupid police would never be able to dope out!"

"A perfect murder method? What was the device?"

"It's diabolically simple, if it works, and the meek little man was sure it would. It seems that when a bone is broken, there is an oily fluid given off by the fracture. If some bland oil, like olive oil, were injected into a vein through the break in the skin, the olive oil would kill the man, and an autopsy would show nothing! Absolutely nothing.

"Mind you a lot of this is guessing on our part, because my man only got pieces of this conversation! But, Hunter kept insisting: "Give me a sock on the head in a dark alley, or a knife between the ribs; those are the sensible kills and the perfect ones! These fancy methods, phooey!"

"You know, Sherly, Hunter's right; those are the easiest murder methods to get away with. It's when a killer puts too many frills on the murder that the police find it easy to..."

"Oh, sure, I know that, but how do you like the light this throws on the whole case? If we only knew who the murder method was being devised for..."

"Oh, don't you know?" Cranston smiled.

"Know? Of course not! Do you mean you do? Who... who are they planning on killing?"

Lamont Cranston smiled at Sherly's eagerness. "It's quite obvious, I thought. The murder method was devised to take care of Don Barron!"

XII.

SHERLY was out of his seat and over at the teletype before Cranston could stop him. Cranston called, "Whoa, hold it. Don't you see what this is all about?"

"No time to talk, Cranston, wait till I get a message out to the boys to cover Barron constantly. Can't have anyone else killed on this blasted case!"

"Please, Sherly, come here. Barron, believe me, is in no danger from Hunter. Your normal precautions are quite satisfactory. Now, I must apologize for not telling you immediately."

Sherly scowled at Cranston. "Telling me what?"

"You realize that Hunter is being blackmailed. Have you any idea why?"

Sherly shook his head in the negative.

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"Because of that little meek man that you're all upset about. Hunter has been writing a long time. He's written out, he's gone dry. So, he hired a ghost! It's not too unusual, but Hunter's ego wouldn't let it be known that he had to have help in plotting. He kept it a secret for a while, and then it was too late for him ever to admit it, because, with the ghost's aid, he became better known and more famous than ever. He was licked; he could never let it be known that the meek little man was really his brains! That's what the blackmailer has been holding over him!"

"Then..." Sherly was thrown off his stride. He scowled in concentration, "then, oh... cripes... I get it now... that conversation I overheard yesterday. and the one my man heard last night... they were..."

"Plotting, of course! With Doster's death, the picture-story line had to be changed. Don Barron is a much more important star than Doster was, so the role had to be increased! That's what they were working on!"

"That's a pretty kettle of red herring, I must say. Then this still leaves me with...with \$100,000 and a certain temperamental director..."

As Sherly spoke, Cranston pointed to the box on the desk. "It leaves you with something else," he said. "It leaves you with The Shadow, or had you realized that he was here?"

"Out here on the coast? No kidding..."

"Of course, it was The Shadow that those gunmen were after yesterday!"

"This explains a lot of things. You know I had to let that cabbie go?"

"I figured you would."

"I had nothing tangible to hold him on. But now, I can see that with The Shadow as his passenger it might well have been difficult for him to describe the man he was transporting. Hmm..."

"If I may say so, it seems to me that since the blackmailer was willing to hire a gang to finish him off..." Cranston paused as he saw that Sherly was still staring at the metal box.

"I hate to be impolite, but I've been waiting quite a while for you to tell me how you came by this bundle of boodle!" Sherly's smile dispelled any feeling of rancor that the words might have caused.

"Of course, that's why I brought The Shadow's name into the conversation. He sent that box to me last night and said that it might well be the bait to get our prey!"

"I'd love to know how even The Shadow could have spirited all this coin away from our careful killer!"

Cranston stood up preparatory to leaving. "By the way, and I can't give you any more information on this, have there been any reports of a man being found in the ocean off Laguna since last night?"

Sherly shook his head no and then watched with wide eyes as Cranston picked up the box and hefted it in his hands.

"You know," said Cranston, "there are some times when an empty box will serve the same purpose as a full one. Suppose you put this money in the safe, and I take the box along with me?"

"You are a brave man, Mr. Cranston; do it by all means if you think that's what The Shadow wants us to do."

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Cranston waved a cheery goodbye and left.

The pace of the case was due to increase, and he welcomed it. He returned to his hotel room but not before stopping at a drug store and making a purchase that made the druggist look inquiringly at him. It wasn't what Cranston bought that amazed the clerk, it was the quantity.

Once inside his hotel room, Lamont Cranston smiled to himself. He opened the metal box, and looking at its emptiness he proceeded to rectify it. He opened the bottle he had just bought and poured the entire liquid contents of the bottle into the box.

That done, he closed the box with the magnet and looked at the container which had held a fortune. Instead of a fortune it now held a trap. A trap that was going to snare a killer! He had baited it as carefully as a big game hunter for, after all, he was a hunter after the biggest game there is.

The box went into his briefcase along with the cloak and black slouch hat that were his trade marks when he was operating in that other guise.

Cranston and Sherly were driving along a road. It was the road that lead to Sturm's palatial mansion. The briefcase on Cranston's lap jiggled in time to the cobbles they were riding over.

"Glad you could come along, Cranston. I know I'm just sticking my neck out. I have nothing to go on, really. I just want to pass the time of day with the estimable director."

"I imagine too, you want to check on that helicopter?"

Sherly nodded. "I want to check on a lot of things. That shooting routine, for instance. Although the shot hit Sturm in the back, there was no reason why it couldn't have been self-inflicted!"

"You noticed the books in the roomette, then."

"I certainly did. I even found a length of string that could have gone from the trigger out to the doorknob and back to his hand. He could have stood with his back to the gun. This is all after he could have clouted Flip Hiller on the head, of course, and after aiming carefully, have pulled the string which released a bullet at his back."

"His motivation for this dangerous act?" asked Cranston.

"As a throw-off. I imagine that if he is the killer, he's pretty jittery and thought that would be a good way to mis-direct attention away from him."

"I see."

The road stretched ahead of them interminably. Sherly spoke again, he was obviously thinking aloud. "If we could know what the blackmailer knew about the people in the case it would help a lot! For instance, we know his hold over Genia, but what has he got on Don Barron, or is Barron being blackmailed?"

"Barron doesn't live too well, if that's any indication."

"But Sturm does! He's one of the few people involved in all this that really seems to spend some of the dough-re-mi that he makes!"

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"Yes, his baronial barn certainly is expensive to keep up."

"Do you have any idea," asked Sherly, "whether or not Gainsworthy himself is paying off?"

Cranston pictured the scene where Gainsworthy had projected the torpedo out the window and nodded his head. "Yes, indeed. I wouldn't be surprised if the blackmailer takes more money from him than any of his other victims."

"Wonder what Gainsworthy has on his conscience that he doesn't want the world let in on?"

"I don't think the blackmailer holds that sort of thing over him at all. I have an idea that his threat is even more horrible. After all, all the blackmailer has to do is either threaten to disfigure a batch of stars so no one will ever work for Gainsworthy, or, and this may be more probable, he may threaten to make all the stars he controls go on a sit-down strike."

"Wow, that's an idea! Sure, all he'd have to do is say no work, and there'd be no work!" Sherly chewed on his lip thoughtfully. "That routine with Flip Hiller's model ship in the bottle turned out to be of real value. My men found some microscopic traces of the bottle and some tiny fragments of wood when they went through the place."

"If interpreted correctly, that ship's prow points directly at the guilty man!" As these words left Cranston's lips, the car drove up the curving pathway that led to the Sturm menage.

The door opened and the butler looked out at them inquiringly. "We have an appointment!" Sherly's tone brooked no argument.

They followed the servant into the big foyer that faced the living-room. Sturm, stiff-necked, belligerent-looking, walked out to them.

"This is official?"

"Why, no, not exactly, but since you are bound so closely into the case," Sherly's eyes indicated the bandage on Sturm's shoulder, "I thought maybe you'd like to chew it over with us."

"This is not my idea of a pleasant way the evening to spend but..." Sturm's shrug could have meant anything. He guided them into the living-room.

The butler brought a tray over to Cranston who shook his head. Sherly took a drink and cuddling it in his hands said, "You don't give any indication of being one of the blackmailer's victims."

The light glinted on Sturm's monocle. "Of course not. Blackmail I do not pay! What is there in my life of which I have shame?"

"You got me! I'm just asking the question." Sherly took a sip of his drink. "In the length of time that has passed, have you been able to remember any more details of your mysterious shooting?"

Sturm's heavy head shook in negation. "I have told you all there is to tell. I am not any secrets keeping from you."

"Since you aren't, how about something about your helicopter?"

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"What about it? In the first war I an aviator was. My interest in flying has waned never. The helicopter interested me, that is all. I in a position am where I can my little desires coddle."

Cranston looked at the shield on the wall that concealed the safe and smiled to himself about Sturm's not keeping any secrets.

Sherly followed Cranston's eyes, but of course could see nothing on the wall but the barbaric shield. He asked, "How's the picture coming along?"

Sturm popped the monocle out of his eye and polished it on a pocket handkerchief. "As well as anyone could hope, I suppose. Troubles I have had, as you well know. Barron will no doubt a better actor be than the dead man, Doster. I foresee no troubles in that direction. Tomorrow we will finish the back scenes and ahead be ready to go."

They talked a while longer, quite aimlessly, as far as Sturm could determine. Finally, they picked themselves up and made their exit.

Outside, as Sherly looked around, Cranston asked, "Find out anything you wanted to know?"

"Not a blasted thing," Sherly looked at the huge garage behind the mansion. "Come on, I want to poke my grubby nose in there."

The garage was unusual. It held three cars, foreign makes all, and the helicopter. It looked smaller than the usual ones because of the black paint that covered it.

"I suppose Sturm's favorite color is black in case I were to ask about the funeral paint job."

They examined the machine closely. But for its color it was a standard job. Cranston's pointing finger gestured at some striated lines that ran down the nose of the helicopter from the pilot's window towards the base of the plane.

"Looks like the paint has been scraped a trifle by – I guess rope would do that wouldn't it?" Sherly asked.

Lamont Cranston nodded. He was thinking of the rope that had come down through the night and grabbed the bundle that Genia Gladder had hung in her garden.

"Oh, this is worse than useless. Come on, I'll drop you off downtown." Sherly walked off impatiently.

The road whizzed by in an endless concrete ribbon. Cranston again held his briefcase in his lap. "I'm not set for bed yet. Will you drop me off at the RoTango?"

"Not only will I drop you off, I'll come in and have a nightcap. I need it."

As far as Cranston could see, the people in the night club were the same he had seen there the last time.

Sturm was missing, but the other picture people were all there. Even Hunter, again playing solitaire, looked as if he hadn't moved from the table. Flip had a girl that Cranston thought for a moment was the same one that had been the cause of the fist fight, but on second glance, Cranston realized that it was just a family resemblance. The girl was enough like the other to be related to her.

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Flip waved a lackadaisical hand at Sherly and Cranston as they approached the table at which Hunter sat. Gainsworthy looked up, and seeing them, nodded. He gestured to a waiter who brought a table over and set it up next to the one at which Gainsworthy and Hunter were sitting.

"You have some news for us?"

Gainsworthy's face showed the strain he was under. It was deeply lined and not even his dark tan could hide the bags under his eyes.

"Not very much I'm afraid." Sherly sighed.

"Before you get tangled up in all that, J. G., what do you think of the new murder method for the picture?" Hunter was anxious for an answer.

"It'll do; it's just mildly sensational, but it'll do. If I only had the time I'd think something up for you, but..."

A waiter took the latest customers' orders and departed. The band, a small combination, let go with a blare of sound that snapped Gainsworthy's head up. He glared at the podium.

Hunter said, "Whew, that riff is strictly from corn!"

"From what it is I don't care. Only it should stop! That I care! Waiter!"

Gainsworthy gave orders in no uncertain terms that, until he left, the band was to play waltzes, low and not too many of them.

He heaved a sigh and said, "Now that I can hear myself think, tell me what goes on."

"Well..." Before Sherly could finish, Cranston cleared his throat.

"May I?" He asked.

"Of course." Sherly was only too glad for someone else to take over. He had nothing to report. "Go right ahead."

"The Lieutenant has a tendency to modesty that doesn't fit too well out here. I can say for him, that as far as we can tell, the setting sun tomorrow will go down on the end of this case!"

Gainsworthy's lips moved but nothing came out. He looked as if he had something in his throat. At last he got out, "You mean it?"

The nod that Cranston gave him reassured the head of Impressive Films, Inc.

"This I can almost not believe. You'll excuse me, Mr. Cranston, if I wait till tomorrow before I say anything more?"

"Wait if you will, but take my word for it, the killer-blackmailer will be finished on the morrow!" On that, Lamont Cranston rose and left the room.

The men he left behind him looked stunned. They would have been more stunned if they had heard a sound that lingered outside the night club for a second after Cranston walked away.

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It was the sound of The Shadow's laughter—for The Shadow knew all he had to know to end the career of as merciless and cunning an adversary against whom he had ever matched wits!

XIII.

CRANSTON hadn't realized that Flip and his girl had preceded him out of the RoTango. It wasn't till he almost tripped over them that he did realize it. Luckily they were too concerned with each other to notice him.

He faded into the shadows at the foot of a palmetto tree. This kind of eavesdropping he didn't care for, but he wanted to change his clothes and this shadowy area was perfect. As he changed he couldn't help but hear Flip whisper, "It's a shame, that's what it is, kid, but you know the kind of money that I make; I just barely get along. I wish I was back in the bucks the way I used to be when my name was on every theater marquee from here to Jersey City."

The girl's voice was even lower. "I know, Flip. I know. Come on, I don't care if we can't see the bright lights, just let's walk. I like to walk. Back where I came from that was about the only thing there was to do after dark. I don't mind at all."

Their voices faded away as they linked arms and walked.

An idling cab drove slowly along the street. The Shadow, for it was that mysterious creature of the night who paced the silent street, cast a quick suspicious look at it. He was prepared for anything. But then, suddenly, a grin spread over his saturnine face.

He pulled the door open and sat down in the back seat. Shrevvie, for, it was Shrevvie, said, "I t'ought you was never gonna come out from dat palmetto tree. I see Cranston walk into the shadow and den I don't see nuttin', so I knew..."

"Shrevvie there is finally something The Shadow doesn't know! How in the wide world did you ever get another cab so quickly?"

"Revenge is sweet! I ain't a gonna tell ya!" Shrevvie grinned.

"If you don't, I won't tell you what these are!" The Shadow smiled at the by-play. He held up two gelatin capsules.

Shrevvie wrinkled his brow and took a look in the rear view mirror at the capsules. "Aw... a cousin of mine has dis here cab. I borried it offa him."

The Shadow handed the two capsules to Shrevvie. "Handle these gently and get rid of them at the earliest opportunity. Although some capsules like them saved my life, I still don't want to take any chances with them."

"What are dey?" Shrevvie, one hand on the wheel, looked at the capsules in his other hand. "Dey look familiar"

"They should. You've seen them in novelty store windows! They're stench bombs!"

"But how could a gag, and a corny gag at dat, save yer life?"

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The Shadow explained about his trip to the prop department at Impressive studios. "When I found the diving suit there, I placed four of those bombs inside the suit. I fastened them with tape."

"Yare?"

"No matter how cold the water under the ocean is, and it can be bitterly cold, the inside of a diving suit is like a turkish bath because of the fact that body heat, given off, has no place to go!"

"Ya mean dat de guy's own body heat melted dese here jelly t'ings?"

"It did indeed and just in the nick of time! The killer's knife ripped my suit wide open and it was just at that split second that he got the jolt from the stench bombs. It must have been incredibly smelly, for he left \$100,000 down there under the water! He had to get out of that suit!"

"But fast! Phew! I bet it could killya used dat way!" Shrevvie eyed the little bombs with ill-concealed nervousness. They were riding over a bridge that spanned a shallow river at the time.

Shrevvie flipped the capsules from him and said, "I hope de fishes don't mind!"

"I'm sure they won't!"

"Where to?" Shrevvie screwed his neck around and looked at The Shadow. All traces of pleasant humor were gone from his face. It was set in lines that Shrevvie knew well. "Oh, we're getting' close to de deadline, huh?"

The Shadow nodded. "What did you find out about Barron?"

"Ya mean de guy ya phoned me ta check on? Well, it took a lot of nosin' around, and I ain't got no proof, but ya know Barron's married for de second time..."

"Yes, I understood he was in the process of divorcing wife number two."

"Well, he really don't have ta. He wasn't never married to her!"

"Ah, bigamy! So that's what the blackmailer knows. I had an idea that with a man of Don Barron's reputation it would turn out to be something like this."

"I don't tink it was his fault. Deere was some business about de foist wife takin' a powder. He tough she was dead when he tied up wid de second one. Den up pops number one!"

"So he's been paying her to keep quiet till the divorce goes through so as to protect his second wife's reputation and at the same time paying our killer! Quite an expense. No wonder he was willing to fit into Doster's dead shoes and finish the picture."

"Yare, it was a tough spot. Whatcha gonna do now?"

The Shadow gave him directions.

The cab slowed to a halt in front of a house. "Don't bother to wait for me. But wait, maybe, you'd better at that!" The Shadow was gone.

Shrevvie watched the dark figure blend into the blackness.

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In even denser black, The Shadow, using his fingers as eyes, searched till he found a table. Having found the table in the center of the room, he pulled the metal box that had once contained a fortune out from under his cloak. He laid the box in the center of the table.

He didn't think he'd have long to wait. The killer was in for a surprise; for all the killer knew, the metal box was down at the bottom of the ocean, along with the antagonist that he thought he had killed!

The Shadow settled himself comfortably in a chair. He had no idea how long he was going to have to wait, but he had a hunch it wouldn't be too long.

It was an hour and ten minutes, to be exact. The door opened and light from outside the room poured in. The man who was framed in the doorway was but a silhouette, for the light was back-lighting him.

Enough light came in for him to see the metal box in the center of the table. He gasped. Stunned to the core of his being, yet he was on the uptake. With his brain whirling he still had presence of mind enough to kick the door of the room shut. Just before the door closed, The Shadow saw a horseshoe-shaped piece of metal being withdrawn from the man's pocket. He had a magnet. The man moved through the darkness with the ease of long practice.

He was thinking. I don't care what kind of a trap this is; I have to know if the money is still in there.

The Shadow heard the faint scrape of metal on metal. He knew the man was using the magnet to open the box. There was an even fainter sound as the metal top of the box was opened.

At that precise second, with shocking suddenness, The Shadow lashed out with his foot, under the table, across from the man.

The table up-ended towards the man. He gasped again. So this was it! His reflexes were fast. Even as the table was coming down on him, even as he felt liquid spill on him from somewhere, he grabbed the table by the ends and heaved it back in the direction it had come.

It was a heavy table, and if it had landed on The Shadow, it might have brained him.

But he had heard the heavy inhalation of breath as the man strained in the darkness, he was gone from the chair, down on his hands and knees to one side as the table crashed with a thud into the chair he had been in a moment before.

The man followed up the table with a chair. It flew through the air and smashed to kindling wood on top of the table.

The Shadow, half rising, had his arms out in a semi-circle. He moved forward slowly. At any second he expected to feel flesh within the living arc of his arms. Minute step by step he took. Straining his ears, he suddenly realized that for the first time he heard no sound of breathing!

Standing stock still, he listened. His own blood pounded in his ears. Otherwise, silence! The man had vanished! The room was empty but for The Shadow!

As he realized this, he felt for and found a light switch. The light pouring down showed the wreckage of the chair and table, the box fallen on its side on the floor, and nothing else.

The Blackest Mail

Despite the fact that The Shadow had been outwitted, a satisfied smile played on his lips as he walked across the pavement towards Shrevvie's cab. He knew that the man had not simply disintegrated; therefore, there was a trap somewhere in the room. But, it was not worth The Shadow's while to waste any time searching for it! He leaned back against the cushions of the cab and said, "Back to the hotel, Shrevvie."

En route, the black cape and hat went into the briefcase. He waved good-bye to Shrevvie in front of the hotel and entered it as Lamont Cranston. The curious little smile that had played on the features of The Shadow went up to bed with Lamont Cranston!

His sleep was deep and undisturbed. Nine o'clock the following morning, Lamont Cranston, briefcase and all walked into the office of J. Gainsworthy, president of Impressive.

"A mind-reader the man is. Today is the first time in fifteen years I am behind this desk so early in the morning!" Gainsworthy was on his third cigar since he had finally given up all hope of sleeping and come down to his office.

"No mind-reading involved," smiled Cranston, "I just had an idea that on this of all days you'd be here early." In the same tone of voice, Cranston said, "How much have you paid out to the blackmailer all together?"

It was so casually done, and the one held so much assurance that Gainsworthy, without a thought, answered, "Three hundred thousand... Yippee! What the...why... how did you know?"

"That didn't take a mind-reader either, Mr. Gainsworthy. How did he threaten you? Did he say that all your stars would go on a sit-down strike?"

Gainsworthy's face was defenseless, emotions ran across it without his making any effort to conceal them. "Yes, you are right. What's more he proved it for, one time when I got fed up and wouldn't pay any more, he held up production of a film that I assure you was costing a lot more than my monthly payment to him!"

All the affectations were gone. Gainsworthy was just a man now, a worried, frantic man who had seen a menace come to fruition that was robbing his business of its rightful profits.

"This may sound curious, but I think you may get back quite a bit of that money!" Cranston was on his feet and leaving before Gainsworthy could do anything but splutter something about, "It really came to almost double that because of the income tax. On a tax form you can't write off 'Blackmail: three hundred'..."

Cranston was out of the office.

Gainsworthy leaned back in his chair and lit his fourth cigar of the day. If any other man in the world had spoken to him as Cranston had... What was that air of confidence that Cranston had? It was like a helping hand.

On the set, Barron and Genia were in a lovers' pose. Genia with the aid of much make-up had partly hidden the ravages of her emotional upset of the revelation of her secret.

"No... no! Gladder! You are supposed to be in love! In love, woman, can you not understand? You are rigid like a..."

Barron cut in on Sturm's bellowing. "Can't you understand that it'll take her a little while to get back to normal? Put the cat-o'-nine tails away and try to pretend you're human.... Just try! See if it makes you blow a

gasket."

Sturm's red-rimmed eyes circled around for someone to vent his spleen on. He saw Flip helping a grip to set up a light.

"You! Hiller! You are an electrician now? You want trouble with the union? Get away from there! Attend a little, please, to your own job!"

"Oh," Flip glared at Sturm, "today I have a regular job? That's a novelty! Am I not to be punished any more? Can I go back to being a prop man?"

Sturm turned around and walked away. His riding crop swished down and cut through the air with a hiss. "I will be back. Get the set rigged!"

Cranston felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Sherly. "Our happy little family is starting to ravel a little at the edges, isn't it?"

Cranston nodded.

"Did I tell you, by the way, that when we checked the finger prints on that mystery gun that the mysterious prowler used to shoot Sturm with that there were only one set of prints on it?"

"Whose were they?" Cranston was positive he knew.

"Sturm's! He's the killer, the filthy blackmailer, and I can't hang a thing on him! I'm going to have a record made of me saying that!"

"Oh, you can hang some things on him. For instance, he is a Nazi! He heels his servant, if you don't mind!" Cranston's grin was not possessed of any humor.

"That's interesting!"

"It was he that stole Hiller's ship model. It was he that broke it up in Hunter's rooms. I have an eye witness to that."

Sherly's eyes were full of hope as he looked at Cranston. "Tell me more, my ears are feeling good for the first time in days."

"Sturm piloted the helicopter the night that Gladder and Barron paid their monthly installments."

"Can you prove that?" Sherly's voice was eager.

Cranston nodded. "It might be interesting to check back on his movements the day that Gainsworthy shot his tribute out the window of his office and a car with a net caught it! I have an eye witness who saw a man driving that car. A man with his shoulder bandaged!"

Sherly was running away when Cranston turned his eyes to him.

Sherly was pulling a pair of handcuffs from his pocket as he ran towards Sturm's roomette. Cranston instantly ran in pursuit.

The Blackest Mail

At the door there was a nightmarish feeling that all this had happened before, for the door would not give!

Cranston and Sherly leaned their respective weights on the door and it gave. As they pushed, a shot sounded and the shot came from inside the roomette!

This time the light was on. This time they could see what had happened. A note lay on the floor almost under Sherly's feet! Beyond the note, stark and dead, lay Sturm, a revolver clenched in his hand.

As they watched, his fingers relaxed and the gun dropped out of his hand!

"This time he did a good job of it!" Sherly stared down at the dead body with no compunction.

The note on the floor read, "I can feel the noose tightening. I thought I could somehow, by sheer brilliance, get away with murder, but somewhere I have slipped. The Shadow is on my trail! I am the blackmailer, I am the killer of Doster, as well as a man who may well be nameless. He was an employee who got out of hand. His body may one day be cast up by the ocean. The money, what is left of it, is in the safe behind the shield on my wall."

It was signed, as was Sturm's habit, with an S.

Sherly, who was holding the note, almost dropped it, for a laugh, a faint laugh, an echoing, macabre laugh sounded in the tiny room.

"Just an S," said Lamont Cranston, "doesn't even take a good forger to imitate that!"

XIV.

SHERLY wrenched his eyes away from the hole in the right side of Sturm's forehead. It was small. It was the other one, on the other side of the temple, where the bullet had blasted its exit, that was large.

Sherly blinked his eyes a couple of times as though to clear the cobwebs from them, he said slowly, "I must be losing my mind; first I hear a laugh that you don't, Cranston, and then, I could swear you just said something about this suicide note being a forgery!"

He knuckled his eyes and shook his head. "I guess this proves that four hours sleep a night isn't enough for a growing boy. Am I glad this case is over with the murderer signed, sealed and delivered, all ready for the grave with no nonsense in court!"

"Sherly," Cranston's voice was gentle, "I did say that the note was forgery, for despite the fact that on the surface Sturm seemed to be the man we want—he wasn't!"

The shot had attracted attention. Sherly and Cranston looked out at a sea of faces. Seemingly, every single one of Impressive's employees was grouped outside the roomette.

Sherly said, "Let me get to a phone while I try to make sense out of some of this jabberwocky."

He elbowed his way past Barron and Genia, who had gotten a glimpse into the room, Genia asked, "Is he... is he?"

"Oh, he's dead all right, but for what it's all about you'd better ask him!" Sherly jerked his head at Cranston,

The Blackest Mail

who was guarding the doorway.

Cranston held his hands up for silence because the babble of frightened voices was getting louder all the time. "Please, won't you all go back to doing what you were before the shot? That will help a great deal."

They heeded the real plea in his voice and the crowd began to scatter. Flip Hiller, Barron and Genia walked towards the set where they worked.

"It doesn't seem possible! First Doster and now the old Sturm himself." Flip's voice trailed off.

"Ugh... anything is more than liable to happen on this lot!" Genia's voice was tight and frightened.

"Take it easy, kid." Barron's voice was warm, reassuring. "It'll all come out in the wash."

It was only after Sherly's assistants arrived and went about their work that Sherly grabbed Cranston by the arm and drew him away from the flash of photographic bulbs that were helping to record the grisly scene for the police files. Sherly then had a breath in order to ask, "What was that big routine you were just giving me?"

Cranston lead the way to some camp chairs that were at the back of the fatal set where all the tragedy had begun.

"All the things I said about Sturm were true. He was guilty of the things I described. But you never gave me time to explain that his complicity was the price he paid the blackmailer instead of money! He danced to the killer's tune just as did all the others. It was a perfect throw-off for the real blackmailer.

"You see, despite all the blackmailer's precautions, there was the ever-present risk that something might slip up when he went to get the money from all the people he was blackmailing. So he cut that risk to a minimum. He made Sturm do all the pick-ups, then on occasion, he made one pick-up of all the money that the director had collected for him!"

Sherly seemed awed by the villainy of the killer. "He only had to risk one pick-up instead of five or ten! That explains the hundred grand. I couldn't believe that any one person's contribution was that big!"

"Yes, that hundred thousand dollars was probably a whole month's receipts in the murderer's deadly take! I think now you will appreciate the horrible subtlety of that first shot at Sturm! The killer, knowing that Sturm was the obvious suspect, carried the whole thing one step further and proved, at least in your mind, that Sturm was the killer. He did it by framing the shooting so it looked as if Sturm had shot himself through the aid of the books and the string. You see Sturm, that one time, was telling the truth!"

"That took me down the alley nicely!" said Sherly, looking ashamed of himself for being taken in. "Go on."

Dimly, in the back of his mind, Sherly was conscious of Gainsworthy's voice cutting across the layers of sound that came from the set. It made an undercurrent beneath what Cranston was saying. In a vague way Sherly heard Gainsworthy pleading with the actors to go on with their work—heard him saying the assistant director was every bit as good, if not better, than the defunct director. But the surface of Sherly's mind was all on Cranston's words.

"Perhaps it would be better if you ask me about things that puzzle you. That way there won't be any duplication." Cranston paused.

The Blackest Mail

"What was the gag on the ship in the bottle?"

"Inside the ship there was a note telling Sturm to gather together all the proceeds for the month, place it in the metal box we have both seen and then, to take a canoe ride out into the Pacific! The only drawback,"—Cranston realized that Sherly knew nothing of all this, "—was that when the killer donned a diving suit and waited in the water for Sturm to drop the box, there was someone waiting for him!"

"The Shadow!" breathed Sherly.

Cranston nodded. "Earlier, The Shadow tangled with Sturm in the prop department. It was dark, and Sturm, after hitting Flip on the head, managed to make his getaway with the ship model.

"His going to Hunter's apartment to crash the bottle was just his way of trying to clean his own skirts by throwing us a red herring!"

"Then, even Sturm didn't know who it was that managed his destiny?"

"No, indeed; the blackmailer was most careful to prevent that, knowing that Sturm was by way of being a dangerous man! No, the killer has kept covered diabolically well!"

"It might even," Sherly hazarded, "be that the killer has rigged it so that it looks as if he were being blackmailed too." Sherly shifted his eyes away and looked at the set.

He looked at Barron, who had Genia in his arms and was telling her in a deep throaty baritone how much he loved her.

Genia had perked up considerably, some of the worry lines were erased from her face. Gainsworthy, cigar puffing like an insane chimney, was watching as the assistant director cued the actors from behind the camera.

Hunter and Flip were at one side; they were grinning as they talked.

Wild thoughts ran pell mell through Sherly's mind. He got to his feet decisively. Cranston put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Where you off to?"

"Why the blackmailer—killer is right out there in front of us! One of those people is the fiend that is responsible for all this."

"Admittedly," said Cranston quietly, "but do you know which one?"

"Of course not. I guess I'm getting a little slug—nutty." Sherly fell back into the chair with a half groan. "Go on tell me all!"

"I don't have to! The man you want is going to reveal himself in his true colors in a little while. Now compose yourself. It won't be long, I promise you!"

Sherly stared at Cranston. "You make me sit down, and then you start off!"

"I'll be back. It's time I put through a call to New York. You'll be able to handle anything that comes up!"

The Blackest Mail

As Cranston walked off, brief-case under arm, Sherly muttered to himself. "But will I?"

He sat quietly, studiously forcing himself to relax. After a moment he loosened his gun in his shoulder holster. The villain will reveal himself in his true colors, he thought, He wondered what Cranston had meant by that.

This case was beginning to give him an inferiority complex. Never before in a long and active career had he been so buffeted by fate. So helpless. Certainly he had never been dependent on anyone else. And yet, he knew that without Cranston—and The Shadow—he would have to mark this case down as unsolved in his records. He fidgeted with the handle of his gun, and then took a cigarette out, lit it, and sat there blowing puffs of smoke into the air. The scene that was transpiring in front of him was interesting. It was the end of the picture that had been going on under impossible handicaps. Not that they were finishing up the story by any matter of means. Movies are not shot chronologically. Various bits and pieces are filmed as the occasion arises. Then, the patch work quilt of film takes shape in the cutting room.

The cameras were grinding on a typical Hollywood mystery picture ending. The detective, a dashing amateur who dabbled in esoteric studies like Egyptology and bacteriology, had managed to collect all the suspects in the inevitable livingroom. And just as inevitably, he was pointing out all the errors that the police had made.

Sherly sighed and wished in real life it were that easy. He'd never had a case yet where it was possible to invite all the suspects to a pink tea, and then determine which was the guilty party.

His suspects were always people who had a living to make and he had to somehow fit in around the regular routine of their lives. The less he interfered with them the better it was, because it generally was by spotting some difference in the way someone was living that gave him clues.

Yep, it was as he had thought. The hero in the movie was busily casting suspicion around. At each moment the guilty party seemed to be a new person. The camera would come in for close-ups, and the eye of the camera would depict each person in turn looking as guilty as he could.

It was all built up so as to make the blow-off more exciting. There, the detective was putting a long Russian cigarette in an impossibly long holder while he gave a dissertation on all the possible murder motives.

All the while the camera, on a long boom, was getting fleeting pictures of each of the actors on the set. In the final finished movie it would be an effective suspense device even though it had all been done a hundred times before.

The film detective was saying, "Rule out murder for gain and you rule out ninety-nine out of one hundred murders. Vengeance, power, these are rarities. Show me the person who gains most by the kill, and I'll show you the murderer! In this case..."

He was pointing his finger dramatically at Genia Gladder. Her face contorted. She said between her teeth. "Prove it, wise guy! Let's see you prove anything on me!"

Without Sherly's noticing until this moment, some grips had been dragging in the wall of a new set. It was put at right angles to the living-room scene where the detective in the picture was forcefully proving that Genia was a fiend.

Right in the middle of a dramatic bit between the detective and Genia, the assistant director bawled out, "Can it! Cut! Next scene!"

The Blackest Mail

The replica of life, a moment ago illusive enough to fool the mind, dissolved. The actors dropped their pretending and ambled over to the new set. The assistant director had a conference with the cameraman. Gainsworthy chewed on the end of his cigar.

The police technicians wound up their job and Sherly saw the long wicker basket go out of Sturm's roomette. The four men carried the basket casually as though it contained dirty linen.

Genia saw it go by and pushed the back of her hand into her mouth. It distressed her more than anyone else in Sherly's line of vision. Flip waved nonchalantly at the basket as though in jesting farewell.

Hunter eyed the container emotionlessly. The others, busy with their work, didn't even see it go out the door on its way downtown for a post mortem.

Sherly mentally doffed his hat to the killer for one thing. On that rigged-up shooting that had landed the bullet in Sturm's back, the blackmailer had shot at him, then using gloves, forced the gun into Sturm's hand in order to get his prints on it before putting it in that damning position that had convinced Sherly that Sturm was a liar.

He could picture in his mind's eye the new chalk outline that one of his men had drawn to show where a body had fallen. He wondered what was keeping Cranston.

A new battery of klieg lights came blasting down. This was nearer the lieutenant, for the new set was at his right. The lights showed that this set was a bedroom. Genia was lounging on the bed.

The camera was at such an angle that all it could see was the one wall, the bed and its occupant.

Silence descended as someone yelled out, "Let's shoot! Quiet everybody. This is a take."

The scene was a simple one. Genia took a letter from the bosom of her lounging pajamas and started to read it.

The message was evidently supposed to be a pleasant one for as she read she smiled. Then, throwing herself back on the bed she crumpled up the letter and stretched languorously. She lay in such a way that she could see the wall of the set behind her.

Her eyes suddenly widened and seemed to glaze. She lost her smile, instead, horror showed in her face.

Sherly thought, that little gal is a real actress. She looks scared stiff!

Before he had completed the thought he saw that she was not acting, for the case was repeating itself! Another message was appearing out of nowhere!

Just as slowly, just as dramatically as the other times, a message began to write itself in sprawling giant letters!

It read, "Did you really: think, you could get away with murder? Don't you realize that The Shadow knows?"

Sherly heaved a sigh of relief as he saw that the message, for the first time, was directed at the guilty party.

Instead of striking terror into a horrified, innocent person, it was doing a job on a heartless rat!

The Blackest Mail

Sherly quickly looked from face to face: Gainsworthy, Hunter, Flip, Genia, Barron. But it was so different from the movies. Not a sign of guilt; instead, every face wore the same expression of dazed surprise. Oh, at first there had been fear, but when the complete message was spelled out and the realization dawned that this message was from The Shadow, minion of law and order, the faces donned the expression that now showed itself to Sherly.

Everyone looked from the message and then down. Next they looked at each other. If it hadn't been so serious, there might have been an element of humor in the similarity of reactions. But a new expression did make itself manifest, for, from out of nowhere, from the far corners of the huge set, there came a sound. It was loud, and it was the laugh of The Shadow!

XV.

FOR a moment after the sound had died down there was complete and utter silence. The laugh had been so triumphant that the guilty heart, no matter how schooled in deception, must now be racing with express speed, with clammy-handed fear squeezing it tight.

They milled around, searching for the origin of the mocking sound. But there was none.

The Shadow, securely and completely hidden within a deep black area behind the klieg lights, watched every movement, all the various plays of emotion—watched and waited, for he was waiting for the prediction that he had made as Cranston to Lieutenant Sherly! He was waiting for the killer to show himself in his true colors.

It would not be long now, he knew. The sands were running out. The killer had bare minutes left.

And in that milling mob of technicians and actors, of executives and laborers, the murderer walked, outwardly calm, inwardly seething. He ran over and over in his mind all the things he had done. The care he had taken to cover every possibility. He had been so sure that the police and even the mocking Shadow would be taken in by that faked suicide he had rigged for Sturm. The care he had used there; he had struck Sturm on the left temple and, because he knew that an autopsy would reveal that blow, he had carefully shot through Storm's right temple, knowing that the expansion of the bullet on its way out the other side of Sturm's brain would wipe out all evidence of the blow that had laid him low. The care with which he had faked that suicide note, that last careful pressing of the gun into Storm's hand before he pulled the trigger. It was his finger pressing on Sturm's that had sent the bullet crashing on its way.

For this careful, cowardly killer was well aware of the nitrate test that will show whether or not a hand has fired a gun.

It was so clean all around, the killer thought. He hadn't slipped up anywhere except in hiring those stupid thugs to kill The Shadow. That was a job that he should have taken care of himself. But he had been so sure that he could outsmart The Shadow. It had added a certain perverted zest to the game. After the kill-try had failed he had amused himself by thinking how good it would feel to fool not only the police but The Shadow as well.

His brain whirling, he tried to calm down. He told himself that since he had made no errors, The Shadow was bluffing. That was it! The whole thing was just a bluff!

Well, this was where The Shadow was going to be out-bluffed. For he was not the type to crack up! Not he! He'd play it smart, just as he had all along!

The Blackest Mail

Let The Shadow do his worst. He knew that he was safe! He would just wait!

And The Shadow waited! For this was no bluff! This was a killer that was going to stand completely revealed. As obviously revealed as Cain had been when the brand had appeared on him!

Sherly waited, for he didn't know what else to do! He kept the whole scene under surveillance and waited. If only Cranston would come back. But a trans-continental call might keep him tied up for an hour. Sometimes it took an hour just to get a line through.

And then it began!

It was slow at first, almost imperceptible. Certainly no one but The Shadow saw the darkness begin. It was an off-shade of light gray. But the gray would darken. The Shadow knew. He watched.

The gray did begin to darken and people did begin to notice it. They looked, rubbed their eyes and then looked again, for on one man, the guilty man, a stain was appearing. His face, his arms, his hands, all were darkening, turning black!

Not all over, but in splotches, like accidental splashes of black ink! And the stain grew darker! But the man did not know why everyone was staring at him!

His guilty conscience twitched. He wondered if this was part of The Shadow's bluff and decided it was. He decided that The Shadow had cued everyone to look at him with horror, for there was horror on their faces.

They would look at the stains on the man and then glance, just a fleeting glance, at the writing on the wall of the set.

But the eyes came back to the man. Snapped back as though dragged there by a magnet.

The stains were really dark now. The edges of them were deep India black now. His forehead was covered with it. His nose, part of it black and part still skin-colored, looked like a piebald horse.

His arms were jet black now. His hands looked like a negative held up to the light.

It was his hands that finally told the killer what was happening, for even his nerve was cracking under the silent barrage of eyes that pounded him.

He saw his hands and couldn't believe his own eyes. He looked at them again. He saw then what was so plain for all the others. He saw his guilt revealed for all the world to see.

And he realized then why The Shadow had not searched for his trap-door the night before. Knew why there had been that curious splashing sound when he had opened the metal box that he had hoped would hold the hundred thousand dollars.

Even in that extremity his mind worked like chain lightning, he would not give up-would not put his blackened hands out for the handcuffs to tighten on!

Instead he risked instant death! For two guns were trained on him! The Shadow's, and the lieutenant's. At the first sign of the tell-tale blackness, Sherly had whipped his gun from its holster.

The Blackest Mail

Two thoughts were uppermost as the killer took his last most desperate chance. One, how was he to get away, and two, how had The Shadow known?

As calmly as though in a shooting gallery, The Shadow whipped a shot at the man's arm. It fell at his side powerless.

The bark of The Shadow's gun threw Sherly off his aim. He shot high and missed. In that flick of time, the murderer spun, arm dangling helplessly and darted through a door that led to his retreat!

Sherly—and a black-cloaked figure—were after him instantly. The Shadow had deliberately shot not to kill. He wanted this killer to die by due process of law!

Even as the killer darted down the corridor that led to his sanctum, The Shadow knew where he was heading! Sherly pounded along after the blackmailer.

The Shadow cut off and ran around a set. He knew where the case would end. It would end where it had started, where all the evil machinations had started!

Taking the short cut, The Shadow was in the retreat before the wounded man. He was invisible. The man came racing in, with Sherly at his heels. He risked a look behind him and swearing in a breathless gasp, he ran towards a machine-gun that was in the center of the floor.

Once behind that, he'd sell himself dearly. It wouldn't matter too much if he did go out—wouldn't matter at all if he could take The Shadow with him.

None but The Shadow had stood between him and vaulting ambition. And no one but The Shadow could prevent a final holocaust! For he made the machine-gun before Sherly could aim and fire!

Sherly stopped so fast he stumbled when he saw the position that the black-stained wounded man had assumed. He was in a prone position, and the muzzle of the machine-gun covered Sherly.

"If you think there are blanks in this, just move; that's all just move." And the killer's voice proved he meant what he said.

"Drop your gun," he continued in a conversational voice. "I don't mind you. If it had only been you I'd have been safe—I would never have been suspected!"

There was nothing else to do. People had followed on Sherly's berserk trail and were jammed motionless in the doorway. If Sherly failed to obey, the vicious madman would cut a swath through them all!

And then, with all the cards in the killer's hand, they were dashed away, and, mocking, there came The Shadow's laugh! And it was behind the killer!

He did not dare look behind him, for if he did, Sherly would be on him. Instead, in character to the end, he said, "Okay, Shadow! Move around in front of me, slowly and without any false moves. If you don't, I'll fire at those yaps in the doorway..."

"Too late... too little and too late..."

The voice was so close, so confident that a man of steel would have broken. The killer couldn't stand it, he had to see how close his nemesis was!

The Blackest Mail

He turned his head, and Shadow was on him! For The Shadow had made his silent way to within two feet of armed murderer.

Even as The Shadow wrested the machine-gun from the killer, Sherly's flying leap deposited him on the black-stained man.

The muzzle of the machine-gun, forced upward, let out a chatter of protest. A stream of projectiles rammed into the model of the Bleriot flying machine that hung from the ceiling of the killer's retreat.

The prop room was a mad house, the people who had at first jammed their way into the room were now using every energy to try and get out. The machine-gun stopped as The Shadow's iron grip wrested it from the custodian of the prop room, from Flip Hiller's now despairing grasp.

Handcuffs clicked on Hiller's stained wrists. Wounded arm or not, this was a prisoner that Sherly had no intention of coddling. He dragged Flip to his feet.

"All right, let's get a move on." Sherly dragged him towards the door.

Flip sent one last look back at the figure of The Shadow who was fading into the darkness around the base of some props. Then, and only then, The Shadow noticed that Flip darted a glance up at the machine-gunned Bleriot on the ceiling.

And then The Shadow laughed, a loud, almost boisterous laugh unlike his usual one, for now, truly, The Shadow knew! The one last piece of puzzle had dropped into place!

XVI.

SHERLY walked his prisoner out onto the set. Flip looked up at the handwriting on the wall and grimaced. He had been so sure The Shadow was bluffing.

He stopped walking. The drag on the handcuffs stopped Sherly who turned, annoyed. "What is it?"

"Can I make a deal with you?" Flip's voice was low, conspiratorial.

"It's worth a quarter of a million dollars to you if you let me get away!"

This was bribery on a vast scale! Sherly asked, "And where are you going to get all that?"

"I still have most of the money! Talk fast. Is it a deal? If you don't play ball with me, you'll never find the money! I won't tell and you can't find it!"

All Hiller's desperation was in his voice. It was obvious that from what he knew of humanity, he was positive that no one could resist a bribe like this!

Sherly lowered his voice, and looking around, shifty-eyed, said, "It's a deal. Where's the dough?"

Flip laughed, a bitter knowing laugh. "Are you kidding? We'll have to work this out. Do you think I'd tell you where the dough was and then have you shoot me? All you have to do is say I tried to escape and then kill me!"

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"All right, you're the expert on rigging this sort of thing. How shall we do it?"

Hiller looked all around, saw Lamont Cranston hurrying towards them and said, "No more now. Here comes that busybody Cranston!"

"What in the world has been going on around here? Oh, I see that Hiller has been shown up in his true colors as the blackest male." Cranston looked at the stains on Hiller.

"The case finally cracked wide open just as you predicted! For a while there I thought he was going to get away even at the end!"

A cop walked by and Sherly acting on impulse, used his key to open the handcuffs. He gave his prisoner to the cop who used the cuffs to fasten himself to Hiller.

"You, Hiller," said Sherly, "I'll see you later." There was hidden meaning in his voice.

Flip smiled a small smile at the message and walked towards the company street with his new escort.

As soon as Flip Hiller was out of ear shot, Sherly said to Cranston, "What a stroke of luck, he says he has most of the blackmail money and he thinks he's bribing me with it! We should be able to get it without any trouble!"

"Of course he has most, if not all, of the money! That was the smartest move of all his cleverness! Here he was, living as though he had a struggle making both ends meet, and all the while he was rolling in his illegal loot!

"Evidently the feeling of power that he got through controlling the stars, and Gainsworthy, paid him enough so that he was able to resist the money; I imagine though, that he was figuring on getting a certain amount and then leaving forever!"

Sherly was thoughtful. "You know, another clever move on his part was playing that make-believe tough guy part that he did. Somehow when you saw him getting knocked around so easily you couldn't conceive of his being a menace."

"He was clever in a variety of ways; using his knowledge of Sturm's Nazi party affiliations and not asking money of him, that was a stroke of genius!

"But the real crux of all his scheme was the place that he worked. That prop department is like a magician's box from which anything that is desired may be produced. He could not have done a tenth of the things he did without that Pandora's box."

"What shall we do about the money? Shall I go on pretending that I am being bribed?" Shirley did not look happy about the venality of his role.

"Somehow I don't think that will be necessary. We will get his treasure trove without his assistance!"

A policeman running to them overheard Cranston's last words, he gasped, "You'll have to!"

Sherly snapped, "What do you mean? You didn't let him get away?"

The cop shook his head, "I did and I didn't!"

"Speak up, man, what happened?"

Sherly was on his feet with his hands clenched in the cloth of the cop's uniform. "Speak!"

"Well, I will if you relax! He killed himself!"

"He killed... How? Did you fall asleep?"

"He musta been plannin' on it all along! As soon as we got into the dolly car he gave me a message for you; then he asked if it was all right for him to light a cigarette. I said yeah. And a couple of minutes later he was slumped over, dead! His cigarette musta had somethin' in it cause I smelled a funny smell on his mouth!"

Cranston looked content. "A capsule of cyanic acid, I'll wager!"

"This is terrible. Not that he's dead. If ever a rat deserved death, he did—but the money—how are we going to find that?" Sherly thought bitterly that Hiller was haunting him from the grave just as he had in life.

"It's not terrible at all," Cranston said didactically. "I couldn't tell you at the time, but, although I was positive that he was the one, and events proved my contention, there was little or no evidence that would have stood up in a court of law! That was the reason The Shadow used the melodramatic device of the writing on the wall as well as the staining process!"

Momentarily forgetting the money, Sherly asked, "What was the gag on that writing? That was one of the things that was really driving me screwy!"

"It's a chemical that is heat-sensitive, that you can get in any drug or photographic store. It is called hydroquinone. Its peculiar property is that although it is a water-colored liquid, it is quite invisible if you use it to write on any surface at all.

"Ordinarily it would be quite unusable as synthetic ink because it needs a lot of heat, and it would be hard to time it correctly. But here on the set, the conditions were like those in a laboratory."

Cranston pointed to the klieg lights. "The lights give off a known quantity of heat, and knowing the distance that the heat is from the set which has the writing on it, you can time to a second the length of time it will take for the message to become visible!

"The Shadow couldn't know quite as exactly how long it would take for the hydroquinone to develop on a human being..."

"I see. Enough of explanations. There's just one thing I want to know now—and that's the whereabouts of the treasure trove, for treasure it must be!"

Gainsworthy was with them. "Mr. Cranston, it is a pleasure, believe me, to meet a man who keeps his word as you have! To think that this year of downright terror is at an end. I never knew from one minute to the next whether or not I was going to be in business."

Don Barron and Genia walked up and joined them. "Our thanks to you and The Shadow, Mr. Cranston. We can't quite believe it yet. I suppose it will be weeks, months, before I really know that it is all over!" Genia's smile was genuine and warm.

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Barron shook Cranston's hand. "I was sorry The Shadow vanished before I could thank him! You'll never know what a load this has taken off of all of us!"

"Double that for me!" Hunter's grin was crooked. "I feel as though I'd been given a new lease on life."

Cranston thought: For a group of people who've been blackmailed, they're a likable bunch. But after all, how heinous were their misdeeds? Accidental bigamy, a writer who used a ghost and was ashamed to admit it, and Genia—she was more to be pitied than anything else.

They made a procession that wended its way as Cranston walked with Sherly towards the place that had held the master spider—in the center of a web.

Sherly and Cranston entered the doorway of the prop room. "You do know definitely where Flip concealed the money?"

"I'm fairly sure I have deduced its location," Cranston said.

Gainsworthy looked around the room. "So this is the place where he figured out all those dreadful things... Ugh... And to think I liked him, gave him a job when no other studio in the business would."

"Can you call one of the prop men and ask for a ladder? A long ladder?" asked Cranston.

A man scurried over at Gainsworthy's gesture.

"A ladder?" he asked. "Sure, we got a dilly... over here."

The man dragged a sectional ladder into the center of the room. Cranston told him to place it under a certain object that hung from the ceiling.

All eyes were on Cranston as he climbed the ladder towards the Bleriot monoplane.

At the very top of the ladder, Cranston used his knees to brace himself. The old plane looked rickety when seen so close. For a moment Cranston paused and wondered at the bravery of the men who had dared to fly in these ancient crates.

That peculiar look that Flip Hiller had cast at the plane as he was taken away... had The Shadow interpreted it correctly? Cranston looked into the plane.

Nothing. The simple controls, the open framework, left very little space for concealment. And yet... that look.

Cranston came down the ladder thoughtfully. As he reached the bottom step he asked, "Will you have that plane brought down, Mr. Gainsworthy?"

"Of course."

Workmen got right to it. Anxious eyes watched as they carefully lowered the decrepit relic. Once on the floor, Cranston and Sherly went over the plane with a fine-tooth comb. Propped in the front of the plane near the wheel that was used as a control in the days when Bleriot was a hero, they found one of Flip's ship models. It was curiously pathetic, left there as though in braggadocio.

Aside from the ship model there was nothing else extraneous to be found, search as they might.

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"Well?" Sherly had not lost faith in Lamont Cranston; he was just curious about the turn of events.

"This is a set-back. I was sure... Wait... I may still be on the right trail... I feel like a vandal... but..."

The people who were gathered watched in stunned surprise as Cranston picked up a hammer. He laid the ship model in its bottle on a work bench. He tapped the bottle with the hammer and it splintered into shards.

Picking up the ship model, he peered into the inside.

Sherly watched with a pucker between his eyes as Cranston plucked the model apart.

From inside bills dropped out!

Sherly said indignantly, "That's far from being all the dough that he mulcted from these people!"

"I'll say it is!" Gainsworthy was frazzling a cigar.

"Of course, this is but a tiny part of the whole." Cranston looked from the wreckage of the ship model to the people who surrounded him.

"Flip spent a lot of his spare time at his hobby. He made a lot of those ship models, didn't he?"

All of them nodded. Gainsworthy spoke. "Sure. It started to get silly. He had so many he couldn't sell them all. He began to give them away. I have two of them."

Genia said, "I have one, too."

Hunter and Barron held up a finger apiece.

They saw the idea form in Cranston's eyes. Sherly broke the silence, "You don't mean he had the unmitigated gall to..."

"I think he did. I think when he got the money, he changed it into as big bills as he could and then..."

"Well, I'll be a monkey's father-in-law..." Hunter looked appalled. "You mean I've been living down on Olvera Street, flat broke, and all the time that lousy ship model in my bedroom held all the money that rat had taken from me?"

Cranston nodded. "That's the way I size it up. It would be in line with the general tenor of the way Hiller's mind worked. What better way to hide the money till he wanted it? After all, none of you would have refused it if he had said that he needed to sell the models. You would have returned them at any time..."

XVII.

AN hour had passed since Lamont Cranston had deduced the hiding place of the blackmail money. Sherly and he sat at Sherly's desk. The phone was ringing as it had been on and off for the last half hour.

Sherly answered it. "Uh-huh every cent, eh?"

He hung up and turned to Cranston. "That was the last one of the 'blackmailees', Genia. She ripped the model

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open and found all the money she had paid out. That cleans it all up. But..."

"But what?" smiled Cranston.

"I get the whole thing now and an uncannily bizarre set-up it was. But what was Gainsworthy mumbling about when he mentioned some New York paper to you? That's one question, and I have another."

"That was on a par with Flip's cleverness. He increased the ante. Demanded much more from Gainsworthy than he had in the past, but he took no chances with writing that might be identified, or a typewriter that might tie into him. Instead, he had Sturm act as a newsboy and deliver five copies of The New York Times to Gainsworthy. The message was obvious to Gainsworthy. The blackmailer wanted five times as much money on that trip as the normal quota."

"I see. One last thing before you go." For Cranston was on his feet tucking his brief-case under his arm.

"How in the world did you, or The Shadow, first settle on Flip as the blackmailer-killer?"

"That was the only slip that Flip ever made! When he sent a message to Sturm to go to the prop department and steal the latest ship model that he, Flip, had made—that was when he gave himself away completely!"

"Why? I don't see that Flip getting conked on the head in a scuffle was quite convincing to me; just as the blow he gave himself when he was in the roomette, after he first shot Sturm in the shoulder, convinced me that he was in the clear."

"That first clout must have come as a little surprise to him. I don't think he had figured on that. You see, Sturm of course, had no idea that his prop man was his master. So when he went to get the model he didn't think twice about hitting Flip on the head. But all this is getting us afield.

"Don't you see, the ship model that time, held, instead of money, a note, giving Sturm his orders."

"Yes..." Sherly was still puzzled.

"Who else could have placed a note inside the ship and the ship into the bottle but Flip Hiller? That was the slip that sealed his doom!"

Cranston waved good bye and before Sherly could do anything was gone.

Sherly sat a moment at his desk, deep in thought. He had a lot for which to be grateful, to both Cranston and The Shadow. He marshaled all the facts of the case in his mind and then reached for the phone. Now, for the first time since the case had opened, he was going to relish talking to some reporters.

He called them on the phone.

In the cab, Shrevvie turned and spoke to Lamont Cranston. It was a gorgeous day. "Chee, it's quite a place, this here now Los Angeles, ain't it?"

Cranston nodded. "And beauty can be turned into a nightmare by one evil brain."

Shrevvie wasn't listening. He was watching some palmetto trees whizz by as the cab speeded along. He said, "Yare, it's a great place to live, but I wouldn't want to visit here again on a bet!"

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There was silence broken finally by Shrevvie. "Hey, where we goin' now?"

Cranston thought of that long distance call he had received. For that had not been a lie. Of course it had taken a fraction of the time he had said it did, but the call had come through. It had been from Harry Vincent, one of his agents, and Harry was full of the details of a strange and horrid crime that had taken place on the lake shore of Chicago.

There was nothing to do but get there as quickly as possible, for where crime was, The Shadow had to be. He directed Shrevvie to go to the airport.

The cab had just made the connection. Lamont Cranston waved a hurried farewell to Shrevvie as he ran up the gangplank into the plane that was to take him to the scene of another place where evil paced the face of the earth.

The plane door closed, the propellers roared up in a crescendo of sound, but even they didn't quite cover the haunting echo of a faint laugh that seemed to come from everywhere—and nowhere... the laugh of The Shadow, the laugh of the master hunter who never paused in his relentless, never-ending battle with the forces of the underworld! The end of one case was but the beginning of another to this dauntless avenger of the forces of death and destruction!