

THE CHEST OF CHU CHAN

Maxwell Grant

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THE CHEST OF CHU CHAN

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CHAPTER I

JARED SHEBLEY leaned back in his teak-wood chair and toyed with the Burmese katar. His crisp smile, slicing across his parchment face, would have suited an Oriental potentate more than a New York curio collector.

Shebley's surroundings were in keeping with his appearance.

This was his curio room, the pride of his Manhattan penthouse. Its walls were adorned with tall, narrow tapestries, woven mostly in gold and silver, set alternately between the glass-fronted cabinets that housed the rarities comprising Shebley's collection.

It would have required a sizable pamphlet to describe those items. In fact, such a pamphlet was already in the making; the proof sheets were scattered all over the chess table which Shebley used as a desk. The table itself, a bulky and elaborate affair inlaid with squares of black and white mother-of-pearl, was one of Shebley's chief prizes. It was supposed to be the table on which a Persian prince had been maneuvering his men when he was captured, along with his royal tent, by Hulagu, the Mongolian invader operating under the banner of Genghis Khan.

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As with most of Shebley's curios, the authenticity of this number was a matter of some doubt, but not to Shebley. He believed it to be the genuine article, and the only thing that bothered him was what Hulagu had done with the chessmen that belonged with it. Shebley would be very unhappy if some day that ancient chess set showed up in the possession of another eccentric collector.

What bothered Professor Giles Frescott was the way in which Shebley toyed with the Burmese katar.

No weapon more insidious could have been imagined, let alone fashioned, than this royal katar or Oriental thrusting dagger. As he studied it across the chess table, Professor Frescott lost some of the benign expression that usually characterized his broad, elderly features. His eyes narrowed under his thin gray brows, though whether through suspicion or envy, he didn't declare.

With all his genial ways, Frescott mistrusted collectors as a whole, perhaps because he recognized that he, too, had the basic urge to lay his hands upon rare items and hold them. But as curator of the Museum of Antiquities, the noted professor had managed to curb his secret desires.

Shebley noticed Frescott's gaze and broadened his peculiar smile.

"I was about to discuss the chest of Chu Chan," remarked Shebley, dryly, "but I see that you are more interested in the katar of Pagan Min."

Frescott's eyes widened immediately.

"You mean Pagan Min, the Burmese king?"

"Precisely," replied Shebley. "Pagan Min, the son of Tharawaddy, ruler of Burma, until deposed by his brother Mindon Min, who proved to be the only humane king in the entire line of Alompra."

Professor Frescott gave a knowing nod.

"That was the curse of Alompra," he recalled. "Beginning with a warrior chieftain, the dynasty degenerated and finally perished through descendants who were the victims of a homicidal mania."

"A fratricidal mania, too," added Shebley. "One of their greatest pastimes was killing off their brothers – and all their families were large."

Again Frescott nodded.

"I've often wondered about Pagan Min," continued Shebley. "He must have hated his brother Mindon, and why he let him live, I cannot understand. Why, if Mindon had ever come within Pagan's reach –"

With a sudden pause, Shebley studied Frescott's gaze as though trying to guess what lay behind the narrowed eyes. Then, crisply, Shebley asked:

"You are interested, professor?"

"Very much," assured Frescott in a dispassionate tone. "You appear to be versed in Oriental customs, and anything Oriental intrigues me."

It was so frankly put that Shebley decided his actions would not be misunderstood. Rising from the table, he stepped around it, the twelve inch dagger lying flat across his hands so that Frescott could study it more

closely. The professor had seen many katars before, but none like this.

"Unique."

Shebley voiced the word in matter-of-fact tone. It was his favorite expression, for it applied to every item in his well stocked cases. As a collector, Shebley valued curios only if they were quite unmatched, and he had reason to prize this katar as such.

The silver blade was six inches long, and ran wide from the hilt, tapering to a dull point. Having no sharpened edges, it appeared to be a ceremonial weapon, as was further evidenced by the hilt. In fact, the hilt was the distinctive feature that caused a katar to differ from other styles of daggers.

Instead of a mere handle, the hilt was shaped like a letter H so that the cross-bar could be gripped by the fist, the knuckles resting in the stirrup-shaped space between the cross-bar and the dagger blade. The upper extensions of the hilt were protective wings for the hand and wrist and were composed of gold, highly ornamented.

It was the cross-bar, however, that fascinated Frescott, as Shebley knew it would. Instead of being mere gold as was customary with the finest hand-grips, the center of the bar was a gleaming, blood-red stone set between two cup-shaped holders. As large as a marble and as round, that magnificent gem seemed filled with the blood for which the dagger's blade unquestionably thirsted.

At first glance, Frescott mistook the jewel for a genuine ruby, worth a fortune in itself, but Shebley, catching his visitor's questioning glance, shook his head.

"A Balas ruby!" defined Shebley. "Merely a form of spinel, though this is a fine specimen, which I doubt that anyone could match. It probably came from Tharawaddy's crown, so he could furnish his bloodthirsty son with a weapon befitting a murderous prince."

Opening one button of his vest, Shebley thrust the dagger through the space so that the silver blade projected below and the gold hilt, with its blood-red eye appeared above. There was something rakish in the slant of the weapon which brought a happy chuckle from Shebley.

"This is the way Pagan Min must have worn it," decided Shebley. "More as an ornament than a weapon, judging by its appearance. But Mindon Min must have known its purpose, for if he had let his evil brother come close enough –"

Shebley gave another of his abrupt pauses, though he could well have added – "this would have happened!" Instead, he demonstrated the deed in question. With a stride toward Frescott, as though the latter represented Mindon Min, Shebley gripped the cross-hilt of the katar and whipped the dagger from his improvised belt. Pulling back, his arm drove forward like a piston, stopping halfway in its thrust.

The jab was comfortably short of Frescott and it was lucky that it was. For with it, Shebley illustrated the automatic action of the deadly katar. Actuated by the pressure of Shebley's knuckles, the silver blade opened into two sections, scissors-fashion. Those splitting halves were like spreading flower petals, but what they disclosed was by no means pretty.

The silver blade, as dull as it was ornamental, was nothing more than a cunningly fitted sheath for a blade of steel concealed within. Needle-pointed, razor-edged, the deadly prong jabbed into sight like a cobra's fang lashing from a widened mouth!

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Professor Frescott might have been expecting something of the sort, for he didn't budge a muscle. Shebley's mock thrust could have scared his visitor into immobility, but Frescott's broad face revealed nothing resembling fear. Rather casually, the professor held out his hand, silently requesting the privilege of examining the weapon. Shebley gave a reverse flip that closed the outer blade; then handed over the katar.

"I admire your sangfroid, professor," Shebley commented. "Other visitors have been more impressed."

"Who for example?"

"Lionel Graff," named Shebley. "Which proves that Graff does not know as much about Oriental antiques as he claims."

"Graff is merely a speculator." There was a tone of contempt from Frescott. "Surely you do not take his word on anything" – the professor was tilting his head to study Shebley's face – "or do you?"

"On speculative propositions, yes," returned Shebley, "because that is Graff's business. There, professor!" Shebley became suddenly enthusiastic. "You've got the hang of it already!"

Shebley was referring to the katar, which was performing its scissors trick under the persuasion of Frescott's knuckles. With a style that might have been termed professional, the museum curator was causing the hidden blade to show and disappear by movements forward and back that were almost imperceptible.

Then, closing the katar, Frescott took it by the harmless outer blade and held it so he could examine the large Balas ruby that showed a deepening tint in the glow of sunset that was streaming in from Shebley's well-barred window.

"A magnificent specimen," mused Frescott, half aloud, without specifying whether he meant the katar or the gem which ornamented it. "Yes, I believe that I would class it as unique."

Shebley was quick to take advantage of those words. Eager-eyed, he demanded:

"Unique? Like the chest of Chu Chan?"

Momentarily, Frescott's eyes matched the ruby's glitter. Then, relaxing his gaze, he slid the katar among the proof sheets on the chess table and leaned back, folding his hands across his vest. Frescott's laugh was pleasant, but the elderly professor had a habit of covering his real sentiments with opposite tones.

"You invited me here to discuss the chest of Chu Chan," declared Frescott blandly, "so tell me what you already know about it and I shall supply the rest. We may as well come directly to the point instead of trying to conceal it."

A subtle listener might have suspected that Frescott's final sentence referred to the Burmese katar rather than the chest of Chu Chan, but Shebley was not inclined to be subtle. Seating himself, he began to pour the facts that Frescott wanted.

All the while, the ruby handle of the Burmese katar kept deepening its glow in the dying sunset, like the watchful eye of some evil monster awaiting the chance to deliver a fatal thrust!

CHAPTER II

IT was an interesting tale that Jared Shebley told while Giles Frescott listened with half closed eyes.

The chest of Chu Chan had belonged to a Chinese of the same name who resided in Hanoi, capital of Tonkin, in the north of French Indo-China. For many years Chu Chan had lived there undisturbed until the Japanese began to move into Indo-China, taking whatever they wanted, particularly from Chinese nationals.

Chu Chan had managed, however, to keep a few jumps ahead of the wily Japs, where his treasures were concerned.

First, Chu Chan's belongings had been shipped southwest across the Mekong River to Bangkok, the capital of Siam. By the time the Nipponese arrived there, the shipment was on its way to Singapore, where it cleared again for India before the Japs controlled the Malayan Straits.

At last the goods had arrived in America, there to be auctioned to raise funds for the cause of China, in keeping with instructions given by Chu Chan, when last heard from.

"Dariel Talcott bought the antique chest," concluded Shebley. "You must know him, professor. He owns the Talcott Antique Galleries."

Frescott nodded as though half asleep.

"A very reliable dealer, Talcott."

"So reliable," assured Shebley, "that he wouldn't guarantee that the chest of Chu Chan was unique, as he did with the katar of Pagan Min. Talcott said that I would do well to check its history personally."

"Quite wise of Talcott."

"He has always been more than fair," affirmed Shebley. "For instance, he wouldn't even think of selling me the Bangkok dancer statue."

Frescott's eyes opened.

"What statue was that?"

"One that came with the chest of Chu Chan," explained Shebley. "It was inside the chest, so the two were sold as a lot. Only I doubt that it even belonged to Chu Chan. Probably it was put into the chest to get it away from Siam before the Japs arrived there."

"A logical theory, but why didn't you want the dancer statue?"

"Because Talcott says there are dozens like it in Siam, all life-sized figures in a seated pose. As I said before, Talcott only sells me items that he knows are unique."

Frescott began to nod in understanding fashion, then paused as though puzzled.

"This chest of Chu Chan," he remarked. "It must be quite large to hold so sizable a statue."

"That's right," returned Shebley. "It is a large chest. Built much like a cabinet."

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Frescott gave a disparaging shrug.

"Then it isn't unique," he declared. "It may be antique, but not unique." Chuckling at his play on words, the professor added: "There is a difference, Shebley, as you should know."

"Only I don't know." Shebley stroked his chin. "Simon Benisette bought the dancer statue and now he is interested in the chest. He's a sharp buyer, Benisette."

"But he doesn't specialize in the unique."

"He specializes in anything that promises a profit," argued Shebley. "That's why I'm beginning to believe what Graff said. You see, Graff told me" – Shebley halted, then decided to out with it – "well, he told me that there might be a fortune in the chest of Chu Chan. So I'm of a mind to let Graff bid for me against Benisette."

Though Shebley didn't notice it, Professor Frescott had become suddenly alert. His eyes by their very sharpness, could have been likened to the hidden blade in Shebley's katar, but they, too, were concealed as Frescott promptly closed his eyelids over them like folding sheaths.

Tilting his head back, Frescott gave a mild, though significant chuckle that puzzled Shebley just enough to take him totally off guard.

"Nobody will bid on that chest," laughed Frescott, "at least not at Talcott's Antique Galleries."

"And why not?"

"Because Talcott has already sold it," informed Frescott. "It went to a dealer in Washington."

There was something of savagery in Shebley's gesture as he reached for the telephone. Frescott waved his hand.

"Don't call Talcott," warned Frescott. "You won't have time. You'd better phone the airport for a reservation on the next plane to Washington. You'll just have time to make it."

Taking Frescott's advice, Shebley dialed the airport, but his gaze carried a query which Frescott answered with a question of his own.

"Did you ever hear of Lamont Cranston?"

Shebley nodded.

"I happen to know that Cranston will be taking that plane to Washington," assured Frescott. "Like yourself, he is interested in the chest of Chu Chan."

Shebley had the number. Finding that plane seats were still available, he ordered one. As Shebley hung up, Frescott reached for the telephone.

"May I call the museum?" asked Frescott. "They may be wondering where I am."

"Of course," replied Shebley. "Only I'll have to say good-bye right now, if I want to catch the plane. If you want, you can wait and talk to Graff, because he's due here shortly. But it won't matter. I'll have my servant tell Graff I've gone out of town."

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Nodding toward Shebley, Frescott fumbled the dial in what seemed accidental fashion. Repeating the process slowly, the professor took pains to keep from getting his number before Shebley went, which wasn't difficult, because Shebley was already starting from the room, calling for his valet.

With a smile that marked him capable of conniving practices, Frescott completed the connection. Alone in Shebley's curio room, Frescott asked to be connected with his own office in the Museum of Antiquities. There were a few rings from the line; then came a voice that Frescott recognized.

"Hello, Cranston." Frescott's tone was both affable and confidential. "Sorry to keep you waiting, but I have some last minute news. You know Jared Shebley, of course?"

Apparently Lamont Cranston did, and said so. From then on, Professor Frescott was very precise.

"Shebley has heard on what he regards as good authority," stated Frescott, "that the chest of Chu Chan has gone to a Washington dealer. So Shebley is taking the next plane to Washington. You will just about have time to do the same."

The abrupt click of the receiver at the other end told that Cranston wasn't losing a moment in acting on Frescott's advice. With a subdued chuckle, the old professor arose from his chair and rustled the proof sheets on the chess table as he fumbled for his hat that was lying there.

Leaving the dusk-shrouded room, Frescott went out through the hallway; his hat still in hand, he bowed to Shebley's servant as he left. Taking the elevator down to the ground floor, the professor went out to the street.

There was something crablike in Frescott's rapid gait toward the nearest corner. Over his shoulder, the benign-faced man looked back with a conniving smile. Someone was entering the rather modest apartment house that was noteworthy only because of Shebley's lavish penthouse; somebody whose face Frescott recognized.

The arrival, sallow of face and worried, was Lionel Graff, the speculator who had come to convince Jared Shebley that he ought to buy the chest of Chu Chan. Graff would be sadly disappointed when he learned of Shebley's sudden departure, and that fact gladdened Professor Frescott.

If he hadn't been watching Graff, Frescott might have noticed something that happened on the far side of the street. There, a figure stirred from a dusk-fronted building and kept pace with Frescott as he turned the corner. Possibly the professor wouldn't have seen the shape that trailed him, for its manner was decidedly furtive.

Though its height was uncertain, the figure was lithe, if not slender. Gliding from one dusk-patch to another, it gave the effect of being clad in a dark cape. It dwindled into gloom near the corner, thus adding a mysterious aftermath to the canny game that Frescott had played.

In manner, at least, the mystery figure resembled The Shadow, the famous personage who roved Manhattan's streets at dusk in search of crime to conquer. But there were two good reasons why The Shadow could not be hereabouts this evening.

First, The Shadow had been too far from Shebley's apartment house to reach there before Frescott left; again, The Shadow had decided upon another destination. Whether wittingly or otherwise, Professor Frescott had personally tricked The Shadow with a neat but simple ruse.

The Shadow, in the person of Lamont Cranston, had left for Washington on a blind quest. He and Jared Shebley would be watching each other with mutual suspicion concerning an antique Chinese chest which Professor Frescott wanted neither of them to buy!

CHAPTER III

MARGO LANE hurried from the cab as it stopped in front of the Talcott Antique Galleries. With the delay of rush hour traffic, Margo had hardly hoped to arrive before the place closed, but it was still open.

This trip was the result of a call from Lamont Cranston. He'd phoned from the airport, saying he was leaving for Washington and wanted Margo to visit the Galleries for him. Still, the trip didn't seem very important.

All Margo needed to do was learn the name of the Washington dealer who had bought the chest of Chu Chan from Talcott. That learned, she was to call a Washington hotel by long distance and leave word for Cranston. The reason it wasn't very important was because Cranston had blandly said that he would probably have that information by the time he reached the capital. Nevertheless, he wanted Margo to check the New York end.

There was no reason for Margo to keep the cab, so she dismissed it. Entering the lighted doorway of the Antique Galleries, Margo went up a broad flight of stairs to the second floor which constituted the Galleries proper.

The place was really something to take one's breath away, without assistance from the stairs. Though Margo had been to Talcott's before, the Galleries never failed to intrigue her.

You came into a row of rooms that could have been called an indoor esplanade. The whole second floor, from front to back, a distance of nearly half a block, was a succession of wonders. Only in Talcott's could a person gain a proper appreciation of the ingenuity displayed by the human race during centuries past.

Paintings, pottery, statues, musical instruments, tapestries, furniture – the list ran like the spiel of a department store elevator operator. Only Talcott's items differed from any that you would see in a modern department store. The things he sold were products of forgotten imagination and handicraft.

Literally wading through a mass of antiques, Margo reached a niche that Talcott called his office only to find it empty. Continuing further back, she passed a side stairway and came to the sliding door of the final room, which was the longest of the lot. There Margo saw Dariel Talcott, a tall, stoop-shouldered man with a drab, tired face. Beside the antique dealer was a burly, bearded man whom Margo remembered as Simon Benisette.

Indeed, once seen, Simon Benisette was nearly impossible to forget.

Benisette's face was so long that it had a horsey look. People must have marked on that resemblance, otherwise Benisette had no excuse for growing the red beard that adorned his equine countenance. His style of beard was badly chosen, however, for he had nurtured the old fashioned kind that spread around from ear to ear, mostly under the chin. If anything, the beard gave him further claim to his nickname of "Horse Face."

More than "Horse Face" the term "friends" was a stretch of the imagination. Technically speaking, Benisette had no friends; merely an assortment of passing acquaintances. Being a man who lived much to himself, Benisette had come to be all for himself, especially when purchasing antiques. He delighted in making "finds" before other buyers discovered them, and the bearded man was doing that right now.

Simon Benisette was inspecting the chest of Chu Chan!

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The fact bordered on the incredible, where Margo Lane was concerned. She couldn't imagine how Cranston had managed to let this prize slip, if he really wanted it. Yet this was the chest all right, for Margo had seen pictures of it. Judging from Benisette's manner, he already classed himself as its owner.

Standing nearly six feet high, the chest of Chu Chan looked like an old-fashioned wardrobe cabinet, or more correctly, it looked like the thing that wardrobe cabinets had been patterned after. It was mounted on six bulky legs, which might better have been termed feet, since they were shaped like dragon's claws.

The bottom of the chest was very thick, finely carved and ornamented with brass work. About four feet in width and three in depth, it had a fairly thick top, decorated like the bottom. Brass fittings predominated, particularly where the doors were concerned. When closed, as they were at present, they made the chest a veritable strong box.

Nodding curtly to Margo as she approached, Benisette paused suddenly to note the girl's expression. Apparently Benisette didn't know that Margo expected the chest to be elsewhere; as a result, he mistook her puzzlement for admiration of the chest itself.

"Your friend Cranston was too late," boomed Benisette, ending with a chuckle muffled deep in his beard. Then, with eyes widening suspiciously, Benisette added: "Unless he sent you here to bid against me, Miss Lane."

"Sorry, but he didn't," returned Margo. "Or maybe I'm not so sorry. If this is the famous chest of Chu Chan, it's better that Lamont didn't buy it."

Benisette's wide eyes glared. His brawny hands moved upward, tightening into fists, as though he resented this slur against the antique that he admired.

Rapidly, Talcott moved into the situation. His bent shoulders loomed between Benisette and Margo, his hands came upward to spread with pleading gesture. His tired face wrinkling with worry, Talcott wheedled:

"Please, please do not dispute about the chest. I'm sure that Miss Lane did not intend to disparage its merits —"

"Not at all," interrupted Margo. Then, tactfully: "I was thinking only of its size. Why, Lamont has cluttered his house with so many curios, you can scarcely move around. I don't mean" — Margo turned hastily to Talcott — "that is, I'm not criticizing these Galleries, just because they're so packed with antiques. But Lamont is a collector —"

"I understand, quite," interposed Talcott, his worried wrinkles fading with his smile. "A dealer like myself is forced to display all his wares."

"That's right," nodded Margo. "As for the chest of Chu Chan" — she turned to Benisette — "I must compliment you on your choice, Mr. Benisette. I only hope that you have room for it."

Begrudgingly, Benisette relaxed. It struck Margo then and there that Red-Beard liked arguments and could become violent in the heat of them. Certainly she could understand why Benisette lacked friends, if a mere quip could rouse his anger. Just when she thought that she had humored Benisette with a winsome smile, his violent mood returned. Under the glare of the man's mad eyes, Margo shrank back, only to realize that his attention was directed beyond her.

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A sallow, slinky man had suddenly arrived within Benisette's range of vision. Turning, Margo recognized the newcomer as Lionel Graff. She couldn't exactly blame Benisette for disliking Graff, since the fellow was notorious as an antique buyer, always trying to forestall other bids, often with promises that he later repudiated. Still, the rage that Benisette exhibited was more than this meeting warranted.

"More of your tricky dealing!" stormed Benisette, shoving his hands toward Graff's throat. "I've warned you to stay out of my business and this time I mean it!"

Considering that Benisette's face had reddened to a point that made his beard look pale, he showed admirable self-control at the last moment. His fingers lost their clutching itch as his hand suddenly drew apart and clamped, not on Graff's neck, but on his shoulders. Then, roughly, Benisette tried to spin Graff about and shove him from the gallery.

With a snarl, Graff twisted free. Coming around he struck Benisette's hands aside and bounded back against a squatly Buddha that was seated on a taboret against the far wall. Beside the calm faced Buddha was a bowl from which extended an incense ladle. Clutching the latter, Graff started to raise it in a pose of self defense.

Benisette quieted with a sneer. Brushing his sleeves as though the touch of Graff's hands had contaminated them, Benisette turned to Talcott.

"Excuse my temper," apologized Benisette in his booming way. "I forgot that you were keeping open until Graff arrived. Very well, if he wants to bid, let him."

Graff gave his lips an eager lick. Like Benisette, he spoke only to Talcott.

"How much did Benisette bid for the chest?"

"Five thousand dollars," replied Talcott. "It is a low price, I know, but –"

"Low!" exclaimed Graff. "It's ridiculous! Why, it's absolute robbery!"

Talcott spread his hands pleadingly, as though fearing that Graff's term would enrage Benisette, but the latter had lost his fever pitch. He was standing now with folded arms, a contemptuous curve upon his bearded lips. The flush was gone from Benisette's face, but somehow Margo felt that his color now represented white heat instead of red.

"It's a fair price," began Talcott, addressing Graff, "because after all, Mr. Benisette purchased the Bangkok dancer statue –"

"Which has nothing to do with it," interrupted Graff. "One sale does not govern another. You have said that yourself, Talcott."

Before Talcott could reply, Benisette stepped forward, striding slowly as though in haughty self-restraint. His tone was hard, icy, as he queried:

"Just how much can you offer for the chest, Graff?"

"More than five thousand," retorted Graff. "In fact, I'll double the bid. I'll make it ten thousand dollars –"

"In cash?"

"Yes, in cash!"

"You have it with you?"

"Of course not. Why should I carry so much money?"

"I do." From his coat pocket, Benisette produced a roll too thick to carry in his trousers. "This is the way I clinch my deals, Graff."

Benisette's hand tightened on the money, but there was too much of it to encircle, even though his muscles strained themselves. Ignoring Benisette, Graff turned to Talcott.

"I've just come from Shebley's," declared Graff. "He'll buy that chest. He really wants it."

"You'd better get Shebley's word for it," taunted Benisette. "Why not phone him, Talcott?"

"Shebley isn't home," admitted Graff. "He left town unexpectedly and his servant doesn't know where he went."

Slowly, Talcott shook his head.

"No money, no sale," stated Talcott. "Sorry, Graff, but it's my rule – in your case."

"But by tomorrow –"

"I told Benisette I would close the bids tonight."

"You must give me time!" Graff was very earnest. "It – well, it might be a matter of life and death to me."

Benisette provided another sneer.

"Are your creditors that close on your heels, Graff?"

Margo expected Graff to challenge Benisette's taunt. Instead, Graff nearly wilted. He darted looks across his shoulders as though expecting some of those very creditors to appear. Then, anxiously, Graff pleaded:

"Let me use your phone, Talcott. If I can't reach Shebley, I'll try other people. Maybe they'll believe me when I tell them this deal is worth their while."

"Worth your while, you mean," scoffed Benisette. "Like all the deals on which other people lose."

The sudden flush that came to Graff's face was like a reflection of Benisette's earlier mood. Margo wondered, almost fearfully, what reaction it would bring from Benisette, so she turned to look.

If there was hatred in Graff's glare, Benisette certainly returned it in full measure, but with the same control that had become his policy. Round, livid balls, in centers of white, Benisette's eyes had a cold ferocity that said: "Beware!"

Talcott was nodding in Graff's direction. Plucking the sallow man's arm, Talcott gestured him toward the little office. Turning suddenly, Graff started there to make his phone calls, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

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Margo felt ready to collapse with relief. The strain seemed gone all at once, now that Graff was no longer within Benisette's reach. Somehow, Margo felt that she had just witnessed a scene wherein murder had been in the making. Talcott, too, had noticed it, for his shoulders gave a wearied sag. Talcott, too, was very much relieved.

The tension of those past few minutes produced an effect that Margo didn't realize at present. Limp as a rag, the girl was too relieved to think in future terms. That was why Margo didn't recognize that murder-in-the-making wasn't apt to halt until it reached completion.

Margo Lane was standing on the very threshold of coming crime, without realizing it!

CHAPTER IV

THE next ten minutes seemed very uneventful. During that period, Simon Benisette kept muttering to himself as he inspected the interior of the Chinese chest, rubbing the woodwork and nodding his appreciation.

When he began to examine the outside, Benisette admired the brass work and the carving. Then, abruptly, he turned with a smile so genial that Margo stared in total amazement.

"A fine chest," complimented Benisette. "Worth the five thousand dollars, Talcott. And you are right, Miss Lane" – he gave an appreciative bow – "when you say that a place should never become cluttered. My living room is small and this chest will take up considerable space. But I have an idea!"

His smile broadening, Benisette turned to Talcott and gave a gesture toward the open chest.

"I shall keep the dancer statue in it!"

"An excellent idea," said Talcott, with a routine nod. "After all, the statue arrived in the chest."

"Even though it didn't belong there," chuckled Benisette, deeply. Then, wagging a big finger: "You rascal, Talcott! To make a double sale from a single purchase."

"Two sales at half price," reminded Talcott. "You heard what Graff offered."

A hissing tone came from Benisette's lips; his old glare returned, directed toward the office.

"What's keeping Graff?" demanded Benisette. "He can't be talking to anyone who trusts him, because no one does. He is trying to trick me, Talcott –"

"Easy, Mr. Benisette," interposed Talcott. "By the way, do you have that color picture of the dancer statue?"

Benisette nodded without lessening his glare or its direction.

"Why not show it to Miss Lane?" queried Talcott. "I know she'd like to see it."

Bringing an envelope from his inside pocket, Benisette drew a picture from it. Receiving the photograph, Margo was duly impressed. The statue indeed was very lovely.

From its colors, the statue was composed entirely of ivory and jade. It represented a Siamese dancing girl, seated with crossed legs, her arms folded in front of her with hands stretched straight against her shoulders. The ivory, an old yellow, formed the girl, while the jade, more precious and therefore sparingly used,

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composed her garments.

Jade girdle, anklets and bracelets formed the costume, while the realism of the figure was obtained by black ivory, probably a vegetable variety, that represented the dancer's hair and eyes. Indeed, if Margo had been shown the picture without knowing what it was, she would have supposed that it was a photograph of a living model.

"How lovely!" exclaimed Margo. "Why from the tint of that old ivory, it must have been aged for years!"

"And so will I be," snapped Benisette, taking back the photograph, "if Graff doesn't stop making those useless phone calls. You've given him long enough, Talcott!"

Snapping his fingers, Talcott called:

"Homer!"

The man who appeared looked like Talcott's echo. Stoop-shouldered, bowing, Homer fitted the term in voice as well as manner.

"It's time to close up," said Talcott. "Get busy right away, Homer."

"Time to close up," echoed Homer. "I'll get busy right away, sir."

"And bar all the windows."

"Bar all the windows."

As Homer went about his duty, Talcott turned toward the office, saying he would hurry Graff. Arms folded, Benisette kept staring at the chest of Chu Chan until suddenly, he wheeled toward Margo, with sharp query:

"Would Graff be phoning Cranston?"

"I don't think he could be," replied Margo. "I'm sure Lamont went out of town, too."

"Then why are you here?"

"Only because – well because Lamont was interested in the chest."

"You mean he's coming here to bid against me?"

"Well, hardly, since it's so late."

Benisette's eyes narrowed in fierce style.

"Maybe you're the one who is keeping this place open," he declared. "If I thought you were –"

Homer was leaving, having bolted all the metal-shuttered windows that turned this room into the equivalent of a vault. The glare in Benisette's eyes was just too much for Margo to face alone.

"I'll talk to Mr. Talcott," she said, hurriedly. "Maybe he can rush things. Good evening, Mr. Benisette."

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Reaching the office, Margo looked back to see Benisette still staring after her. With a flaunt of his folded arms, Mr. Red-Beard turned toward the open chest of Chu Chan, just by way of ignoring the girl's glance.

In the little office, Margo found Graff setting the telephone on its stand with one hand while he mopped his forehead with the other. Talcott was standing by, registering impatience.

"No luck," declared Graff. "If I could only reach Shebley –"

"It's too late," put in Talcott. "We can't keep Benisette waiting any longer."

"But I'm sure Shebley will pay ten thousand! If he'd only left a note for me!"

"You're sure he didn't?"

"I looked around for one, but there wasn't any. Now listen, Talcott –"

Talcott listened, but not to Graff. Instead, he and the others heard an enormous bellow that could only have come from the rear room. It was Benisette, howling the limit of his patience in terms uncomplimentary to Graff.

"Sold for five thousand dollars," announced Talcott. "If you want to buy the chest, talk to its present owner, Simon Benisette."

Considering the trouble to which Talcott had been put, Margo could pardon his rather bitter jest at Graff's expense. Oddly, though, Graff didn't consider it in a light vein.

"Talk to Benisette!" he repeated. "Say, that's really an idea, Talcott."

"I thought you'd appreciate it."

Again, Talcott was ironical, but Graff's mood didn't change.

"Money would talk with Benisette!" he exclaimed. "Just as with anybody else! I'll close the deal with him right now, pending Shebley's future decision."

"Go right ahead." Talcott gestured to the door. "Good luck, Graff."

As Graff went out, Talcott motioned Margo to a chair and took another for himself. While they waited, Talcott talked wearily of the problems of an antique dealer, wishing sincerely that Cranston had decided to buy the Chu Chan chest before Benisette ever saw it.

"I could have sold it to Shebley," added Talcott, "only I couldn't guarantee that it was unique. He wanted to talk it over with old Professor Frescott up at the Museum of Antiquities. I suppose Frescott was honest with him, too."

Margo wasn't listening closely. She was expecting sounds of chaos from the rear room, but apparently Benisette and Graff had curbed themselves sufficiently to hold a quiet conference.

"Of course Graff would say anything," continued Talcott, after a considerable pause. "But that doesn't mean that Shebley would listen –"

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Now Margo was listening hard and Talcott paused to watch her. He caught the sound too, heavy footsteps approaching the door. Both stared as the door opened and in stepped Benisette. The bearded man's face wore its cold look of satisfaction.

"Now I've experienced everything," declared Benisette, with a deep chuckle. "Imagine Graff trying to do business with me! By the way" – he reached into his pocket – "here's your five thousand, Talcott."

"It can wait until tomorrow," said Talcott, "when you send the truck to get it. I'll have the bill of sale made out by then. Whatever profit you make is your own business."

"You mean profit from Graff?" Leaning his head back, Benisette roared a laugh. "Why, I told that rascal I wouldn't sell the chest at any price. Frankly, Talcott" – Benisette lowered his head as well as his tone – "I think that Graff is desperate."

Talcott gave a half convinced nod.

"His swindles have caught up with him," added Benisette. "If we don't hear from him again, good riddance. If he clears town tonight and never comes back, you'll have me to thank for it. I'll make the rounds of the dealers tomorrow with twice as much as this" – Benisette produced his bankroll – "and more. From the way Graff left, he won't be back to tag me and up my bids with other people's money!"

"If you're in a buying mood," returned Talcott, with a profound bow, "be sure to stop here first."

"I'll stop to pick up the chest, anyway," promised Benisette, "but there's not much else in your stock that interests me."

Talcott took that comment as a matter of course. From his desk, he produced a large, intricate key which he handed to Benisette.

"Here's the key to Chu Chan's chest," stated Talcott. "I'd better give it to you before I forget it. The lock is automatic, the one modern thing about the chest."

Nodding, Benisette left the office and strode down the front stairway. Despite the bearded man's amiable mood, Margo wasn't anxious to follow. She waited while Talcott called for Homer who arrived from the side stairway and slid a door shut to close and lock the rear room, when Talcott announced that both visitors had gone. Noting Margo's glance toward the side stairway, Talcott announced that the door below was still open and bowed a courteous good night.

Margo breathed better when she reached the side street. Meeting Benisette had been an ordeal, to say nothing of Graff. Margo only hoped that neither was in the taxicab that she saw parked near the corner, so when she reached it, she paused long enough to look inside.

There, from the glow of the dim street lamp against the cab window, Margo saw a face and started back, only to laugh when she realized it must be the reflection of her own. Only the mirrored image didn't laugh, and that was when Margo really gasped.

It was a girl's face in the window, but it wasn't Margo's. To her utter amazement, the sort that approached horror, Margo was staring at features that she had seen pictured only a short while before. Lovely features, but not to Margo's distraught mind.

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What Margo saw – or thought she saw – was the life-sized face of the Siamese dancing girl who existed only as a statue that belonged to Simon Benisette!

As Margo Lane recoiled, the saffron countenance disappeared. Tripping back across the curb, Margo was caught by the strong arm of a cab driver, who had seen her from a neighboring lunch room and was coming to claim her as a fare.

"Not feeling good, lady?" queried the cabby. "Here, get inside and I'll take you home."

Was the far door closing as the cab driver opened the near one, or was that just another strained thread in the fabric of Margo's imagination?

At least the cab was empty when Margo plumped into the seat. Then the driver was at the wheel, speeding away from this area where curious recollections built themselves into imaginary realities, if such things could be.

Relaxing, Margo Lane decided she'd tell Lamont Cranston all about it when he returned from Washington.

CHAPTER V

LAMONT CRANSTON smiled across the breakfast table.

Seldom did Cranston smile; almost never was he seen at a breakfast table. Today was one of the rare exceptions, because he had hopped in from Washington on an early plane instead of rising at the crack of noon.

"So Benisette is calling for the chest as soon as Talcott opens shop," remarked Cranston. "Was that the understanding, Margo?"

Margo nodded, rather sleepily. Cranston had wakened her with a phone call from LaGuardia Airport and she'd just about had time to reach the restaurant where he said he would meet her. Having reported what occurred at the Talcott Antique Galleries on the previous evening, Margo was lapsing back to the dream stage.

"Wake up!" spoke Cranston. "You're half asleep, Margo."

It was odd, the way Margo's thoughts unclouded. One moment she was viewing the dark-eyed face of a yellow ivory statue that smiled; the next that image was gone, and she was staring at Lamont across the breakfast table.

There was something very calm in Cranston's countenance. At times, it was like a statue too. Only it was the other way about: Cranston wasn't a statue that came to life; he was a living man who could become singularly immobile when he chose. At present, his eyes carried a restful gaze as they studied Margo from a face that was vaguely hawklike.

"Have another cup of coffee," suggested Cranston. "If it doesn't wake you, you'd better go back to bed. Meanwhile tell me anything else of interest."

Margo couldn't think of anything else. She didn't consider the face in the cab window important enough, because Margo was charging that incident to imagination. Her waking dream confused itself with last night and since the face belonged to both, it would be silly to even mention it. Besides, Lamont wasn't interested in

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the Siamese dancer statue. He wanted to know more about the chest of Chu Chan.

"The deal is closed," assured Margo. "Benisette is paying five thousand dollars for the chest and Talcott has already given him the key. But Benisette will have to send a truck for the chest! It's too big to put in a cab."

"Too big," mused Cranston, "and perhaps too heavy?"

"Very probably," replied Margo. "Nobody tried to lift it while I was there, but it looked like a three man job."

Cranston's mood was speculative. Margo knew that he was visualizing the mysterious chest of Chu Chan.

"Only five thousand dollars," calculated Cranston, slowly. "If the chest is worth anything, it's worth more than that – perhaps far more."

"Graff offered ten thousand –"

"Of Shebley's money," Cranston's slight smile was reminiscent. "Only Shebley wasn't around to back it up."

"If he had been," opined Margo, "Benisette might have boosted the bid. Why, he had a bank roll of more than fifty thousand dollars and he said that today he'd be carrying double that amount."

"Benisette always deals in cash," nodded Cranston, "but I don't think he'd bid higher on the chest."

"And why not?"

"Because I don't think he knows how much it is really worth."

"How much is that?"

"I don't know." Again Cranston gave a rare smile. "That's why I don't think that Benisette knows."

That statement cleared Margo's mind, so far as Benisette was concerned. Obviously the bearded buyer wanted the chest purely as a desirable antique. In contrast, Graff the speculator probably rated the chest on the basis of some secret value. So Margo put the question:

"Does Graff know?"

"Do you mean does he know what the chest is really worth?" asked Cranston. "I don't think so, although he may. He managed to convince Shebley that the chest was worth plenty, but he wouldn't have told everything if he knew all. It wouldn't be Graff's way."

Having met Graff, Margo agreed with Cranston's verdict. Cranston amplified it a moment later.

"Graff is playing a hunch, a long shot, or both," declared Cranston. "His creditors are so close on his heels it isn't funny. He needs cash or he can't afford to stay around, and that's literal. Being desperate, he'd sell a bill of bad goods to Shebley – or anybody."

"So on the face of it, I'd say that any mystery involving the chest of Chu Chan could be classed as a hoax, pure and simple. Strange things come floating in from the Orient nowadays, but that would be just part of Graff's build up. But I'm considering the opinion of someone more reliable than Graff."

"And who is that?"

Cranston's eyes fixed steadily on Margo as he pronounced the name:

"Professor Giles Frescott, curator of the Museum of Antiquities."

Margo was very much awake and highly intrigued. Swallowing some more black coffee, she nodded that she wanted to hear more.

"The esteemed professor is anything but a practical joker," continued Cranston, "yet it was his subtle strategy that sent Shebley and myself to Washington to play hide-and-seek with each other. I'm back, but for all I know, Shebley is still down there looking for me, hoping I'll lead him to the chest of Chu Chan. Frescott doesn't want either of us to acquire it."

"And why not?"

"Because Shebley knows Graff," explained Cranston, "and therefore Shebley may have learned something. I know the Orient and therefore I may already know something."

"But Benisette knows nothing!"

"Precisely. Therefore Professor Frescott cleared the way for Benisette to buy the chest."

"Couldn't Frescott have made a bid for it himself?"

"And given his hand away?" Cranston shook his head. "Never. A curator of a museum doesn't go bidding around antique galleries. But you can be quite sure that Professor Frescott is somewhere in the offing."

"How far is that offing?"

"That's for you to find out." Rising, Cranston gestured to a cab outside the restaurant window. "Suppose you go down to Talcott's Galleries and be there when he opens shop. Tell him I'll be along a little later; that I'd like at least to see the chest of Chu Chan."

"You're stopping off somewhere?"

"Yes, at the Cobalt Club," replied Cranston. "I want to have a chat with Commissioner Weston. You know, Margo" – the steady eyes took a far away stare – "there may be something deep behind this chest of Chu Chan. The slightest clue, perhaps in the form of some trifling mystery that has baffled the police, may be a lead to some impending crime."

They were going out of the restaurant during Cranston's speech and Margo was actually in the cab and on her way to Talcott's, before the very thing popped into her mind again.

Some trifling mystery!

Margo herself could have furnished Lamont with such. That business of the statue face, alive and staring from the cab window, was the very sort of lead that would have intrigued Cranston in his present mood. But it was too late to tell him now so Margo resolved to wait until Cranston arrived at the antique galleries.

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The cab pulled up in front of Talcott's Galleries. The place was already open and Margo saw Homer staring from the doorway. As the cab stopped, Talcott's echo started to duck like a scared rabbit, but when he recognized Margo stepping from the cab he halted. Hardly had Margo paid the driver before Homer was gripping her by the arm, hurrying her inside the building and up the broad front stairs to the second floor galleries.

"I'm glad you came, Miss Lane!" Homer was breathless, worried. "We've been calling your apartment, but you weren't there."

"I was having breakfast –"

"It's about last night." Homer wasn't interrupting; he was merely continuing his theme after taking time out for a breath. "You're a witness to what happened, like Mr. Talcott and myself. That is you're a witness to what happened, before it happened."

"Before what happened?"

"Here's Mr. Talcott," panted Homer. "He'll explain everything."

They had passed the side stairway and were at the doorway of the rear room. The door itself was open and Daniel Talcott, his worried face drooping to its limit, was standing on the threshold. Peering up from between his bowed shoulders, Talcott gave his hands a plaintive spread that ended with a gesture toward the chest of Chu Chan.

"I'll tell you what's happened, Miss Lane!" expressed Talcott, hoarsely. "There's been murder!"

"Murder?" echoed Margo. "You mean here?"

A sudden horror of her own words made Margo stare about in quest of a body she didn't see. Then her eyes were back upon the object of Talcott's gesture, the chest of Chu Chan, with its heavy, brass-bound door ominously shut and locked.

"But how," began Margo, "and who –"

"Lionel Graff has been missing since last night," declared Talcott in a solemn tone, "and the last man to see him alive was Simon Benisette when they were standing here beside the chest of Chu Chan!"

CHAPTER VI

THE telephone bell was jangling from Talcott's office, but Margo Lane scarcely heard it. Through her head was ringing a multitude of other thoughts that were lining up in strictly accountable fashion.

There had been fierce rivalry between Graff and Benisette the evening before, rivalry to the pitch of violence. Then Graff, most unwisely as Margo now reviewed it, had gone into the rear room alone to make peace with Benisette.

Staring at Talcott, Margo could tell that he shared her thought.

Together they had waited in the office, expecting another altercation, but there had been none. Later they had seen Benisette go out alone.

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Alone.

That single word summed the suspicion that Margo now shared with Talcott. Margo was picturing that meeting in this rear room as short and swift. A mere hint of sarcasm in Graff's speech and Benisette's anger would surely have unleashed itself again. A fatal blow would have automatically tumbled Graff into the wide open chest of Chu Chan.

The chest that now stood closed and locked with the key in Benisette's possession!

Noting Margo's horrified stare toward the bottom of the chest's locked door, Talcott shook his head.

"The front is morticed," declared Talcott, "and that door is practically airtight. Blood couldn't flow out under it."

Margo was shuddering as Homer returned. The pale-faced assistant had answered the telephone and was reporting to Talcott.

"Somebody else asking about Graff," stated Homer, shakily. "They've been trying to trace him but he hasn't been heard from since he came here yesterday. This was his last call."

"The phone was ringing when we opened shop," explained Talcott to Margo. "One of Graff's creditors was calling saying he couldn't find him. Then another phoned and another –"

Breaking off abruptly, Talcott turned to Homer.

"You're sure you didn't see Graff leave here last night?"

"No, sir," replied Homer. "I was down at the side door. I'd have seen him if he'd gone that way."

"And you'd have seen him, Mr. Talcott," added Margo, "if he'd gone out the front. You were facing the door of the office while we were in there; while you were saying you wished Lamont had bought the chest, remember?"

Remembering, Talcott nodded; then shook his head.

"But Graff didn't go out," he emphasized. "It was Benisette who finally came along. That's why I thought Graff had gone out the side door."

"Benisette said he'd gone out," reminded Margo. "That was when you gave Benisette the key."

Another nod from Talcott. Then:

"When we unlocked this room this morning," said Talcott, "Homer and I noticed that the chest was shut. It didn't occur to us that Benisette had locked it to hide something until we received more calls regarding Graff –"

Again, the telephone was ringing. Homer went to answer it and came back very promptly.

"It's the truckers," the assistant reported. "They are coming for the chest in half an hour."

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"That means Benisette will be here first!" exclaimed Talcott. "He's going to move the chest right out, Graff's body going along with it!"

Margo turned toward the office.

"I ought to call Lamont –"

"Not here!" interrupted Talcott. "Use the phone across the street. I'll use my phone to call police headquarters and ask them what to do. You stay here, Homer" – pausing, Talcott studied his assistant's frightened face – "no, that wouldn't do, you'd give yourself entirely away. I'll have to talk to Benisette myself."

Talcott was tightening himself as he spoke, in preparation for the difficult task of chatting casually with a suspected murderer. He was forced to speed the process because of heavy footsteps coming up the front way.

Those footsteps were announcing Benisette!

"Down this way, both of you!" Talcott's whisper was hurried as he started Homer and Margo down the side stairs. "Homer, you find the patrolman on the beat and bring him here, but keep him down below! Miss Lane, after you've called Mr. Cranston, come back up by the front stairs and wait in my office. Understand?"

Homer was starting down the stairs when he received his order. Margo was following as Talcott gave the final word, but she paused so Benisette wouldn't hear her, for his footsteps were coming close. Then, drawn to the side of the stairs, Margo heard Benisette's booming greeting:

"Hello, Talcott! I've brought the cash for the Chu Chan chest. Let's settle up so I can go about my business. The truck will be here any time."

Margo couldn't quite catch Talcott's reply, for by then she was stealing down the stairs. Hurrying across to the lunch room, Margo phoned the Cobalt Club only to learn that Cranston had just left. That meant at least that he was on his way here, which was a great relief to Margo. Then, in accordance with Talcott's instructions, Margo came around by the front way, sneaked up to the galleries and into Talcott's office.

Talcott was already there. He gestured for silence as Margo entered and frantically motioned for her to close the door, adding a slow move of his hand that meant to do it quietly. Talcott was holding the phone with his other hand and as Margo approached on tiptoe, he spoke in a low tone.

"It's alright, inspector," said Talcott. "Miss Lane just came in, like I told her... What's that? I'll ask her..."

Turning to Margo, Talcott queried:

"Did you reach Mr. Cranston? Inspector Cardona wants to know."

Margo whispered that Cranston had already left the club for the auction galleries and Talcott relayed that news to Cardona. Then:

"Well, Inspector," undertoned Talcott, "I guess that covers it. Benisette is in the rear room, measuring the chest... Yes, so as to see if it will fit the corner of the living room... No, he didn't mention a word about unlocking it..."

"Yes, he paid me the five thousand" – Talcott was tapping his vest pocket as he spoke – "and he asked me for the bill of sale... No, I hadn't made it out, so he said I'd better, right away... Yes, he's in the rear room alone"

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with the chest, but there's nothing he could do... No, there's no other way he could remove the body, except in that chest...

"It's to go to Benisette's apartment... Yes, I'm sure, because he told me to give the bill of sale to the truckers when they arrived... Yes, so they'd know where to take the chest and would know the shipment was really his..."

Pausing, Talcott did some extensive listening and Margo could see his face change. Apparently Cardona had picked up something from those instructions that hadn't occurred to the art dealer.

"Why, that's so!" exclaimed Talcott. "Maybe Benisette doesn't intend to wait!" He gave an inquiring look at Margo and pointed in the general direction of the front stairs, only to have Margo shake her head. "No, Miss Lane didn't see him go out the front way, but he may have used the side stairs... Yes, I'll have her look... What's that? Oh, yes, if he's still here, we'll try to hold him... What's that?"

Margo didn't hear the final click from Cardona's end of the line. She was stealing out from the office, working her way toward the rear room. Gaining a look past a cluster of heavy chairs, Margo saw in one view that the final gallery was empty. Cardona was right, Benisette had left!

Turning, Margo gave a signifying gesture to Talcott as he poked cautiously from the office. Arriving around some of the intervening antiques, Talcott likewise stared into the empty room. Despairingly, Talcott turned toward the side stairway and muttered unkind things about Homer's failure to return with the neighborhood cop.

"Smart of Benisette to walk right out on us!" expressed Talcott, finally. "He showed his nerve coming here in the first place to learn if we suspected him of murder."

"At least he thinks we didn't," supplied Margo. "What do we do now?"

"Wait for Inspector Cardona," returned Talcott. "The last thing he said was that he'd start here right away. But we can be sure of one thing" – Talcott threw a grim look at the tight locked chest – "we still hold the evidence!"

That much was certain, too certain to please Margo Lane, who couldn't forbear a shudder as she glanced at the ghastly chest that needed only a tag to mark it as the last resting place of Lionel Graff.

To Margo Lane, this wait was like a death watch for a victim whose murderer had come to gloat over an accomplished crime, only to depart in unmolested triumph!

The only hope was that retribution would eventually reach Simon Benisette, man of secret murder. If the law could not deliver it, Margo Lane was confident that The Shadow would!

CHAPTER VII

PEOPLE were arriving at the antique galleries, almost in a group. First, Homer to announce that he'd given up looking for the neighborhood patrolman because he'd seen the truckers coming along the rear street, so he'd steered them to the side door where they were at present.

Next, Lamont Cranston, who strolled in by the front way just as Homer was finishing his report. Before Cranston had time to lift his eyebrows at Margo's story of Graff's disappearance and how it traced back to his last talk with Benisette, a full twelve hours ago, Inspector Cardona put in an appearance.

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He was a poker-faced chap, this inspector and a past master at the art of hunches. From the look – or lack of it – upon his swarthy countenance, it was plain that Joe Cardona had analyzed Talcott's data down to the last iota and had found it thoroughly conclusive.

Nevertheless, Cardona believed in testing theories wherever possible. His procedure in this instance was simple but effective. Motioning Cranston to one end of the Chinese chest, Cardona set his own stocky form at the other. When he found the chest too heavy to heft, he beckoned for Talcott and Homer to help, which they did.

As the chest was tilted and set down again, Margo sensed the sickly but muffled thud of the body it contained. The others noted it; in fact they could almost feel it through the thick woodwork.

Hardly had the chest settled back to level before loud voices echoed up the side stairway.

"Hey – what about that shipment?"

"The guy said the load would be ready when we got here."

"What do we do? Come up or forget it?"

The calls were from the truckmen and Cardona settled their problem promptly.

"Bring them up," ordered Cardona. "Benisette wants this job shipped to his place, so we'll let him have it."

Talcott blinked, rather puzzled, and Homer copied his employer's manner.

"An excellent suggestion, inspector," commented Cranston in his calm toned style. "Benisette might even be watching somewhere in the neighborhood to see that the chest is taken away."

"All the better," affirmed Cardona. "Only thanks for the suggestion. I was going to follow the truck personally, only now I'm leaving it to you."

"In case Benisette should recognize you –"

"That's right, Mr. Cranston. Since you wanted to buy the chest, he won't be scared off if he sees you heading over to his place. In fact it ought to bring him there all the quicker so he can tell you it's no sale and send you on your way."

Talcott was sending Homer to summon the truckers. As an added precaution, Cardona decided to step out of sight before they arrived, so he asked the way to Talcott's office.

"Rather than lose time," decided the efficient inspector, "I'll phone the commissioner while the chest is going out."

"And I can call Shebley," added Talcott. "He's the man Graff said would want to buy the chest."

"Does he know about the murder?"

"No. I tried to reach him by telephone, but his servant said he was out of town."

"When is he due back?"

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"I don't know," replied Talcott. "Maybe I'd better go over to his penthouse. If he's there, I can bring him to Benisette's apartment."

Cardona gave an approving grunt as he disappeared into the office, with Talcott behind him. Then the tramping feet of the truckmen were heard arriving from the side stairway. When Homer showed them the chest and offered to help them with it, they brushed him aside. These three huskies were confident they could handle the burden and they did.

By the time the chest was loaded and the truck was pulling away, Cranston and Margo were in a cab out front. From then on the trail was constant and deftly handled. This was The Shadow's own cab, piloted by a hackle named Moe Shrevnitz who knew how to tag along at well-regulated distances.

As they rode, Margo regretted only that Shrevvy had been busy taking Cranston to the airport the night before. If Shrevvy had been waiting outside the antique galleries, Margo might have had some answer to the mystery of the Siamese face that she had seen in the cab window. If it had been more than imagination, Shrevvy would certainly have known it.

However that trifling riddle seemed more inconsequential than ever, now that Graff's murder was an issue. True, Graff's death could hardly be termed an unsolved crime, since only Benisette could be responsible, but placing it upon the murderer might be difficult unless more than circumstantial evidence could be found.

All during that ride, Margo kept glancing at Cranston, trying to imbue herself with some of his customary calm. She'd have to be on hand to identify Graff's body and it wasn't pleasant to anticipate.

When the truck stopped in front of the old-fashioned apartment house where Benisette lived, the cab pulled right behind it. A few moments later, Cranston was shaking hands with a very surprised but benign old gentleman who was standing on the sidewalk.

"This is Professor Frescott," introduced Cranston. "You've heard me mention him, Margo, and not always in complimentary terms. By the way, just what did I say about the professor after I arrived back from Washington this morning?"

"I'm sorry about that, Cranston," put in Frescott, his tone carrying a well-practiced note of sincerity. "I am afraid that Jared Shebley was misinformed about the chest of Chu Chan." With a beaming smile, the professor gestured to the chest itself. "You see? It was here in New York all the while."

"And now it belongs to Simon Benisette," remarked Cranston. "Well, I don't suppose he'd mind our looking at it. Let's go inside, professor."

They followed the truckers into Benisette's ground floor apartment where the janitor took them to be friends of the occupant and let them remain. While the truckmen were still placing the chest in its assigned corner, Margo found herself staring in almost fearful admiration at the Siamese statue which rested on a taboret on the other side of the room.

The statue was lifelike, strikingly so, until Margo touched the arms and face and found them solid ivory. Even then, the solemn stare of the countenance impressed her, so closely did it resemble the imaginary features that must have been Margo's own reflection in the cab window.

There must have been something of the hypnotic in those black eyes, so powerful that it seemed to have pervaded the carver's art. Margo's own eyes were riveted by the coal black beads and she was believing that even the mere photograph might have stimulated her imagination, when the sound of voices brought her from

her trance.

Commissioner Weston had arrived and was questioning his friend Cranston regarding the trip from Talcott's. In a firm but calm tone, Cranston was assuring the commissioner that at no time had the chest of Chu Chan left his sight while riding on the open truck, a fact which Margo could have confirmed had Weston chosen to ask her.

Cranston's word was good enough for Weston, a point which impressed Professor Frescott, whose shrewd eyes were looking from one to the other. That Frescott was both quick and keen was demonstrated when he shot a sudden glance to the door, just as it opened to admit Talcott. The antique dealer blinked his surprise at seeing Frescott, and the professor smiled smugly in return.

It was Cranston who put the query:

"Any word from Shebley?"

"He isn't home yet," replied Talcott. Then, with a mistrustful glance at Frescott, the wan man inquired: "You haven't seen Benisette?"

"I doubt that we shall," put in Commissioner Weston, in the blunt style he always used when taking full authority. "I told Cardona to remain at your place, Talcott, in case Benisette returned there. But I don't propose to give a murderer more leeway on the slim chance that he may return to the scene of his crime.

"We must view Graff's body to establish the fact of murder. Since Benisette has the only key to this Chinese chest, we shall be catering to his whim if we wait longer. Our proper course is to break the lock, which Cranston believes that he can do with a minimum of damage."

Turning to Cranston, the commissioner gave the order: "Proceed!"

Using some tools that he had borrowed from the janitor, Cranston set to work. His process looked deft to all except Margo, who was sure that Lamont could have picked the intricate lock had he chosen to use the tools and skill that belonged to his other self, The Shadow. At that, the job was rapid, judged in ordinary terms. From hammer and chisel, Cranston reverted to pliers and with a final twist the lock plunked to the floor.

Uncannily the double door began to open of its own accord. The sight chilled Margo, until she realized that the body had probably tilted forward and was toppling in inert fashion. Such proved the case, for as the others dropped back behind Cranston's spreading arms, the dead form literally pitched itself from a huddle and struck the floor at a sprawly angle, to roll over on one shoulder.

This was the horrifying occasion for which Margo had been steeling herself during the past hour. She was braver by far than Talcott, the other person who was here to identify Graff, for Talcott was clear behind the group, blinking worried across their shoulders, while Margo was actually stepping forward.

One look at Graff's sallow, narrow face was all that Margo wanted. No matter how distorted those features might be, she'd recognize them, speak the name "Lionel Graff" and be over with this distasteful business. But as the dead face came rolling upward, all reason flung itself from Margo's brain. Despite herself, she recoiled with a wild, unrestrained shriek.

It wasn't the death twist on the victim's features that produced Margo's reaction; it was the face itself. The horror of the utterly incredible was overwhelming in its own right.

The dead man wasn't Lionel Graff, the sallow victim everyone expected. Glaring upward with death-glazed eyes was the bearded face of Simon Benisette, the alleged murderer!

CHAPTER VIII

HERE was mystery to tax The Shadow's brain.

That brain was working rapidly, smoothly, behind the placid countenance of Lamont Cranston.

His keen eyes revealed the fact, eyes that burned with a sudden glow, like those of a connoisseur examining a masterpiece. Though relentless in his efforts against crime, Cranston never discounted the work of an evil craftsman and he was viewing an unparalleled example of such warped genius.

No one saw that burning gaze, for Cranston was the foremost of the group. If seen, it would have been mistaken for amazing insight, which it wasn't. Cranston's eyes seldom gave way automatically to the gaze that marked him as The Shadow. It was his policy not to mix those personalities.

The simple fact was that Cranston, for once, was the most astonished of all persons who viewed a murderer's handiwork; doubly astonished, being both Cranston and The Shadow. Of this group, only Cranston had not accepted the absolute notion that the body of Lionel Graff was in the chest of Chu Chan. Cranston had been prepared to see anything or anybody roll out of that mystery cabinet – with the sole exception of Simon Benisette.

Then, as quickly as it had arrived, The Shadow's surprise was ended. He was Cranston again, the cool, calm analyst who prodded others into expressing the findings that formulated in The Shadow's hidden brain.

Moving slowly, emphatically toward Benisette's body, Cranston's hand carried all eyes with it until his forefinger stopped, pointing straight toward the dead man's heart. Or in a more literal sense, to the object that already pointed into the victim's heart.

Burning like a Promethean eye was a crimson bulb that jutted from Benisette's red-stained shirt front. Not blood, but its replica in solid form, a thing that might have crystallized from the final palpitation of the dead man's heart. Catching the gleam of the sunlight from the window, that carmine object glistened as a murderer's token.

It looked like a ruby, huge in comparison to most gems of its sort. Not only did it mark Benisette's heart; the brilliant stone formed the exact center of a singular weapon that had fully demonstrated its insidious possibilities.

It was Professor Frescott who identified the instrument of death. In awed tone he proclaimed:

"The katar of Pagan Min!"

Pressing forward, Dariel Talcott pressed his way between Cranston and Weston to view the weapon in question. Nodding, Talcott licked his dry, quivering lips.

"That's right," he agreed. "It's the very dagger that I sold to Jared Shebley. There is no other like it or Shebley wouldn't have bought it."

"Unquestionably unique," affirmed Frescott. "A most deadly instrument, that thrusting dagger. I said so yesterday" – blandly, Frescott turned to face his companions – "when I examined it at Shebley's."

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Nobody looked at Frescott; they were all studying the katar. One thing was certain; to identify that weapon was as easy as both Talcott and Frescott said. For in delivering death, a katar was forced to reveal its curious mechanism and leave it on full display.

The gleaming Balas ruby naturally attracted most attention, centered in the gold mountings that formed the cross-bar of the stirrup handle. The hand-guards projecting upward, were conspicuous to a degree, but more important were the silver segments of the false blade that actually formed a sheath for the deadly spike within the tricky weapon.

Spread wide, those silver sectors lay like wings across Benisette's breast, each forced up to the horizontal, the limit to which they could be raised. That limit, however was enough for it had allowed the hidden blade to bury itself full length into the victim's body.

With a katar, a killer didn't exactly stab. Rather, he punched the death thrust home, as was obvious in this case. The stony expression of Benisette's face seemed to hold the moment of surprise that must have petrified him at the brief but fatal moment.

Stooping, Commissioner Weston went through the dead man's pockets. As he did, Weston heard Talcott's anxious but prompting tone:

"Look for his money, commissioner. He had a bundle of it; how much, I have no idea, but he peeled five thousand dollars from it when he paid me for the chest."

There wasn't any trace of the money. The murderer must have taken it. The only thing of consequence that Weston found was the key to the Chinese chest, which fell from Benisette's pocket during the search. Picking up the key, Weston arose and faced Talcott.

"So you thought that Benisette left your galleries after he talked to you this morning?"

Talcott nodded and Margo did the same. In line with Weston's eyes, she thought she ought to add her silent testimony.

"But you didn't see him go out, did you Talcott?"

"Of course not," replied Talcott. "Otherwise he wouldn't be lying here dead."

"I was thinking in terms of a possible imposture," stated Weston. "People sometimes wear false beards, you know."

"But it must have been Benisette who arrived this morning," argued Talcott, "because we saw him leave last night. So he must certainly have returned."

Again Margo nodded.

"I'm sure it was Benisette who left last night," the girl declared, "and though I only glimpsed him this morning, I heard his voice and recognized it."

"Could anyone else have come into the galleries?" demanded Weston. "This morning, I mean?"

"Quite possibly," replied Talcott, slowly. "But it would have to have happened while Miss Lane and I were in the office. How long were we there, Miss Lane?"

"At least five minutes," decided Margo. "Maybe longer."

"It was while I was talking to Inspector Cardona."

"Maybe he can estimate how long that conversation took."

Talcott nodded, then queried:

"You came in by the front door, didn't you Miss Lane?"

"Yes, as you requested."

"But did you notice the side door while you were coming by it?"

"Only with a glance."

"Homer wasn't there?"

"No, he'd gone to look for the patrolman."

"Then tell me, Miss Lane," continued Talcott. "In your opinion could –"

"I'll do the questioning!" stormed Weston in impatient interruption. "Here's something for you to answer, Talcott. You say you sold this death dagger to Shebley?"

"Yes, commissioner."

"Then you thought it was still in his possession?"

"No, sir. I was sure it wasn't."

Talcott's reply set Weston aback.

"Just when did you begin to doubt the fact, Talcott?"

"Only this morning," replied Talcott. "You see I stopped at Shebley's coming over here from my galleries. Shebley always kept the Burmese katar on the table in his curio room. Only it wasn't there this morning."

Weston wheeled on Frescott.

"But you saw it yesterday, professor," Weston reminded. "What did you do" – sharp suspicion flashed from the commissioner's eyes – "take it with you?"

"Of course not," retorted Frescott. "But I can tell you who could have: Lionel Graff. He was going into Shebley's just after I came out." Before Weston could make a rejoinder, a tone sharper than his own spoke from the doorway.

"My servant can vouch for that, commissioner."

The speaker was Jared Shebley, his expression as crisp as ever. With him was Inspector Cardona; behind them a police surgeon. Shebley gestured to the others as he explained his arrival here.

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"I just returned home," stated Shebley, "and found the Burmese katar missing. When my servant told me Graff had called last night, I had an idea he must be the thief. So I went to Talcott's and found Inspector Cardona. He told me that Benisette had murdered Graff. So we came over here –"

"And brought the medico," added Cardona. "I see you've opened the chest, commissioner. Well, suppose we have a look at Graff's body!"

Even on this scene of tragedy, what happened was funny. Apparently Cardona knew what Graff and Benisette looked like, as did Shebley. As they stepped forward to look at Graff's face and saw Benisette's instead, they behaved like a comedy team with their sudden back-step. Then the others present were getting an idea of what their own faces must have looked like when they saw a suspected murderer lying dead instead of a supposed victim.

While Cardona and Shebley gaped astonished, the police surgeon, knowing nothing of the mistaken identity, stooped calmly and withdraw the dagger from Benisette's heart. The surgeon's surprise came when he saw the halves of the silver casing blade click together so snugly that they left no trace of their joining.

As Commissioner Weston reached for the weapon, his hand came just above the dead eyes of Simon Benisette. The bearded man's frozen face wore appropriate puzzlement, as for the first time his sightless gaze was trained upon the mysterious weapon that had slain him. But Benisette's features were gradually setting into a leer, as though he had cause to gloat over the law's inability to crack this impossible crime.

Perhaps that was the factor that caused Lamont Cranston to gaze toward the real origin of the riddle, the chest of Chu Chan. With that gaze, Cranston caught a glimmer.

Only when the chest was open could anyone have detected what Cranston did. Until Benisette's body had sprawled from it, the chest had not been open since last night. Now Cranston was the first to give it close attention.

Without a word, Cranston stepped around Benisette's body and reached one end of the chest, motioning for someone to take the opposite end. Cardona was the first to respond and together he and Cranston began to slide it toward the center of the room. Seeing that Cranston wanted the chest to be in the full sunlight, others helped to lift it there.

Poised at a tilt, the chest of Chu Chan revealed its oddity to all viewers. The inside of its back and sides bore the pock-marks of tiny holes, a few dozen of them, that weren't visible externally, because of the carved surface. That these holes were of recent manufacture was evident when Cranston pointed to slight tracings of sawdust in the bottom of the cabinet.

"Air holes!" exclaimed Commissioner Weston. "They must have been drilled last night." He wheeled to Talcott. "Are there any tools in that rear gallery of yours?"

As Talcott nodded, Cardona put in his say-so.

"I'll say there are," affirmed Joe. "I was looking them over, to see if I could find anything that Benisette might have used to slug Graff."

"Good hunting, inspector." Weston was rather testy. "But that was before you learned that things were the other way around."

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Maybe Cardona picked up his next idea from Weston's words. Or possibly it was Cranston who did so and flashed the hunch to Cardona with a glance. At any rate, the ace inspector played it right to the bull's eye.

"The other way around," agreed Cardona. "That sums it, commissioner. We've found the wrong man as the victim and that makes the wrong man the killer. I'll tell you who drilled those air-holes: Lionel Graff!"

Then, before Weston could quite complete the chain that Cardona dangled mentally before him, the swarthy inspector did it on his own.

"That's how Graff stayed in the chest all night," completed Cardona, "putting himself among the missing. He was waiting for his chance to murder Benisette with that Burmese dagger. And Graff found it!"

There wasn't a single objection to Cardona's finding among the silent listeners. Rather, faces showed their full approval of the theory, making it unanimous.

Even a dead man cast his ballot in the affirmative. Stiffening into the first throes of rigor mortis, the bearded face of Simon Benisette gleamed with happy hatred. In life, Benisette had detested Graff more than any other man.

It had only needed proper evidence to prove that Lionel Graff had murdered Simon Benisette.

That evidence had been uncovered by Lamont Cranston, the man who was The Shadow!

CHAPTER IX

THE hunt was on for Lionel Graff. Like all quests for a murderer, it began locally and spread itself wide. Unfortunately, finding pictures of Mr. Graff was quite impossible.

Always a slippery character, Graff proved to have been underestimated when the facts began stacking up against him. Everyone knew he'd been in financial water, but no one had guessed how deep.

Creditors galore began pestering the police with details of tricks that Graff had played on them. The stack of promissory notes he'd handed to these dupes was so large it had to be arranged alphabetically. Estimates were putting Graff more than fifty thousand dollars in the red, provided he'd ever intended to pay up.

Among Graff's defaults were bank checks that had bounced so often they hadn't any rubber left. Threatened with legal action, Graff had been right against the wall that evening he'd come to Talcott's to bid on the chest of Chu Chan.

Of course, dealers like Talcott had known enough not to trust Graff and they had even warned their customers against him. Talcott personally provided some data on the subject when he called at the commissioner's office a few days after Graff's disappearance.

Cranston was there and so was Cardona. On the commissioner's desk were some of the exhibits from the Benisette case; having discussed them with others, Weston wanted to do the same with Talcott. Nevertheless, the commissioner willingly took time out to let the antique dealer recall a few facts concerning Graff.

"All the dealers wondered how long Graff would keep ahead of trouble," informed Talcott. "So did shrewd buyers like Benisette. They could insult Graff, but we couldn't afford to do so. Not while he still had contacts like Shebley."

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"Graff had only Shebley," put in Weston, dryly, "and even Shebley was wary of the fellow."

"I found that out," returned Talcott with a nod, "the night that Graff tried to buy the chest. He pulled every string or I might say he used every phone wire, there in my office. Whenever he called a man, he began with a promise to pay a long-standing debt if only they'd help him on one more deal."

"And they all cut him short?"

"Very, very short." Talcott blinked solemnly. "That's when I realized how desperate Graff was. When people began calling me the next morning, I wasn't surprised, because I didn't think he could afford to be around. But when I learned that all trace of him had ended at my place –"

Talcott broke off with a recollective head-shake as though to chide himself for his false theories. Rising, Weston clapped the antique dealer on the stooped shoulders.

"You did good work," complimented the commissioner. "You spotted murder, even though you had it in reverse. Now let's go over the exhibits."

The commissioner opened an oblong box to disclose a set of fine finishing tools that Cardona had brought from the rear room of Talcott's Galleries. Among the tools was a special bradawl with a threaded point. Holding the awl beneath a microscope, Weston invited Talcott to have a look.

Among the threads, Talcott could see tiny fragments of wood from the chest of Chu Chan. This was the instrument that had been used to bore the air-holes.

"No finger prints," stated Weston. "Graff was smart enough to wipe the handle. However, he forgot that the boring point might carry evidence. We've taken photographs of all these tools, Talcott, so we'll let you have them back shortly. I'll let you know later when and where to pick them up."

Talcott expressed his thanks with a nod.

"Now," said Weston. "this!"

He picked up the Burmese katar, gave it a knuckle nudge that sprang the outer blade apart and displayed the pointed steel. Talcott recoiled at the action, only to have Weston smile and beckon him close. Letting the silver casing spring shut, Weston used the dagger to point out a set of photographs which showed the katar full size, open and shut.

"We are keeping these too," said Weston, referring to the photograph. "Shebley can have his precious souvenir again, when we return the various exhibits. So I want you to check the photographs, Talcott, in case we need your testimony."

"They fully represent the katar of Pagan Min," assured Talcott. "I am willing to make an affidavit to that effect."

"Very good. It may save us a lot of trouble later. In the affidavit you can include the dagger's history."

"I know it thoroughly, because I am very particular on such matters. As I told Shebley when I sold him the item, it is positively unique –"

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Weston interrupted with a hand wave that meant for Talcott to put such statements in the affidavit. Taking the gesture for dismissal, Talcott bowed himself to the door; then turned to ask:

"Any traces yet of Graff?"

"None that count," returned Weston, glumly. "The only reports of anyone answering his description came from places too remote for Graff to reach in the time allowed. Cranston is looking at the reports right now" – Weston gestured across the desk – "and he'll show them to you if you wish."

"Never mind," returned Talcott. "There's something else I'd rather know about. What's happened to the chest of Chu Chan?"

"It's still at Benisette's," replied Weston. "We have it under lock and key."

"I mean what's going to happen to it?"

"Haven't you heard?" Weston laughed indulgently. "You'd better get back to business, Talcott. I supposed that every dealer in town would know by this time. Shebley is buying Benisette's entire collection."

"But many of Benisette's items aren't unique."

"Some are, and since his estate will only sell as entire lot, Shebley is buying everything to get what he wants. We're shipping it all to his place tonight."

With the stare of a bewildered antique dealer, Talcott went out, closing the door behind him. Talcott's departure was so typical of a man who had lost a real opportunity that Weston lost his smile.

"Poor chap," commented Weston. "He'd have probably liked to buy that lot himself."

"Those antique dealers have a tough time," put in Cardona. "They don't only lose a sale but a customer, when some collector picks up a load of junk direct."

Tossing the report sheets on Weston's desk, Cranston gave Cardona a poker-faced stare that rivaled Joe's own.

"I'd hardly call Benisette's collection junk," remarked Cranston. "It contains some nice items."

"My mistake," apologized Cardona. "Not being a collector, it's all junk to me, particularly that chest of Chu Chan. There wouldn't have been a murder if it hadn't been around, because there wasn't anything else at Talcott's big enough for Graff to hide in and stow the body."

"A good point," agreed Cranston. "You said the shipment was going to Shebley's tonight, commissioner" – Cranston was looking across the desk – "but does that include the chest of Chu Chan?"

"It will have to stay at Benisette's," replied Weston, "until we return the other exhibits. As an exhibit, the chest is the most important of all. We'll take some photographs of it tonight after the rest of Benisette's stuff has been shipped. We'd be glad to have you come along, Cranston."

"I'll be there, commissioner."

Cranston was going somewhere else first. That became plain as soon as he left Weston's office. First he made a quick phone call from a drug-store phone booth, then summoned a cab and sped uptown, to a favorite restaurant, where he met Margo Lane, the person he had phoned. Though it was early, Cranston insisted upon having dinner.

"This soon?" queried Margo. "Why, we'll be finished before dark!"

"That's the best of all reasons," replied Cranston, "because we're going to be busy after dark."

"For how long?"

"We don't know, because it depends on someone else."

"Upon whom for instance?"

Cranston met Margo's impatient question with a bland gaze; then, calmly, he asked:

"Did you ever hear of a murderer returning to the scene of his crime?"

Intrigued, Margo nodded.

"And where," inquired Cranston, "was Simon Benisette murdered?"

"Why, in Talcott's Auction Galleries –"

Cranston's head-shake came in interruption.

"I think we can limit the scene of crime," decided Cranston. "Let's class it in terms of where the body was found."

"In the chest of Chu Chan!"

Margo's exclamation brought Cranston's approving nod. At the same time he passed her the dinner menu, which she eagerly received. As much as Cranston, Margo was anxious to be on their way by dark on the chance that she could share in the unraveling of the mystery.

CHAPTER X

IT was in Shrevvy's cab that Lamont Cranston summed up the riddle of Benisette's death in terms of past and future.

"Benisette was murdered for his money," stated Cranston. "At least that made the proposition profitable, considering that he had at least fifty thousand dollars on him."

"More nearly a hundred thousand," calculated Margo. "Anyway, more than Lionel Graff needed to pay off his debts."

"Which he wouldn't then, and couldn't now, even if he wanted." Pausing, Cranston pondered; then: "It's an odd trail that Graff left, Margo."

"Odd? How?"

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"The police tried to spread the mesh faster than he could travel, but Graff outraced them. Only he couldn't have gone as fast as statistics show. We know when he must have walked out of Talcott's place, here in New York; yet a man answering his description was seen in Chicago only one hour later and in St. Louis four hours after that."

"But Graff couldn't have reached either city so soon!"

"Naturally not. Which proves that Graff either planted a false trail, or else –"

What else, Cranston didn't specify right then. They were getting close to Benisette's place and Cranston wanted to discuss the chest of Chu Chan.

"There's something important about that chest," assured Cranston, "and the secret was learned by two men."

"The two that wanted it," agreed Margo. "Simon Benisette and Jared Shebley."

"Double zero," scored Cranston. "The two men were Professor Giles Frescott and Lionel Graff."

"But Benisette was buying it –"

"As any collector would. Frescott wanted Benisette to get it, so it would fall into the hands of somebody who knew nothing about its real secret."

The theory was startling, but it had the ring of accuracy. Since Margo's slow nod was visible in the dusk, Cranston proceeded:

"Graff's only bet was to get it into other hands. So he worked on Shebley, telling him the chest of Chu Chan was unique. Once Shebley owned the chest, Graff would have access to it."

"Of course," agreed Margo, "but Frescott blocked the deal."

"Temporarily, yes," declared Cranston, "but Graff became too eager. I have an idea he stimulated Shebley's interest more than we suppose. Since Shebley is buying the entire Benisette collection in order to acquire the chest, we may regard him as a very potent factor."

"Then the secret of the chest, whatever it is, concerns three men."

"Make it four," completed Cranston. "You can count me in on it."

"Shebley is buying the chest," countered Margo. "He is getting it without Graff's help –"

Eyes wide open, Margo paused to exclaim:

"That's why Graff may come to Benisette's tonight! To get at the chest before it goes to Shebley's! Why, it will be Graff's last chance –"

"Say rather his best chance," interposed Cranston. "But we're getting close to Benisette's. I'll be seeing you later, Margo."

As the cab slackened, a curious thing occurred. One door seemed to open of its own accord, the door on Cranston's side. A blot of blackness covered it; then faded. As the door gave a delayed slam, Margo reached

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beside her and spoke breathlessly:

"Lamont –"

It was useless. Cranston was gone and Margo should have known it. Mysteriously, without Margo even suspecting it, he had blended into that other self of his, The Shadow. His way of sliding into black cloak and slouch hat was so amazing in itself that it seemed more incredible every time it happened.

Somewhere in that dusk, a strange weird figure was on the glide, unseen by even the craftiest eyes. How any ordinary rival would have a chance against The Shadow, Margo couldn't understand. In fact, experience had shown that the average man of crime wilted the moment he met the Nemesis in black.

But The Shadow wasn't dealing with anybody ordinary right now. Lionel Graff rated as the most sensational murderer in a decade or more, while Professor Frescott had already shown his crafty make-up by sending The Shadow, as Cranston, off on a blind trail. As for Jared Shebley, he could be classed as a potent factor because he had bought the chest of Chu Chan.

Skillfully, Shrevvy parked the cab at a spot where no light reached the back seat. This gave Margo a perfect opportunity to watch Benisette's apartment house without being seen. The place was across the street at an angle and men were bringing out the various antiques to place them in a truck.

Apparently Shebley, the purchaser, was particular, for the work was being done with care. Everything was either wrapped or crated, so it was impossible to identify the various art objects. At least one thing was certain: the chest of Chu Chan wasn't coming out, because nothing of its bulky size put in an appearance. Nor was it to come out, because a uniformed policeman was on duty and Margo remembered that the chest was supposed to stay.

Margo's own purpose here was important. The Shadow expected cross complications; therefore he would need cooperation. If he flashed a signal, it might be Margo's duty to drop from the cab and put in a phone call either to certain agents of The Shadow or the police.

Shrevvy, of course, would drop her near a telephone and be ready on his own to take up any trail The Shadow ordered. These things had worked out before, but Margo didn't expect the same tonight. Whatever happened would involve the chest of Chu Chan, which was still indoors and would remain there.

So Margo felt more than a trifle annoyed when she saw that the truck was almost loaded. It wasn't until the policeman stepped toward the curb that Margo spotted something of consequence. A figure was gliding across the street, keeping to the darkened patches. Thin and black garbed, that shape wouldn't have been noticed by anyone not on the lookout.

Bold of The Shadow, thought Margo, to come so nearly into the open. Perhaps he was doing it just so she would notice and know that he was entering Benisette's. For at the finish, the figure took to the darkness of the wall, paused there, then whisked right through the doorway behind the backs of the men at the truck.

A sudden impulse swept Margo. If The Shadow's action hadn't been a signal, she could at least interpret it as such. Opening the door on her side of the street, Margo leaned toward Shrevvy and spoke briefly:

"Follow the truck. Orders."

Margo was out and waiting in a darkened doorway when Shrevvy, taking her at her word, started after the truck. Then, as soon as the policeman went indoors, Margo crossed to the apartment house, wondering how

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she was going to get into Benisette's apartment with a cop on duty there.

Hardly had she reached the house before the officer came out. Stepping away from the door, Margo let the cop go past and saw him turn in the direction of a corner drug store. Of course he'd probably locked the door of Benisette's apartment, but having come this far, Margo decided to try it.

Reaching the door, Margo found herself in luck.

The door was unlatched!

Entering, Margo closed the door behind her. The living room was dimly lighted, and strangely different, now that most of Benisette's curios were gone. In the corner, Margo saw the chest of Chu Chan; its lock had been repaired, but the door was wide open, so the Chinese cabinet wasn't ominous. Then, as Margo turned about, she saw that the chest wasn't the only one of Benisette's curios that had been left. Perched on a piano bench, instead of its accustomed taboret, was the ivory statue of the Siamese dancer!

Sight of that old friend rather startled Margo; then, approaching the image, she laughed. Yellow ivory, jet eyes, and jade trappings made an attractive combination, but they certainly weren't as lifelike as Margo had once imagined.

Siamese dancers should cultivate graceful poses instead of sitting solemnly with artificial faces staring between the spread hands of crossed arms. Whoever had carved this mass of ivory and added its paucity of jade was thinking in terms of sculpture, rather than realism.

Even the black eyes looked dull in this light. Looking right into them, Margo realized that the glimmer of sunlight must have caused her former impression; that, plus her tense feeling when she had been waiting for a body to pop from the closed chest of Chu Chan. Of course, the foolish dream could have helped; but Margo had long since wiped away the silly recollection of this same ivory face peering at her from a cab.

The jet eyes were no longer hypnotic.

Or were they?

Margo must have lost a few moments, at least, in realizing that a sharp click had come from the door of the apartment, which was directly behind her. It couldn't be The Shadow, for he would have entered silently. So Margo made up for the time loss with quick action.

In her coat pocket she had a small automatic that she always carried on dangerous excursions. Pulling the weapon, Margo wheeled around and pointed it straight toward the door. Her back toward the Siamese statue, she saw a man who was closing the door behind him and though he drew one arm across his face, Margo was quick enough to recognize Professor Frescott.

"Hands up, both of them," ordered Margo. Then, deciding to keep Frescott guessing, she added: "And make it quick, whoever you are."

Frescott brought his other arm up, trembling, the action momentarily covering his face still further. Then, before Margo could gain a good look at him, he spoke in a forced voice that didn't sound like his own.

All the professor said was a single word that sounded like a name:

"Ankhea!"

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Two twining things like snakes wrapped themselves around Margo's neck so suddenly that her breath choked off as her head went back. Taken from her feet, Margo flung her arms frantically and lost the gun as she tried to fight the strangling clutch.

Like something out of a nightmare, she saw the face of the Siamese statue, alive and active, but with its solemn expression unchanged. Its eyes were staring down into Margo's own, but the face was upside down as Margo saw it.

Maybe the case was the other way about, for Margo certainly was in whirl when she struck the floor. She had an impression of Frescott pouncing forward to aid the creature that had staged the initial stroke.

Then everything went black, so very black that Margo Lane could not have seen The Shadow, if he had arrived to save her from the plight that she had brought upon herself!

CHAPTER XI

PATROLMAN CASSIDY, returning from the corner drug store, stopped short of Benisette's door and stared.

What Cassidy stared at was blackness, too much of it. The blackness formed a cloud that blocked out the light from the back of the hall, which wasn't sensible because the light had been burning when Cassidy left.

Maybe the bulb had burned out. To find out whether or why, Cassidy began ducking his head left and right, only to have the blackness swirl with him. So Cassidy drew his revolver, aimed it at the blackness and halted in astonishment.

He was pointing his gun right at the missing hall light, burning as bright as ever!

It didn't occur to Cassidy that the blackness could have dwindled in crouching fashion. The fadeout had deceived him because the light, again unveiled, had caught his eye. What the patrolman had actually seen was The Shadow, approaching Benisette's apartment from the rear hall, only to retire at Cassidy's return.

All this was in curious contrast to Margo's impression of The Shadow entering by the front door. It was possible that The Shadow could have continued through to the back, though why was a debatable proposition. However at this present moment, Margo Lane was in a place where the consideration of such problems wouldn't interest her.

Back in the rear gloom of the hallway, The Shadow watched Cassidy try the door of Benisette's apartment only to find it locked. Bringing the key from his pocket the patrolman opened the door and entered. As he did, blackness moved toward him again, sidling past the glow of the hall light in case Cassidy turned to look. But Cassidy didn't turn to look.

Inside Benisette's apartment, Cassidy was staring at a piano bench. He removed his cap to scratch his head, though why a blank bench should have perplexed him was something else again. Cassidy might better have studied the chest of Chu Chan, standing locked in the corner, but he didn't. Indeed, Cassidy was so puzzled that he failed to hear the slight sound of a window sash being lowered into place, somewhere at the rear of the apartment.

The Shadow heard it and was away, out through the back hall. He was on a trail that he had picked up earlier in back of the apartment house; that of Professor Frescott. The Shadow had spotted the benign worthy sneaking in through an alleyway, but in keeping with his plan of learning other people's secrets, he'd let Frescott go ahead.

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Now the situation was different. With Frescott departing, it might be policy to follow him elsewhere. So The Shadow reasoned until he reached the back door and pressed it open. The door creaked; not enough for Frescott to hear, for The Shadow could see the professor sneaking along beside a fence; but there was someone closer who caught the sound.

From a trellis beside the doorway, two powerful tendrils emerged like segments of a powerful, living vine, and wrapped themselves around The Shadow's neck with the tightening force of a boa constrictor!

This wasn't the way to treat The Shadow. He proved it by his lunging twist. It was like a jungle combat between a python and a tiger with the verdict going to the latter. Ending his roundabout lurch with a mighty fling, The Shadow crashed his opponent right through the trellis, sending both on a scaling flight that ended with a splintering thud against the fence.

There was an oddity about the flying figure. One moment it was dark, like The Shadow, as if clad in an enveloping cape. Next it was all a dullish white, a lithe thing twisting in the darkness. It seemed to roll into the folds of the garment it regained and it was gone again with a fading process that almost matched The Shadow's.

Another crash sounded.

Cassidy was responsible. He'd heard the bashing sound from the back yard and had taken the shortest line toward it, right through to the rear of Benisette's apartment. Such a trifle as a window didn't bar Cassidy when he was in a hurry. The burly patrolman smashed right through the pane and showed his head and shoulders, one hand waving a revolver.

Shots came from Frescott's corner of the fence. Bullets bashed the house wall between Cassidy and The Shadow. In reply, an automatic boomed from the rear porch, whining its leaden messages above the spot where Frescott crouched. There was a wild scramble as the professor darted out through the rear passage, with a small limber shape scudding after him. The Shadow didn't see that figure go, for Cassidy was bothering him.

Strictly a short-range marksman, the patrolman decided to settle the sharpshooter on the back porch, particularly because there was an advantage in aiming along the line of the house wall. It gave Cassidy a chance of ducking back into the window, which was helpful, but The Shadow had a similar advantage and therefore took it. The Shadow simply went back into the door and waited there while the patrolman wasted bullets. But by the time the shooting ended, it was too late to follow Frescott.

His gun empty, Cassidy tilted his head and decided that his adversary might have doubled around through the hallway. So Cassidy took a similar course and rushed forward through the living room. At the open door of the apartment, he ran squarely into a calm faced man who paused in apparent surprise.

A few moments later, this gentleman was introducing himself as Lamont Cranston, a friend of the police commissioner. Cassidy gave a knowing nod and pocketed his gun.

"The commissioner said to be expecting you," recalled the patrolman. "I was just calling him down from the drug store, the line being disconnected here. A bit of some shooting had me busy out back, but I've chased them, I have.

"It's here where I belong; them's the commissioner's orders, so I'm following them. But there's a bit of a mystery bothering me, unless my imagination is at fault. Look over there, Mr. Cranston, and tell me what you see."

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Cassidy gestured to the vacant piano bench. After a glance, Cranston shook his head.

"I don't see anything."

"And that's just the trouble, Mr. Cranston. There was a statue sitting there" – Cassidy rubbed his chin – "or did they take it?"

"They must have," returned Cranston, "because the commissioner said that everything was to go except the chest of Chu Chan. Of course someone could have put the statue in the chest, only the chest is locked."

"It was open, I thought," said Cassidy, staring at the chest. "It's a funny place, this apartment, but maybe it was just the moving men closed the chest. Anyway, we'll leave it until the commissioner gets here."

Cranston lifted his hand for silence. His keen ear caught a sound so feeble that it entirely escaped Cassidy's attention. In fact, the patrolman would never have detected it, for the weak scraping diminished and ceased altogether as Cranston listened. Cranston's order to Cassidy was quick, but calm-toned:

"The key, right away!"

"The key to the apartment?"

"No, to the Chinese chest, if you have it!"

Cassidy had it and produced it. A quick twist of the key in the lock and the double door came open. Out rolled a limp, gasping figure that collapsed in Cranston's arms. It was Margo, her breath gone almost to the suffocation point.

"Get some water," Cranston told Cassidy. "Maybe we can bring her back to life."

Bringing Margo back was easy, now that she had air again. What Cranston wanted was a chance to talk to her alone. Without waiting for Margo's story, Cranston told her what she was to say and the girl nodded, only to let her head fall back in a pretended faint as Cassidy reappeared.

Shortly Commissioner Weston arrived upon the scene with his inevitable companion, Inspector Cardona. Cranston let Cassidy give the first details, then:

"I told Margo to meet me here," declared Cranston, calmly. "She arrived first and somebody flung her into the chest of Chu Chan. They must have skipped out the back way because Cassidy says he heard some shooting."

"They couldn't have been here long," assured Cassidy, "because I was only gone five minutes. But it's my belief they stole the statue, if it was here."

"That Siamese thing?" queried Cardona. "It should have gone to Shebley's with the rest of the goods. I'll phone him and find out."

Weston had finished an inspection of the shattered rear window when Cardona returned.

"Unlatched," stated the commissioner, bluntly. "That's how the thieves got in and stole the statue."

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"Only they didn't steal the statue," returned Cardona. "Shebley says he's already unpacked it and it's on a taboret in his curio room."

Weston threw an accusing glance at Cassidy, who looked quite sheepish. That was sufficient rebuke for the patrolman's lack of memory; Weston softened the impeachment by commending him upon his prompt dispatch of the unsuccessful burglars and further congratulated Cassidy for remaining at his post.

Cardona summoned the photographers to take pictures of the chest, both shut and open; then arranged for the repair of the broken window. Weston decided that the sooner the chest of Chu Chan was shipped to Shebley's, the better, but meanwhile Benisette's apartment would remain under constant guard.

It wasn't until she left with Cranston that Margo told the story of her meeting with Professor Frescott and its singular sequel. Even in the safety of Shrevvy's cab, Margo shuddered as she added:

"The statue had something to do with it, Lamont! Somehow it seems to come alive. I'd charged it to my imagination, but I'm sure I saw that statue's face peering at me from a cab outside of Talcott's Galleries."

Cranston gave a slow nod.

"You say Frescott spoke some word?"

"It sounded like Ankhea," recalled Margo. Then, in awed tone, she queried; "Do you think it could be some strange Oriental charm – a mystic word?"

"More probably it is a name," replied Cranston. "The name of the living statue, to be precise. It was foolish of you to go in there, Margo, but at least you've proven one thing."

"That the murderer didn't return?"

"If you mean Lionel Graff, no," replied Cranston, firmly, "because you proved that Graff didn't murder Simon Benisette."

Amazement swept Margo's face.

"Suspicion of Graff is based on the assumption that he waited overnight in the chest of Chu Chan," stated Cranston, "in order to murder Benisette later. I am now sure that Graff left New York that night and that reports of persons seeing him in the Middle West are correct."

"But why?"

"Simply because Graff couldn't have stayed in the chest overnight. How long were you inside it, Margo?"

"About ten minutes, I suppose. I was blotto at first, but when I woke up I was almost suffocated. Why!" Enlightenment dawned on Margo. "That must mean –"

"That the air-holes were drilled in the chest as a bluff," supplied Cranston, "to make it look as though Graff had stayed there. You tested them for us, Margo, even though you didn't intend to do so. The holes weren't big enough to supply the air that Graff would have needed."

"Then who murdered Benisette? Professor Frescott?"

"He might be," replied Cranston, cryptically, "but he's not the only man who is interested in the chest of Chu Chan."

Cranston ended with that statement, but it was plain that he must have had in mind the name of Jared Shebley.

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE blue light glowing from the midst of startling blackness.

Such was the token of The Shadow's sanctum, a hidden room in the heart of Manhattan which served as base for the master crime hunter's operations.

On a polished surface beneath the glowing blue were spread documents of every description from newspaper clippings to large scale global maps. As his keen eyes studied the data before him, The Shadow's hand made notations on a pad that lay nearby.

Not merely words, those notations. The Shadow was drawing diagrams, calculating distances, even sketching from memory a life sized Siamese statue of old ivory adorned with beads of jet and jade.

Perhaps The Shadow would have sketched the chest of Chu Chan and the katar of Pagan Min, had such drawings been necessary. They weren't needed, however, because they were pictured in police photographs lying among The Shadow's other papers.

Commissioner Weston was very cooperative toward The Shadow, without knowing it. Weston had the notion that his friend Cranston really possessed a keen brain, if he'd only use it, hence the commissioner was always stirring his friend to apply his talents to crime investigation.

Cranston encouraged this through an attitude of indifference, the surest way to make Weston persist with something. As a result the commissioner was constantly loading his friend with crime reports and photographs, which Cranston usually returned later with apologies for having neglected them.

It really annoyed Weston, the way that Cranston ignored things that should have interested him. It never occurred to the commissioner that the data he furnished was invariably "borrowed" by The Shadow while Cranston was supposed to be studying it.

Of course it was all one and the same, but that was a very special secret. The less that Lamont Cranston appeared to know about a current crime, the more credit The Shadow could take for cracking it.

Not that The Shadow wanted credit.

What The Shadow wanted was results and he was working toward them right now.

The basic problem in The Shadow's survey was still the murder of Simon Benisette. That crime had created plenty of surprise purely because of the original theory that Lionel Graff was the likely victim in the chest of Chu Chan. The theory had sounded plausible enough when put by Dariel Talcott, because Graff had been known to be missing since the night before.

After recovering from the shock of finding Benisette a victim instead of Graff, the law had formed its own theory and a logical one indeed. The business of boring holes in the chest and staying there overnight to murder Benisette was quite in keeping with Graff's character – or lack of it.

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Now The Shadow had spiked the law's theory!

The air-holes weren't sufficient, as Margo's experience had proven. They were a bluff, a blind; in fact a canard, since they weren't air holes at all. Graff couldn't have stayed in the chest overnight; hence he couldn't have been in Talcott's strong room, since the place offered no object other than the chest as a suitable hiding place.

Reaching to a sheet of paper that bore a list of names, The Shadow drew a line through the one that topped the column: Lionel Graff.

The Shadow was marking Graff off the list of possible murderers.

Now it was true that Graff might have picked up Benisette's trail in the morning, followed him to Talcott's and sneaked in by the side door. There had been time for a murderer to go upstairs, make quick work of Benisette, stow him in the Chinese chest and hurry out again.

Just about time enough, by The Shadow's precise calculation of the time element, based on a comparison of estimates given by Talcott, Margo, and Cardona. But with the doubt in Graff's favor, The Shadow had good reason to eliminate him as a suspect.

Under the blue light were those reports that the New York police had disregarded because they didn't fit with the accepted theory. Those were the reports from Chicago and St. Louis stating that Graff – or someone like him – had been seen there sooner than he could have arrived following Benisette's death.

The Shadow was interpreting those reports soundly.

A handy airplane schedule proved that Graff could have gone from Chicago to St. Louis fast enough to be seen in both cities as reported. Tracing back, The Shadow considered it obvious that Graff had skipped for Chicago the night before, after leaving Talcott's Auction Galleries as Benisette himself had declared, which was another point in Graff's favor.

Why, then, hadn't Graff been seen since St. Louis?

The answer was lying among The Shadow's exhibits in the form of a newspaper clipping from that city. Marked with the hour as well as the day it had been printed, the clipping proved that the newspaper had been on sale shortly after Graff was last seen.

This clipping told of Benisette's death and named Graff as the murderer. Already wanted by the law for fraudulent activities, Graff had done the logical thing for a man of his ilk in his position; that was, he'd ducked from sight.

The hunt was still on, which pleased The Shadow; therefore he hadn't announced his findings. Graff's apprehension was necessary in order to obtain his valuable testimony and The Shadow knew that police throughout the country would be more ardent in hunting down a murderer than a less spectacular criminal.

What The Shadow wanted to learn from Graff were any facts that the missing man might know about the mysterious chest of Chu Chan, which still loomed as a potential for murder. Benisette's money had been stolen, but that was a natural consequence. The murderer wouldn't have left it even if he hadn't wanted it, because his oversight would have pointed to another motive.

His pencil poised, The Shadow paused.

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In this strange case, The Shadow wasn't rushing to conclusions. He wanted to check every item doubly and even then, he'd be ready to accept revision. Once more, he traced over the floor plan of the Talcott Art Galleries and made sure that the time element would have allowed a man to murder, enter, and leave just within the brief span.

As he checked that tally, The Shadow laughed.

The laugh, in that curtained sanctum, carried a strange, significant shudder. The walls had a habit of tossing back the mirth in the form of sinister mockery. Withal it gave the impression of omniscience on the part of The Shadow.

Anyone hearing that laugh would be convinced that The Shadow knew all. But no one could have heard it; therefore no one of The Shadow's findings could have reached either of the two men whose names he now tapped with the pencil:

Giles Frescott

Jared Shebley.

Though Frescott pretended that the chest didn't interest him, he had deliberately plotted to keep Shebley from buying it on Graff's advice. Frescott knew that Shebley might have learned some secret regarding the chest from Graff, who rated as a very fancy snooper.

Letting the chest go to Benisette, the man who knew nothing, was a smart move on Frescott's part. In fact he had shown his hand by his daring trip to Benisette's apartment the last night the chest had remained there. Obviously Frescott had intended all along to get at the chest when it reached Benisette, who had purchased it in total ignorance.

Even under the difficulties which later arose, Benisette's apartment had proved a much easier place to enter than Shebley's ironclad penthouse. Nevertheless, the chest of Chu Chan was going to Shebley's after all, which may have been the reason The Shadow's pencil passed the name of Frescott and paused above that of Shebley.

Again The Shadow toned a laugh, this time a reflective taunt that shivered back in echoing whispers.

There was good reason not to cross off either of those names. One man's guilt would of course prove the other's innocence, but with Graff's elimination, suspicion rested equally between Giles Frescott and Jared Shebley.

The chest of Chu Chan rated only as an objective so far as either of those men might be concerned. There was an item more important in their lives – and in the death of Simon Benisette.

That item was the Burmese dagger, the unique katar that had once belonged to Pagan Min. Except for Graff, no longer a factor in The Shadow's language, only two men had been favored with an opportunity to carry that insidious weapon from the penthouse curio room and use it as an instrument of murder.

One man had been a lingering visitor, Giles Frescott; the other was the dagger's owner, Jared Shebley!

CHAPTER XIII

"WELL, Cranston! How unexpected!"

Giles Frescott looked over the top of his reading glasses and beamed as only he could. He was a happy sort, this elderly professor, particularly in his chosen surroundings.

As on a previous afternoon, Lamont Cranston had dropped by at the Museum of Antiquities hoping to find the curator there. This time Cranston was in luck, for Frescott was in his office.

"I was thinking about you, Cranston," continued Frescott, cheerily. Then, as his face clouded: "I'm afraid though that the thought was sponsored by my reflections on the unfortunate business of Graff and Benisette."

"To put it more briefly," suggested Cranston in a casual tone, "you might call it the business of the Chinese chest."

Frescott gave his head a solemn shake.

"I doubt that the chest of Chu Chan was really involved."

"Except as a convenient coffin," reminded Cranston. "You were somewhat responsible for that, professor. If either Shebley or I had bought the chest of Chu Chan, Benisette wouldn't have come home in it."

Frescott shrugged away the impeachment.

"It was all a mistake," he claimed. "I mentioned an idle rumor to Shebley and he took it literally. When he started off to Washington, I assumed that my remark must have confirmed something he already knew. So of course I phoned you at once to tell you where Shebley had gone."

"Of course," Cranston nodded. "You were very prompt, professor. You must have called me right from Shebley's, just after he left."

A sharp flash came to Frescott's frequently keen eyes. Did he suspect the deeper impeachment that Cranston's comment could have carried?

Nothing in Cranston's calm demeanor could have verified any such suspicion, but the remark stood. It meant, in substance, that Cranston knew that Frescott could have picked up the Burmese thrusting dagger between the time of Shebley's departure and Graff's arrival in the penthouse.

It would have been obvious rather than smart for Frescott to harp back to Graff, the man already branded as a murderer. If Cranston thought that he was being subtle, Frescott could be the same.

"At least you arrived back early from Washington," recalled Frescott. "I mean early the next morning. I wonder if Shebley did the same?"

A cunning touch, this, an intimation that Shebley could have stopped back at his apartment and picked up the Burmese dagger if Graff had not taken it the night before. What Frescott was doing was accepting the possible elimination of Graff as murderer only to throw suspicion on Shebley as the most likely alternate.

It was as if Frescott had guessed the very findings made by The Shadow in his sanctum, the hidden place wherein he had switched back to his guise of Cranston only a short while ago. Perhaps Frescott was actually

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connecting Cranston with a mysterious cloaked figure that had appeared at Benisette's while the professor himself was trying to examine the chest of Chu Chan.

As Cranston, The Shadow's best policy was to divert the theme from the question of the Burmese dagger. So in Cranston's style he followed another track.

"Why Shebley wanted the chest of Chu Chan is the real question," was Cranston's verdict, "but now that he owns it, he ought to know something about its origin."

"I could tell him that," asserted Frescott. "The chest of Chu Chan dates from the Eighth Century. It belonged to Komyo–Kogo, widow of Shomo–Temmo, an emperor of the T'ang Dynasty."

Cranston was fortunately well acquainted with Chinese history.

"Komyo–Kogo was quite a patron of the arts," defined Cranston. "In a sense, she was too good a patron, for she employed artisans to revive the crafts of previous dynasties. It is therefore often difficult to tell whether certain Chinese art objects belong to the T'ang or an earlier period."

Slow, approving nods formed Frescott's accompaniment to Cranston's dissertation.

"That is why I am only mildly interested in Chinese antiquities," stated Frescott. "It is too difficult to identify them as such. Something copied from an original of an earlier century is simply a reproduction, even after the passage of further centuries."

"There was a time when they could have been distinguished, professor."

"You mean at the time the reproductions were made? Of course, but how can we hope to probe into that distant past?"

"By examining all records relating to the period of Komyo–Kogo. An empress who patronized the arts would logically have catalogued her possessions."

Frescott shook his head.

"Such things were done," he admitted, "but often at the expense of previous records. For instance" – he rose from his desk and stepped to a cabinet in a corner – "I can show you some samples of ancient palimpsests parchments which have been used several times, the earlier writings always being erased."

"I am referring to more permanent records," declared Cranston in his even tone. "The art of engraving upon metal had been developed in China by the time of Komyo–Kogo."

Frescott lifted his eyes as though hearing this information for the first time.

"Imagine what a discovery it would be," added Cranston. "A catalogue from the past, establishing the precise period in which many rarities were created. Why, such a record would be of tremendous value –"

"To a collector, yes," put in Frescott, quickly, "since it would enable him to corner the market on actual antiquities." Slowing his tone, the professor added: "But not to the curator of a museum."

"Why not?" insisted Cranston "You specialize in antiquities, don't you, professor? You have already expressed your dislike for reproductions."

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"Only when they are misrepresented," interrupted Frescott. "Come, Cranston" – the professor strode briskly toward the door – "and I shall show you exactly what my sentiments are. We shall visit the Babylonian crypt."

Frescott led the way along a corridor and down a flight of hollow-sounding stairs. As he followed, Cranston probed the Chinese question with a few more comments.

"At least something is known about Chu Chan," reminded Cranston. "During all the years he lived in Hanoi, he was recognized as an authority on ancient Chinese art."

Frescott didn't even nod.

"They even say that Chu Chan had intended to establish a museum," continued Cranston. "First he was negotiating with the Chinese government; then with the French in Indo-China. In turn, both were interested in Chu Chan's collection, on his terms."

Still no comment from Frescott.

"Of course Chu Chan wouldn't trust the Japanese," added Cranston, "because nobody of intelligence would. Whatever Chu Chan valued most, would be the thing that he would least desire to have the Japanese acquire."

This time Frescott made response, but not regarding Chu Chan. Halting in front of a large metal door, he raised the metal bar that formed its latch and drew the door wide open.

"The Babylonian crypt," stated Frescott. "You may enter first, Mr. Cranston."

Entering, Cranston kept an eye on Frescott, who immediately followed. Turning on a light, Frescott revealed rows of large clay tablets, standing on shelves around a brick-walled room. The tablets looked like flat trays standing upright and all of them bore Babylonian inscriptions.

At the inner wall of the crypt was a special shelf bearing a set of tablets that looked darker than the rest. "The original set," explained Frescott. "Genuine sun-baked clay from Naishapur. As for the rest" – he swept his hand around the crypt – "they are merely replicas, manufactured at my order. Do you begin to understand, Mr. Cranston?"

Cranston nodded.

"These reproductions will go to other museums," continued Frescott, "so that students can study the actual Babylonian inscriptions. But there will never be any doubt that they are merely imitations. I am a stickler on such matters, Mr. Cranston" – the professor smiled pleasantly – "and that is why I prefer the antiquities of Babylon to those of China. There is no mistaking them."

Professor Frescott added a flourish to his gesture and the wave of his hand took in the open doorway. Then, with a glance at his wristwatch, Frescott exclaimed:

"My word! I shall miss my appointment! I must leave at once, Mr. Cranston, but you are welcome to remain and study these Babylonian tablets at leisure. You will find smaller ones in boxes under the shelves."

With a nod, Cranston accepted the invitation, as a matter of policy. But he strolled along with Frescott as the professor went to the door of the crypt. Nor did Cranston turn back into the brick-walled room until he heard Frescott's rapid footsteps clanging upward on the spiral stairway.

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It was then that something stirred from the corridor side, something that had silently approached and taken its position behind the open door, to look through the crack and catch that final trifling gesture given by Professor Frescott.

The gesture had been a signal, a command that could now be put into execution.

Suddenly sensing danger, Cranston turned about, too late. Before he could reach the metal door, it was swinging shut under the driving weight of a figure from beyond it. Though his strides toward the door were swift, Cranston was a few feet short of the door when it clanged shut.

Outside, the barring latch dropped automatically, trapping Lamont Cranston within the Babylonian crypt!

The dim corridor revealed only a vague figure outside the crypt door, a slender form attired in a dark gray cape. Then, stepping away, this helper who had come at Frescott's summons turned into the light, revealing a face that was a counterpart of a certain Siamese statue.

The Shadow's trapper was Ankhea, the girl who was aiding Professor Frescott in his quest for the chest of Chu Chan!

CHAPTER XIV

COMMISSIONER WESTON was seated in his favorite haunt, the grill-room of the Cobalt Club, when an attendant entered to announce Professor Giles Frescott. Though he hadn't expected this visitor, Weston said that he would see him, so the professor was shown into the commissioner's presence.

What Frescott had brought was a bundle of bulletins, pamphlets, and other data on Chinese and Malaysian art. Frescott felt that these would be helpful to the commissioner in determining the motive behind Graff's murder of Benisette.

Weston showed Frescott the courtesy of thumbing through some of the pamphlets and even used a table knife to open a few of the many uncut pages. But the idea of reading them bored him and the commissioner must have shown it, for Frescott suddenly said:

"It was Cranston who recommended that you read these. He mentioned it up at the museum –"

"So that's it!" interrupted Weston. "Cranston's excuse for not going through those crime reports will be that I haven't read these. When was Cranston up there, professor?"

"He was at the museum when I left."

"Didn't he say that he was supposed to meet me here?"

"Not that I remember." Frescott gave an absent-minded gaze. "As I recall it, Cranston was chiefly interested in deciphering the clay tablets in the Babylonian crypt."

Weston gave a contemptuous snort; then, picking up Frescott's package of pamphlets, the commissioner gestured for the professor to follow him upstairs. Reaching the desk near the foyer door, Weston placed the package beside two others, calling Frescott's attention to the fact.

"Here are Talcott's finishing tools." Weston rattled the oblong package that contained the items named. "And this" – he lifted another bundle that was oddly shaped and heavy for its size – "it's Shebley's precious katar. I

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shall put your package with them, professor. In case you need it, you can call for it."

"That won't be for a few days," returned Frescott. "I want to give you time to read the pamphlets."

"I've already said I'm leaving that to Cranston," reminded Weston. "By the way, what is the phone number at the museum in case I want to reach him?"

Frescott gave the number and added a slight laugh.

"There's no extension to the crypt," he explained. "No phone cord would go through the air-tight door. By the way, commissioner" – in absent-minded style, Frescott changed the subject – "has the chest of Chu Chan gone to Shebley's?"

"It went there this afternoon," replied Weston. "Shebley is stopping here later for the Burmese katar. It's odd, though" – Weston's own tone was reflective – "that Cranston should forget that I expected him here."

Weston was walking toward a phone booth, as though intending to call the museum anyway. Following along, Frescott indulged in one of his nicest chuckles.

"I hope Cranston didn't forget to hook the door of the crypt," he commented. "It swings shut very easily and locks automatically. Well, good-night, commissioner. I must be going home."

In the phone booth, Weston started to call the museum, intending to have one of the attendants go to the crypt and summon Cranston. It struck him that it would be better to have Frescott give the order, but when Weston looked around, the professor was gone. Then Frescott's words about "going home" suddenly jarred Weston's recollection.

If Frescott was going home, the museum was probably closed, except for a night watchman who wouldn't be answering phone calls. Remembering suddenly that Frescott lived miles out on Long Island, Weston realized that it would take an hour or more to overtake him, now that he had left.

Over Weston swept the greater realization that right now Cranston might actually be locked in the airtight crypt, in need of immediate rescue. The phone bell was ringing but producing no result from the museum. Weston slammed the receiver and hopped from the booth.

On the way out of the Cobalt Club, the commissioner ran into Inspector Cardona who was just arriving there. Grabbing Cardona's arm, Weston hurried him to a big official car, intending to explain matters on the way to the museum.

There was another person who was wondering about the missing Mr. Cranston; namely, Margo Lane. At that moment, Margo was at Talcott's Antique Galleries, hoping for a few words with the proprietor. Busy with customers, Talcott left suddenly to answer a phone call and Margo followed him to the office.

Naturally Margo wasn't impolite enough to dash after Talcott, so he was well into his conversation when she opened the office door. There was something very dubious about Talcott's tone.

"I can't see why you called me," Talcott was saying. "Well, yes, I'm the one person who might believe you... Only what would others say if you accused Frescott?"

There was a pause; then:

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"I see," said Talcott. "Yes, Frescott did have an equal opportunity to steal the dagger... Of course, if you get down to fine points, Shebley –"

Noting Margo's arrival, Talcott cut off abruptly. He gave the girl a quick glance; then spoke into the telephone:

"Call me later. I'm busy right now."

There was a touch of indignation in Talcott's tired manner as he turned toward Margo. Meeting an issue fairly was one of Margo's specialties which she promptly demonstrated.

"Sorry, Mr. Talcott," said Margo. "I didn't mean to interrupt. But since I did overhear, just what would happen if Shebley did get down to fine points?"

Talcott blinked in the questioning, manner of an owl.

"Shebley? Fine points?"

"That's what you were telling him," replied Margo, "right after he must have said something about Professor Frescott stealing the Burmese dagger."

Talcott tightened his lips as though trying to withhold something; then he relaxed with a sheepish smile.

"Why, yes," he admitted. "It was sort of a half-way accusation."

"But what gave Shebley the idea?" queried Margo, wondering secretly if Cranston's theory had spread around. "I thought it was thoroughly established that Graff murdered Benisette."

"It was," acknowledged Talcott, "but you can't satisfy Shebley with anything. He's always full of crackpot notions. I should know, because I've had him for a customer."

Picking up the telephone, Talcott dialed a number and soon was speaking to the Cobalt Club. Asking for Weston, Talcott learned that the commissioner had left in a great hurry without saying when he would be back. Resting his chin in his hand, Talcott stared at the wall, then turned to Margo.

"I can't talk to Shebley," declared Talcott, in a tired tone, "but you might, Miss Lane."

"About what – and why?"

"About this Frescott business," replied Talcott, "because your friend Mr. Cranston was deceived in the same way that Shebley was."

"You mean by that trip to Washington?"

"That's right. I think that's what is bothering Shebley. You see Shebley trusted Graff more or less; in fact mostly more."

"And he trusted Frescott mostly less?"

"That's the way it stands right now. But Shebley will expect me to agree with him on everything, because he's one of my best customers. I wouldn't mind talking to him, but I think somebody else ought to break the ice."

"Meaning me?"

"Exactly, Miss Lane."

Margo thought it over; then realizing that if urgent business had called Weston from the Cobalt Club it would have taken Cranston, too, the girl decided in favor of Talcott's plan.

"How soon should I talk to Shebley?" asked Margo. "And where?"

"Right away," replied Talcott. "Over at his place." Stepping to the door, Talcott looked out into the galleries and returned with a pleased nod. "The customers have gone," he added, "so I'll have Homer lock up the place. If there are any calls I'll tell him not to answer them. We'll let Shebley wait until we get there."

The plan pleased Margo Lane immensely. It struck her that she was just the person to sound out Shebley's sentiments on the Frescott question. Certainly there was much to gain and nothing to lose.

Margo Lane had the wrong idea of nothing. She was going to find that out!

CHAPTER XV

IT was a twenty-minute ride to Shebley's from Talcott's, in a direction directly away from the Cobalt Club. In fact, the Antique Galleries were just about midway between the two places, so Margo was putting herself a good forty minutes from where Cranston was supposed to be.

If she'd guessed that Lamont had been foolish enough to get locked in a crypt at the Museum of Antiquities, Margo could have added further minutes to her estimate of distance. But Margo was too busy hatching plans with Talcott to think in terms of the ridiculous.

The plan worked out very simply. When they reached Shebley's, Margo was to go up to the penthouse while Talcott waited in the lobby. After ten minutes, Talcott would either come up or call up, so Margo could schedule her chat accordingly.

The cab happened to be Shrevvy's, so Margo talked loudly enough for the driver to overhear and Talcott's tone was about the same. So when they alighted from the cab in front of Shebley's, Margo was quite sure that word of her expedition would be relayed to Cranston if he could be reached.

There was nothing pretentious about the lobby in the apartment house where Shebley lived. There was no office, no direct phone to the various apartments, simply a pay-booth in a corner of the lobby. The elevator was the automatic type, so Margo entered it and pressed the button marked "Penthouse."

After the end of a rattly ride, Margo opened the door and stepped into premises that flabbergasted her.

The shabby appearance of the apartment house in general didn't apply to the penthouse. The place was magnificently furnished with soft-tufted rugs that led into a sumptuous living room. Though only eight stories up, the windows of the penthouse afforded a fine view toward the river, or would have except for the settling dusk.

From another window, Margo saw a terrace, part of the penthouse set-up and realized that Shebley had chosen his location well. This was just the sort of place to live free from worry; or so Margo would have believed if she hadn't seen Shebley.

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The man with the tight-drawn face sprang from a living room chair the moment that Margo entered. His hand went to the pocket of the dressing gown that he was wearing; then relaxed. In the indirect light of the handsome living room, Shebley let his lips break into a smile which he probably thought was equally handsome, but Margo didn't agree.

Shebley looked scared, so scared that he was ugly. His peculiar mood threw its effect on Margo, who began to get jittery, too. Then, when Shebley lowered his dry voice to a soothing tone, Margo began to feel that his whole manner was a sham. Maybe he thought it fun to frighten visitors; but at least he was courteous enough to offer an excuse.

"So it's you, Miss Lane," spoke Shebley. "I thought I was imagining things again, like the elevator coming up here and stopping all by itself."

Pretty thin, thought Margo. If Shebley wanted to have her keep the shivers, talk of bats batting windows would be a better type of horror stuff.

"Maybe the elevator was just acting up," suggested Margo. "They do, you know."

"Do they?" Shebley seemed quite pleased. "I'll have to ask Claude about it. He's my man, Claude, but this is his night off. Very reliable, Claude."

Margo already knew of Claude's reliability. The police had grilled him like a hamburger when checking on the theft of the Burmese dagger. Claude's word would stand on about anything. Margo felt herself wishing that Claude and not Shebley had been here to receive her.

"I ought to be getting down to the Cobalt Club," remarked Shebley. "I'm supposed to pick up that Burmese curio of mine, the item with the Balas ruby in the handle." Shebley seemed anxious not to refer to the katar as the weapon that it was. "But I couldn't go out, not unless Claude was here. On account of the chest of Chu Chan, you know."

Margo faked a puzzled look.

"Too many people are interested in that chest," explained Shebley, with another of his wide-split smiles. "I suppose you'd like to see it, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Well, you're quite welcome, Miss Lane, since Cranston is a friend of yours.

"I'd trust Cranston any time." Shebley seemed straining to put sincerity in his tone. "He's the one man that I'm glad is interested in the chest." Shebley paused and nodded. "Really."

"Really?"

It was neat, that word, the way Margo put it. Just about Shebley's tone and style, but with a slight upward inflection. If Shebley caught the sarcasm, he didn't show it. Instead, he bowed Margo into the famous curio room.

Just across the threshold, Margo started back abruptly. It wasn't sight of the chest of Chu Chan that jolted her, even though she'd spent unpleasant moments in the thing. What produced the real shivers was Margo's view of the Burmese dancer statue, seated on its taboret.

"Lifelike, isn't it?" queried Shebley. Going over to the statue, he tapped its arms. "Real ivory and a better item than I realized, even though it isn't unique." Fingering the eyes, he added: "These are fine specimens of jet,

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while the jade" – he stepped back to appraise the statue – "is an excellent shade of apple green, which marks it as the best."

Margo was studying the room itself. She noticed that the windows were metal-framed, firmly clamped from the inside. In addition to the strong door that they had entered, there was another, equally formidable, in a rear corner of the room.

"Speaking of jade," added Shebley, as though Margo were really interested, "I can show you something quite unique. Out here, Miss Lane."

Shebley led the way out through the living room. They reached the dining room and there Margo saw a set of dinner gongs that really intrigued her. Hanging like pendants of different sizes, the sounding bells were carved in the shape of fishes, and each was made of hollow jade.

Taking a small hammer with a solid head of jade, Shebley began to tap the sounding stones. The chimes were clear and well-toned, as musical as any that Margo had ever heard. Like Shebley, Margo became fascinated and neither noticed what took place within the living room.

From a corner near the elevator entry, a figure stepped from behind a flimsy lattice screen that was transparent but not enough so to reveal the form that had been standing against the darkened background. It was a shape clad in a dark gray cape, so dark that it was almost black.

Slippered feet moved rapidly through the door to the curio room and several seconds later, the caped figure returned, bearing a burden as large as itself. From the cape peered a face that resembled the statue's own, as Ankhea carried the image to the corner where she had hidden.

Gonging away at the fish-bells, Shebley was having so much fun that Margo gave him a genuine smile. Right then was when they lost their one real opportunity to spot Ankhea, for when she had planted the statue behind the screen, her hardest task was finished.

Half-crouched, Ankhea blended with the wall's dark background and also cut off view of the statue. She waited until Margo laughingly suggested that Shebley try another tune. Then, in a single move, Ankhea became a living version of the dancer statue.

Simply stepping from her slippers, the Siamese girl let the cape slide from her own shoulders and fall inside out upon the statue, completely submerging it. The effect was magical, giving the illusion that the statue had bobbed up to life in a kaleidoscopic leap.

She was something from a dream, this creature of delicate ivory turned human, as she stole soft-footed across the tufted floor. Jade beads quivered like the tendrils of a wind-swayed vine with every undulation of her willowy form. Her black eyes, sparkling as no jet could, were fixed upon the far side of the living room, watching to see that neither Shebley nor Margo turned her way.

Only Ankhea's lips were tense and they were compressed simply to hide their ruddiness, the only touch of color which did not correspond with the delicately yellowed hue of the statue that this exotic maiden represented. Ankhea's arms were lightly crossed so that each hand pressed the opposite wrist, but not because she was conscious of any insufficiency in her jade attire.

The girl's only concern was that chance that her wrist bangles might jangle. She handled the anklet situation by the unique process of gliding her feet with every step, so that she seemed to literally flow along the tufted rug. Then, reaching the door of the curio room, the ocher-tinted vision was gone, a few mere moments before

Shebley tired of the tune that he was beating on the fish gongs.

"Suppose I lock the curio room," said Shebley to Margo. "I'll feel safer if it isn't on my mind. Then we can chat until Cranston arrives. I don't suppose he will be long."

It wouldn't be Cranston, it would be Talcott, but the time element wouldn't be long. In fact, Talcott was very nearly due, according to the schedule that Margo had arranged with him. So Margo followed Shebley to the curio room, watched him stare into every corner to make sure that no one could be hiding in this chamber of treasures.

Reaching the doorway, Shebley turned to look again and let his eyes rest upon the seated statue that gazed solemnly between the hands of its crossed and upraised arms.

"It's beautiful," breathed Shebley in a tone of complete admiration. "Too bad it isn't unique."

With that, Shebley closed the door and locked it, not realizing that his curio room had indeed gained a unique treasure in the person of Ankhea, the living counterpart of a statue from Siam!

CHAPTER XVI

ANKHEA was at work again. In the darkness of the curio room she had discarded her statue pose and was using those slim, deft hands of hers to unbar the windows that opened on two exposures. One window was above a sheer wall which Ankhea observed when she leaned outward. That was why she opened the other, which suited her purpose better, since it was almost within reach of the fire tower.

Next, the roving creature of imitation ivory stopped at the door in the deep corner of the room. There, Ankhea drew the bolt, thus opening another route into the curio room. Finally she went to the main door, the one by which Shebley had left, and tried to unlock it. Here, Ankhea failed, because the door had no inside bolt as an attachment to the lock.

With three routes open, Ankhea was satisfied that she had done enough, particularly as Professor Frescott would hardly choose the orthodox way of entry through the main door. So Ankhea glided back across the room and paused in listening attitude.

First, Ankhea thought she heard sounds from the direction of the fire tower, but before she could thrust her head and shoulders from the adjacent window, another noise attracted her. This sound came from the rear door, the one that Ankhea had unbolted. Turning that direction, Ankhea gave a low, soft whisper as the door opened.

The signal was answered. In his crablike style, Professor Frescott entered and closed the door behind him. At Ankhea's beckon, he approached the chest of Chu Chan, which was standing wide open. There, Frescott lost no time.

With a narrow-beamed flashlight, the agile professor studied the thick bottom of the chest. He ran his fingers from one brass ornamentation to another; then reached to his coat lapel and drew out some ordinary pins, which he carefully inserted in tiny holes that he had discovered at the front corners of the chest, only because he had been looking for them.

Handing the flashlight to Ankhea, Frescott spread his arms and placed a thumb against each pin head. He pressed, and there was a sharp click, deep within the bottom of the chest. Then, with Ankhea supplying the light, Frescott slid something straight out from the bottom of the chest.

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Only briefly did the light reveal a dull brown glister from flat objects packed within the cache. Then the light was off, with Ankhea whispering warningly. The mystery girl was turned toward the window near the fire tower, listening as before.

Whatever Ankhea might have heard was drowned by a peculiar clang that came from the chest itself. Frescott was having trouble with whatever he had found and Ankhea's rapid efforts to help him in the dark only bungled matters more. A sound jarred the stillness of the room, a sound like the sharp clang of cymbals. It was muffled, repeated, then muffled again. After that, Frescott and Ankhea caught the hang of it and managed operations with less noise.

By then, Ankhea had forgotten the question of the fire tower, except for an occasional glance toward the window that opened near it. What Ankhea overlooked entirely was the other window that opened above a sheer wall.

Ankhea's eyes never paused when they passed by that window. The glance she gained of solid blackness was sufficient so she thought. What Ankhea didn't notice was that the blackness shifted.

Strangely, that mass of gloom had taken the shape of a human head and shoulders, a figure clad in slouch hat and cloak!

If either Ankhea or Frescott had noted that weird shape, it would have suppressed any notion they might have had concerning a dual identity of Lamont Cranston and The Shadow. For between them, these connivers had planted the enterprising but inquisitive Mr. Cranston in the Babylonian crypt, which he couldn't possibly leave until his friend the police commissioner arrived to release him.

By Frescott's calculation, the commissioner was just now reaching the museum. The Shadow couldn't possibly be here at Shebley's penthouse.

Or could he?

Out in the living room, Margo Lane was asking herself that same question when she saw Shebley give a worried stare in the direction of the curio room. Immediately, Margo glanced toward the elevator, hoping that Talcott would arrive if Cranston didn't.

For Shebley had unquestionably detected some sound from the curio room, a clang which Margo too had caught but was hoping it stood for the elevator.

"Did you hear that, Miss Lane?"

Trying to look unconcerned, Margo shook her head at Shebley's question.

"It came from the curio room," asserted Shebley. "Someone has entered there!"

Thinking in terms of The Shadow, Margo tried to allay Shebley's suspicions.

"But how could anyone be in there?" queried Margo. "And why?"

"Because of the chest of Chu Chan."

"It was empty," insisted Margo. "You made sure of that yourself when you looked around the room. The chest was wide open, so nobody could have been hiding in it."

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"You asked why would anyone enter," argued Shebley, "and I told you because of the chest of Chu Chan."

"But who even knows that it's here?"

"Anybody could guess. Look at this." Shebley rustled a newspaper that was lying on the table beside him. "Here under auction news, it states that I have just bought the entire collection that belonged to Benisette."

The item was so small that Margo could scarcely read it in the light. With a shrug, she inquired:

"But who would notice this?"

"Everybody," returned Shebley. "That is, everybody interested in the chest of Chu Chan."

Rising, Shebley beckoned for Margo to follow him. On the way around the living room, Shebley turned off all the lights, darkening the entire penthouse except for the glow of the city that showed through the windows. Margo heard a jingle as Shebley produced some keys; when he stopped at the door of the curio room, she could hear him inserting one in the lock. His other hand deep in his pocket, Shebley opened the door.

At that moment, Margo heard a clang, which she thought came from the elevator door. If such, it was the thing that totally destroyed Shebley's efforts toward silence. But the answering clash, much like an echo, wasn't from the elevator's direction.

The jarring slam of metal against metal came from within the curio room itself, right from a spot close by the open chest of Chu Chan!

Before Margo could even gasp, Lionel Shebley surged into the room, to be met by a stooped man who unlimbered up from his huddle in a fashion that Margo Lane distinctly remembered from an encounter of her own.

In that momentous instant, Margo Lane would have sworn that Shebley's antagonist was Professor Giles Frescott!

There was a flash of steel in a rising hand; then a battering sound of metal meeting metal. A gun stabbed, but its fiery tongue thrust upward, proving that it had missed its mark. Then, as Margo heard a clatter from a window, blotting blackness took human shape, came surging inward to smother the two battlers.

Then came Margo's turn for trouble.

In answer to the spontaneous shriek that Margo couldn't quite suppress, the figure of a living statue, jangling jade and sinuous ivory, came literally from nowhere to clutch Margo Lane in its serpentine embrace!

CHAPTER XVII

IT was The Shadow who lunged in from the window that Ankhea had overlooked. In visiting this curio room where the unique ruled, The Shadow had naturally chosen a unique route. Yet it wasn't love of the spectacular that had urged him to scale the sheer wall in preference to some easier mode.

Simple logic indicated that if any route to Shebley's curio room would lie open, it would be the most difficult one. So The Shadow had come up the hard way, hoping to find it easy. Thanks to Ankhea's methodical preparations it was.

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Easy entry didn't mean easy victory.

Hurling himself into the conflict between Shebley and Frescott, The Shadow had the element of surprise in his favor. But those two fighters had been surprised enough, by their own meeting. They were in a mood to battle with anything within reach, and The Shadow belonged in that category.

A gun, swinging downward in the dark, glanced against The Shadow's head before he could throw up a warding arm. Reeling, dodging as he went, The Shadow drove head first into what seemed a wall of metal that lifted to meet him.

Whether they liked it or not, Shebley and Frescott were ganging up against a mutual foe in The Shadow. However, that had nothing to do with their private fight, so The Shadow had another break in his favor. Rallying from his first strokes of bad luck, he was in the fray again, battling groggily, but with purpose.

All The Shadow needed was one foeman less. If he could settle either Shebley or Frescott – and The Shadow was willing to accept one's aid against the other – the handling of a single enemy would be easy. But neither Shebley nor Frescott was willing to give up. Both fought with a fury that carried The Shadow in their whirl.

The three were milling toward the deepest corner of the room. Shebley didn't care, because he thought he was trapping his antagonists; but Frescott carried the fray in that direction purposely. As the mass spun around, Frescott managed to yank open the door that Ankhea had unlatched; then, swinging hard and wide with the flat burdens that he carried, he literally bludgeoned Shebley into The Shadow's arms.

Next, Frescott was through the door and out into the garden, huddled low as he tried to find some spot of security. It wasn't a case of hiding his face; what doubled him was the weight of the metal objects that he had taken from the chest of Chu Chan. Frescott wanted to keep those trophies at all cost.

The clatter of an opening door, the quick-toned signal in a foreign tongue, gave Frescott the chance he wanted. It was Ankhea who called him and opened a doorway in through the penthouse; having quickly taken Margo out of combat, the Siamese girl was back helping Frescott again.

But she wasn't the same Ankhea.

During the interval, Ankhea had regained her dark gray cape; though she was as sinuous as ever, she was no longer visible. As Frescott turned in her direction, she helped him with his burden and the two disappeared into the darkness of the penthouse slamming the door behind them.

Shoved forward by The Shadow, Shebley heard the door slam and hesitated as he turned about. Then, apparently assuming that the fugitives had locked the barrier behind them, Shebley swung further around and went back through the curio room, hoping to cut off Frescott and Ankhea before they reached the elevator.

The Shadow took the shorter route, through the door by which the others had gone. It wasn't locked, but The Shadow needed more than a few seconds to get to it and open it. Moreover, he wasn't familiar with the penthouse, and a blind trail took him into the kitchenette. By the time The Shadow was again on the right route, the fugitives had reached the elevator.

The Shadow saw the door of the elevator clang shut just as Shebley flung himself against it. There was a rumble, indicating that the car was going down, while Shebley clawed with both hands, as though hoping to tear the door of the shaft apart. Knowing how useless that would be, The Shadow chose the fire tower instead, on the chance that he might reach the street before the fugitives gained too good a lead.

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As the door of the fire tower slammed shut behind The Shadow, Shebley turned and gave a puzzled stare. Then, with a shrug, he walked unsteadily into the living room and sat down in a large chair. Reaching for a lamp cord, Shebley tugged it and gave a look of amazement.

Margo Lane was just recovering what wits she still had. All she could remember was that something had whirled her into the living room to fling her against the corner screen. Her hands to her throat, Margo was wondering why the creature hadn't choked her while it had the chance, for its arms had certainly gripped her neck tightly enough.

Then, half to her feet, Margo gasped a half shriek and shied away from what she thought was the enemy of a short while ago. What Margo saw was the Siamese dancer statue, toppling from its corner as though it intended to clutch her again. This time, the statue simply landed face down; for it was really the ivory statue, deprived of the cape that Ankhea had so briefly lent it.

Blinking at the statue, Shebley turned for another look at Margo, then came to his feet, his fists half clenched. A man was stepping forward to catch Margo by the shoulders and Shebley thought for the moment that this was his old rival, Frescott. Then, as Margo gave a thankful gasp, Shebley saw that he had been deceived by the man's stooped shoulders.

The man was Dariel Talcott and he was quite calm. Selling antiques was a business that worried him, but away from his customers he was a man of steady nerve.

"It's all right, Miss Lane," soothed Talcott. "Whoever was here has gone. Now tell us what happened."

All Margo could do was point to the statue and shake her head, meaning that the ivory image must have grabbed her, though she still couldn't believe it.

"Hello, Talcott." Shebley kept his feet by gripping the arms of the chair behind him. "I think I can tell you what it was all about. Somebody was in the curio room."

"So I heard," returned Talcott, with a nod. "But who was it – and how did he get there?"

"I'd say it was Frescott," declared Shebley, "but I couldn't take oath on it. How he got in there – well, that's what we'll have to learn."

"Which way did he go?"

"I don't know," admitted Shebley. "The elevator door slammed shut, but so did the door to the fire tower."

Slowly, Talcott stroked his long chin.

"I came up in the elevator," he said, "and some people rushed past me in the dark. Then I heard Miss Lane calling from over by the screen, so I came to help her."

"I'm glad I was able to call," put in Margo. "I thought I was completely out until a moment ago. I only wish you'd arrived sooner, Mr. Talcott."

"I should have," admitted Talcott. Then, turning to Shebley: "I told Miss Lane I'd be up shortly to talk to you."

"It was about that telephone call," put in Margo. "I didn't have time to mention it, Mr. Shebley."

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Rubbing his head, Shebley gave a dazed stare.

"What telephone call?"

Before either Talcott or Margo could explain, a clang came from the elevator and they both turned in new alarm while Shebley pawed in the pocket of his dressing gown only to find he didn't have a gun. Then sight of familiar faces caused them to relax.

Two men had arrived: Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona.

After listening to Shebley's brief description of what had happened, Weston turned to the curio room and Cardona promptly followed. The others went along to learn what the law would make of the singular invasion and its consequences. Hardly had Cardona entered the door and looked around, before he shrugged and announced:

"It was an inside job, all right, commissioner."

"Apparently," agreed Weston, dryly, "considering that all the doors and windows were open. But who handled it?"

Cardona thumbed across the room.

"Somebody must have been hiding in the Chinese chest."

"But the chest was wide open," objected Shebley, stepping forward. "Miss Lane can testify to that."

"It's shut now," argued Cardona, "and for all we know, somebody might still be inside it. Do you have the key, Shebley?"

Nodding, Shebley supplied the key. He stared at the chest, puzzled while Cardona unlocked it.

"I can't remember that chest slamming shut," declared Shebley, slowly. "What's more, I can't understand who would want to hide in it."

"Graff might," reminded Cardona. "He did once before."

Margo could have objected to that statement, but she didn't. If Cardona still wanted to think of Graff in terms of murder, he was welcome to do so. From Cranston's analysis of the case, Graff was out of it altogether.

So Margo Lane thought, and she was wrong as usual. That was proven very dramatically.

As Cardona opened the door of the Chu Chan chest, a figure came toppling from it and struck the floor in the same inert fashion that had characterized Benisette's tumble. There wasn't a doubt that this man was also dead; nobody had to stare at his face to know it.

They stared for a different reason.

The police were looking for a murderer and they had found him. The victim from the chest was Lionel Graff!

It wasn't the drawn expression of Graff's face that caused viewers to draw back in actual horror, nor the fact that death had brought a tawny pallor to his sallow face.

What literally stunned the persons who drew back was the death weapon that projected from Graff's heart. As with Benisette, a blood-red gem, topping the spread sections of a silver sheath, formed an emblem upon the dead man's shirt.

Like Simon Benisette, his supposed victim, Lionel Graff, had been stabbed with the Burmese katar that had once belonged to Pagan Min!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE commissioner's big car pulled up in front of the Cobalt Club and Dariel Talcott stepped out. When Margo Lane started to follow, Talcott gestured her back to the seat and said soothingly:

"Wait right here, Miss Lane, and don't worry. If Mr. Cranston is inside, I'll bring him out. Remember, the commissioner said not to get excited."

"But if Lamont was locked in that vault," began Margo, "what can have happened to him if he isn't there now?"

Talcott wasn't around to reply. He was starting into the club, so all that Margo could do was wait until he returned. At least that was all she could do for a few minutes.

At the end of that time Talcott hadn't returned, so Margo sprang from the car despite the chauffeur's protest and hurried into the club herself. There she found Talcott standing at the desk, quite alone and very placid.

"Why don't you ring the bell?" demanded Margo, pointing at the desk. "I know the club is short-handed; they used to always have a man on duty. But you can always ring for an attendant –"

"I did," interposed Talcott, with one of his tired smiles. "The fellow is looking for Cranston right now. By the way, Miss Lane" – Talcott tilted an oblong package that he was holding – "Here are my tools, the ones that the commissioner no longer needs as evidence."

Margo nodded without looking at the box. She was wondering where Lamont could be.

"And there is Frescott's package on the shelf," continued Talcott. "The one with all the pamphlets that the commissioner mentioned. But there is no other package."

"There couldn't be," rejoined Margo, "not with the Burmese dagger showing up at Shebley's. Do they know who called here for it?"

"I haven't asked," said Talcott, "but I suppose anyone could have taken it; that is anyone who had time to get to Shebley's penthouse afterward." Looking around the lobby, Talcott added: "I'm still wondering what happened to Cranston."

That final remark worried Margo for a new reason. If Lamont hadn't been in the museum crypt where Weston didn't find him, he might have been anywhere. Therefore Cranston's actions, like those of both Shebley and Frescott, were still unaccounted for.

Talcott might even be thinking that Cranston had stopped for the Burmese dagger and used it to knife Graff!

Another look at Talcott allayed Margo's qualms. The man seemed honestly worried over Cranston's prolonged absence, and Talcott's honesty certainly stood unquestioned. He at least was one person who

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couldn't have acquired the Burmese dagger, because he had been with Margo since the time when Weston had last seen it. The only interval had been the quarter-hour of Margo's sojourn in the penthouse and Talcott couldn't have reached the Cobalt Club in that time, let alone returned.

All of which brought back the question: Where was Lamont Cranston?

Just as Margo felt ready to shout that question for all the world to hear, a calm voice spoke beside her:

"Hello, Margo. Have you been waiting here all evening?"

It was Lamont, as unperturbed as ever. He had strolled in through the door while Margo was staring everywhere else. In a torrent of words, Margo began to tell Lamont how glad she was to see him; then, realizing more explanations were needed, she detailed the story of what had happened at the penthouse, with Talcott adding a few supporting facts.

When Margo came to the discovery of Graff's body and the fact that Pagan Min's katar had again been identified as the murder weapon, Cranston's eyes showed a momentary glimmer, which he promptly restrained.

Here was a riddle that formed a real challenge to The Shadow, particularly since it had occurred on the scene where he had been.

Yet there was something reflective in Cranston's stare. In the darkness of the curio room, amid the excitement of a three way battle, even The Shadow couldn't have learned whether the chest of Chu Chan was open or shut. Hence it was difficult to determine whether murder had preceded or followed The Shadow's actual arrival.

The best plan was to view the scene again. Pausing only to pick Frescott's bundle of pamphlets from the shelf, Cranston turned toward the door of the Cobalt Club and said:

"Since the commissioner's car is outside, why should we wait?"

They reached Shebley's to find a huddle in the living room, with Shebley the center of it. Weston and Cardona were both working on one grand idea, for which they would probably each claim credit later. At least Shebley wouldn't want credit, for he was getting the worst of it.

The idea was that Jared Shebley, and no one else, had murdered Lionel Graff.

"But I tell you I didn't!" Shebley, reiterated his plea when he saw that newcomers had arrived. "Why should I have murdered Graff?"

"For the same reason you murdered Benisette," jabbed Cardona. "Because he was after the chest of Chu Chan."

"But I didn't murder Benisette –"

"Who else had a better chance?"

"Talcott for one!" Frantically, Shebley pointed an accusing finger at the first man in sight. "Don't forget, Benisette was packed in that chest while it was still in Talcott's place!"

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"And he was stabbed with your katar," reminded Weston. "The only one like it in the world. It belonged to a murderous king originally, and maybe that legend went to your head, Shebley."

"But somebody could have stolen the dagger –"

"Not Graff," put in Weston. "We were wrong about classing him as the killer."

Shebley's trapped expression turned to another furious look, again directed at Talcott, who promptly countered:

"Don't try to blame me, Shebley. I only sold you the dagger; I didn't steal it. I didn't even come here the day the dagger was stolen. I stopped by the next morning, but that was after Benisette had been stabbed with the weapon."

"And today," added Margo, emphatically, "I was with Talcott when the dagger was still at the Cobalt Club. We came directly here and Talcott waited downstairs."

"For only fifteen minutes," reminded Talcott. "It would have taken me half an hour to go and get the katar."

Good points, these, but Weston didn't like to see the quiz falling into the hands of amateurs. Accepting the sound facts, the commissioner followed them through by storming at Shebley:

"The dagger was yours. I told you where I had left it for you, Shebley. You were supposed to pick it up" – Weston's tone was very terse – "and you did."

"I haven't been out of this penthouse all day!" argued Shebley. "Miss Lane will tell you I was here when she arrived."

"So you were," agreed Margo, "but where were you when you made that phone call to Talcott?"

Shebley stared; then demanded:

"What phone call?"

Margo looked at Talcott, who spread his hands in the fashion that he used with unreasonable customers at his antique galleries. Then:

"Miss Lane was present when you phoned me," stated Talcott. "There's no use denying it, Shebley."

"You said something about Professor Frescott," Margo told Shebley, "because Talcott repeated it without knowing that I was there."

Shebley's face was becoming purple, which explained why he was speechless.

"And then" – Margo was recalling the conversation exactly – "Talcott said: 'If you get down to fine points, Shebley' – and that's where I came in."

"So I hung up," added Talcott simply.

His voice back, Shebley became sarcastic.

"It must have been two other people," he sneered. "But since you mention Frescott, what about him? He could have taken the katar from here and he could have picked it up at the Cobalt Club tonight."

"Only he didn't," was Weston's verdict. "I'll tell you why, Shebley. You say you encountered someone in the curio room, don't you?"

Lips tight, Shebley nodded.

"And we found someone in the curio room," added Weston. "We found Lionel Graff."

"All tucked away in the Chinese chest," defined Cardona. "Where only you could have put him, Shebley."

That was enough. The law had found a man who could be properly charged with double murder. Handcuffs clicked on Shebley's wrists when Cardona applied them; still fuming, the suspect was led from his luxurious penthouse. Since the police had taken over, the others were invited to remain.

Lamont Cranston accepted the invitation. He wanted to have another look at the chest of Chu Chan, the mysterious source of all this trouble.

CHAPTER XIX

Two days in jail hadn't weakened Jared Shebley in the least, but that was a thing to be expected. In his position, his best plan was to deny everything, whether he was innocent or guilty. Of course meanwhile the police were supposed to be piling up evidence on both counts, only they weren't.

Lamont Cranston stated so, rather smilingly, when he called on Dariel Talcott. The chat took place in the rear room of the Talcott Antique Galleries, the spot where crime had technically begun. Margo Lane was there, too, though she couldn't see why this discussion was important.

However, it soon became so.

"The commissioner actually asked me what to do next," concluded Cranston. "So I told him."

"And what was that?" queried Talcott.

"I told him to release Shebley," replied Cranston. "In fact, I even suggested that all charges be dropped – on one proviso."

"Which is?"

"That Shebley should voluntarily join us in a visit to the Museum of Antiquities, which I think he will. Shebley would certainly like to see certain of his prized curios."

It was Margo who exclaimed:

"You mean they've been shipped to the museum?"

"A few have," explained Cranston. "The chest of Chu Chan, the katar of Pagan Min, and the Siamese dancer statue. They're all important exhibits."

Talcott shook his head.

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"I don't see why the statue is."

"Because it was found outside the curio room," stated Cranston, with only the slightest side glance at Margo. "How it arrived there is something of a mystery, unless Shebley purposely flung it there, just to add another puzzle."

"But tell me," queried Talcott. "What good will it do to take Shebley to the museum?"

"Plenty," replied Cranston. "Professor Frescott happens to know a great many things about Oriental art, things that Shebley doesn't. If we get the two of them talking together, something may develop."

"You said 'we.'" This came from Margo. "I think you are the only person who could start a chat between those two, Lamont."

"I'm relying on Talcott." Cranston gave a polite bow. "He knows art, too. By the way, Talcott, some of Frescott's pamphlets would interest you. He has one that is very rare, in fact unique."

"That should interest Shebley," returned Talcott, dryly, "unless he has lost his collector's urge."

"This one is on Burma," specified Cranston, "and it tells all about our old friend Pagan Min. Unfortunately, I didn't read it; some of the pages were uncut so I didn't open them. Frescott says that I can borrow it again, but now that he's interested, he intends to read it first."

Glancing at his watch, Cranston noted that it was nearly time for the appointment. He didn't have to suggest that Talcott come along. The art dealer said that he would follow as soon as he could; it was too early now to close up shop, but after a few phone calls, he'd be able to let Homer take over for the rest of the day.

All the way to the museum, Margo was wondering about Frescott. It had occurred to her more and more that the professor was getting off very lightly. All counts considered, he was a more likely suspect than Shebley. When the squat museum came in sight, Margo suddenly blurted her opinions.

"What about Frescott?" she demanded. "Why don't you out with it, Lamont, and say he did those murders?"

"Why, Margo!" Cranston's tone carried genuine rebuke. "I never say that anyone ever murdered anybody."

"Well, in Shebley's case –"

"The opinion was Weston's – or perhaps Cardona's. Each is now blaming it on the other, though at first they had it the other way about."

"But Frescott entered Benisette's apartment," began Margo, "and he may have come to Shebley's penthouse."

"Not necessarily for murder," argued Cranston. "We must learn his motive, and how far it may have carried him. I think we may uncover something very soon."

Weston, Cardona, Shebley were all in Frescott's office. As soon as Cranston appeared, Shebley came over to shake hands earnestly, at the same time sidling a look of denunciation at Frescott. Beaming from behind his desk, the benign professor purposely misinterpreted Shebley's glare.

"Don't worry about your curios." Frescott gave a sweeping gesture. "The museum does not want them. They will be returned when – and if – you are where you can receive them, Shebley."

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The chest of Chu Chan was in one corner of the room, the Siamese statue in another. On the desk lay the Burmese katar as a final exhibit. But Shebley wasn't thinking of his curios, except possibly the dagger. From the increase in his glare, he might have been contemplating using that weapon on Frescott.

"It's likely to be your turn!" stormed Shebley. "I mean it, Frescott, when I say you'd do anything to acquire what you want."

"But I want none of these," repeated Frescott. "My interest lies in Babylonian antiquities, such as these ancient tablets." He pointed to a row of the clay plaques that were standing against the wall behind him. "I brought them here especially for Cranston to see."

Cranston bowed his acknowledgment and with it continued a glance toward the door. Talcott was entering, having hurried along as soon as he could. Since everyone in any way concerned with the case was present, Cranston was ready to open his attack on Frescott.

"The Babylonian tablets," repeated Cranston. "Nice of you, Frescott, not to send me down to the crypt again in order to see them. I spent an unpleasant time there."

Frescott raised his eyebrows, as though puzzled. Moving his chair closer, Cranston found the chest of Chu Chan in the way and started to move it. Cardona stepped over to help him, but it wasn't necessary. Using his knee, Cranston just managed to lift the chest alone.

An odd flicker came to Frescott's eyes, but he said nothing.

"Maybe I too need an alibi in this case," remarked Cranston. "So, professor, if you will admit you locked me in the crypt, it might help."

The flicker gained the proportions of a glare.

"After all," added Cranston, "if I was in the crypt, I couldn't have gone to Shebley's as you did – or could I?"

Frescott came to his feet, slamming a big fist on the desk.

"If you were locked in the crypt, it was a mistake!" he roared. "Anyway, I stopped to see the commissioner and gave him the hint that you might be there –"

"So I would survive?"

"Of course not," retorted Frescott. "There was enough air in that crypt to last you all night!"

"Just as there was enough air in the Chinese chest," suggested Cranston, "to last Margo when you put her there."

"The chest had air-holes."

Frescott caught himself. It wasn't that he knew the inadequacy of the air-holes; if he had, he probably wouldn't have mentioned them. Frescott was chewing at his tongue because he had gone far enough off guard to be tricked into admitting that he was responsible for Margo's plight that night at Benisette's.

"We supposed the air-holes supplied Graff overnight," said Frescott, suddenly, "if that's what you mean. Anyway, Cranston" – smartly, the professor was trying to parry – "if you were locked in that crypt, how

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could you get out?"

"The way I did get out," replied Cranston. "With a razor blade. It's the best of wedges, professor, to get at a latch through a crack that's hair-thin. That latch works very smoothly, by the way –"

"With a razor blade!" interrupted Frescott impatiently. "You don't expect us to believe that!"

"Why not? You expected the commissioner to believe he was coming here to rescue me, when your actual purpose was to keep him from going to Shebley's."

"What's that, Cranston?" Weston was on his feet. "You mean Frescott was playing a double game?"

Cranston nodded.

"A double game," he replied, "with these."

Hands moving from the lapels of his coat, Cranston produced a pair of black pins. Eyeing them, Weston snorted.

"What's this, Cranston, a joke?"

"No more than the razor blade was. Professor Frescott uses even simpler equipment than I do. I found these on the floor in Shebley's curio room. I finally figured their purpose."

Turning to the chest of Chu Chan, Cranston asked Cardona to move it closer, which the inspector did.

"It took three men to lift that chest when there was a body in it," recalled Cranston. "With the body gone, two men could lift it. Now only one can, which means that it has lost more weight."

Probing along the brass mountings, Cranston found the pin-holes in the bottom corners of the chest. It was already dawning on others that the loss of weight could only have come from the thick bottom; hence Cranston's discovery was logical. In went the pins; muffled clicks sounded.

The bottom of the chest slid out like a drawer. The hidden compartment was empty, but it revealed crossbraces and little pegs, which had obviously been put there to hold something tightly in place.

"From the size of those spaces," observed Cranston, "I would say that this secret drawer contained engraved plates of the T'ang period, unquestionably of bronze, which would allow for the missing weight."

Turning toward Frescott, Cranston demanded:

"Where are those plates, professor?"

"You can search this whole museum," retorted Frescott, "and you won't find them, because there are none."

"You're sure? Suppose I begin right here."

Cranston was stepping past the desk. With a roar like a bull, Frescott sprang to stop him. When Cranston shoved the professor back in his chair, Frescott grabbed for a desk drawer and pawed among his pamphlets, shouting:

"I warn you, Cranston –"

The warning wasn't needed. Cranston was quicker; his own hand, driving past Frescott's, found the gun before the professor could. To the amazement of all, it was Cranston who was glaring now, and murderously. Half rolling from his chair, Frescott looked frantically about for refuge; trapped, with Cranston bearing down on him, the professor grabbed one of the Babylonian tablets and twisted it in front of him.

On hands and knees, with nothing but a shield of baked clay to protect him, Frescott looked so pitiful and helpless that everyone expected Cranston to laugh and toss away the revolver.

Instead, Lamont Cranston aimed toward the heart of the cowering professor, tightened the gun trigger mercilessly, and fired!

CHAPTER XX

As the bullet smashed the hardened clay, Frescott sagged back toward the wall, flinging his hands upward. There was no time for Cranston to fire another shot; half a dozen hands were gripping him. However, another shot wasn't needed.

Instead of a body thudding the floor, something was clanging there. Frescott wasn't hurt; all that had perished was a clay tablet, one of the fine dark colored type, but the loss wasn't important. The clay tablet was merely a replica, darkened to pass as one of the priceless originals.

A special replica that Frescott had baked very recently, for it contained another object, almost the same size, the bronze plate that was clanging; on the floor. Engraved with Chinese characters, that plate was one of the very sort that Cranston had pictured as the secret contents of the chest of Chu Chan!

Seeing it, Shebley kicked another of the clay tablets and it broke as the first had. Out of it came another of the Chinese plaques. Then Weston and Cardona were breaking the Babylonian fakes apart to discover more Chinese genuines.

From beside the desk, Cranston spoke pleasantly.

"You gave it away, professor," he said. "Even in fright, you wouldn't have used a clay shield, not a man of your keen caliber. I fired because I knew that the bronze interior would deflect the bullet."

Coming to his feet, Frescott stood with bowed head. Then, with a slow nod, he decided to state his case.

"Chu Chan sent those engravings," declared Frescott. "You analyzed it correctly the other day, Cranston. All along, I was afraid that you would, you with your keen knowledge of Chinese art. Yes, the plates are a catalog of the treasures of the Empress Komyo–Kogo. Chu Chan was trying to buy up the true works of ancient art and bring them back to China.

"He sent me the plates when he feared he could not longer keep them. Their very existence was unknown and should remain so. In the hands of unscrupulous dealers or collectors, this information would enable them to buy up many little–valued items at low prices; then reveal their true worth and reap huge profit.

"Graff knew something of the secret and was trying to make a deal with Shebley. That's why I wanted Benisette to get the plates. He knew nothing, so I was sure I could obtain the precious plates later. So I went to Benisette's first; then to Shebley's –"

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Halting, Frescott raised his head and faced all eyes squarely. He had told his purpose; the plates stood as his proof. Apparently he saw no reason to declare more.

Shebley stepped forward, his hand extended.

"My apologies, professor," declared Shebley. "If I had known about the plates, I would have given them to you. Surely I could – and would – have removed them as soon as the chest reached my curio room. But Graff told me nothing; he only hinted that the chest had some special value in itself."

A strange laugh suddenly chilled the room. It literally could have been described as mirth from nowhere, for when persons turned, they saw no one who might have uttered it. True, everyone looked in a different direction, which proved that all ears had been deceived.

The laugh of The Shadow, brief but sinister, a whisper that rose to a sharp crescendo, then cut off to let echoes carry its shuddery taunt; such was the tone that was gone before it could be traced!

Even Lamont Cranston was looking around with a puzzled expression. He turned as he felt Weston grip his arm.

"The Shadow's laugh!" voiced the commissioner, hoarsely. "What could it mean, Cranston?"

"Only that we must still find a murderer," replied Cranston, in a slow, even tone. His eyes were upon those hand-shakers, Shebley and Frescott. "Yes, that would be it. Someone did murder Benisette and Graff."

His arms folded, Cranston let his eyes wander all around the room, passing the people and studying such items as the Chinese chest and the Siamese statue. Then, his gaze ending on the desk, Cranston gave a look of real surprise.

"It's gone, commissioner!"

"What's gone?" demanded Weston. "If you mean The Shadow, he wasn't even in here!"

"I mean the Burmese dagger." Cranston was staring at the blank desk top. "In all this confusion, someone must have taken it. Yes" – Cranston's eyes studied faces, now – "someone – anyone of you – could have taken that deadly instrument. I would suggest that everyone be searched, commissioner. Only on the murderer will you find the katar of Pagan Min!"

It was cold, hard logic, a murderer seeing his game go wrong as facts came out, would certainly be the man to snatch away the most important piece of evidence against him. No one had left this office; therefore, Cranston's proposal of a search was proper.

"We can eliminate Margo," remarked Cranston, casually, "since we know she must be innocent. Let us proceed with the others, commissioner."

Cranston raised one hand slightly and gestured in the direction of Shebley and Frescott. Weston stepped over to search Frescott, while Cardona took Shebley. Both men raised their arms willingly and it seemed that the search would not be difficult, since a weapon so large as a one-foot katar would not be easy to conceal.

As though to complete a purely technical procedure, Lamont Cranston stepped around the desk, past the statue, and toward the door, to reach the last man: Dariel Talcott.

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Then it happened:

With a move that he must have practiced long, Talcott whipped his hand beneath his coat, brought out a silver bladed knife and thrust it, by its stirrup handle, straight for Cranston's heart!

To reach its mark, the dagger would have to pass those folded arms. That it could slither through was proven, when the silver blade clicked apart under the jab of Talcott's skilled knuckles, unsheathing the vicious steel thrusting blade within.

Cranston's hand was quicker. Tucked under his coat, it already gripped the counter-weapon. Out came a flash, a click of spreading silver, and the bared blade of another katar met Talcott's with a cross slash!

A master duel began.

No one dared to intervene. One weapon alone could vie with a katar, and that was another katar. Thrust after thrust proved that ordinary stabs or slashes would be too slow against steel-pointed punching like this. Now the reason for the hand-guards became apparent. These weapons were meant for duels as well as for assassination.

Only the guards were stopping the furious jabs in as fast a fray as could be witnessed; but the blood that was occasionally marring the duel came from Talcott. Cranston's blade was getting its point past his rival's protected wrist and scoring valuable hits.

Twisting as they parried in their ever-thrusting style, the duelists were covering considerable ground. Talcott's free hand slid behind him; unnoticed by the watchers, it gripped a chair. His next move was to swing, around past the corner of the desk, and with the twirl, Talcott sent the chair skidding straight for Cranston.

The whirl that Cranston gave made Talcott look clumsy. Cranston hadn't been deceived; he was ready for the chair when it came. Spinning twice about, he was away and in again, while the chair was clattering onward to bash against the Chinese chest across the room. And with the finish of his double pivot, Cranston was giving a piston stroke to his katar, intending to lay the point against Talcott's unguarded body.

Cranston's pointed punch stopped short.

No longer was it needed. The part of Frescott's story that hadn't been told revealed itself voluntarily. The Siamese statue came to life. Unfolding, hands of living ivory swooped down and caught Talcott's neck, while a lithe figure added its weight to the fling that followed.

There was skilled power in that form of Ankhea. Jade beads rippled in tune with straining muscles, as the girl's whole body seemed to press its force into the strangling tension of her fingers.

The katar clanked from Talcott's hand as he writhed to the floor; then, as Cranston, stooping, placed the point of his own dagger right where it belonged, Ankhea relaxed and drew away. Choking, Talcott couldn't even gasp for the mercy that Cranston gave, now that the murderer was helpless.

Prompt with the handcuffs, Cardona clamped them on Talcott and drew the slumped man to his feet, while Frescott politely introduced Ankhea, the ivory girl in jade.

"She came along with the chest," explained Frescott. "It was Chu Chan's idea to send a guardian. In the chest he sent a matched statue, hoping the two would be kept together if they reached the wrong hands. That was so

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Ankhea would be able to take the statue's place if needed – which she was."

Even Margo could forgive Ankhea when the black eyed Siamese girl smiled. After all, their two encounters had been along Ankhea's line of duty. What Ankhea needed now was some American attire and Margo would be only too glad to help her choose. Needing her jade no longer, Ankhea might swap some in return for more capacious clothes.

Cranston's voice roused Margo from commercial ideas. Calmly, Cranston was explaining the mystery of the Burmese katars and how they concerned Talcott.

"It was obvious that there must have been two such daggers," stated Cranston. "Frescott wouldn't have killed Benisette because he wanted him to have the chest. Shebley didn't know the secret of the chest so he had no reason for murder.

"Money was the motive. Frescott wasn't after it, Shebley had enough of it. Graff wanted it and so did Talcott. Graff's death left only Talcott and there the obvious declared itself. Since Talcott couldn't have picked up the katar before each murder, I knew there must have been an extra.

"Note this clue: After each murder, Talcott had his opportunity. He had to pick up a katar after the crime in order to make it appear that someone had stolen the weapon before. We had only one man's word that the death weapon was unique. That man happened to be Talcott."

It fitted perfectly. Talcott's visit to Shebley's after Benisette was already being shipped to his apartment; his later trip to the Cobalt Club to pick up his own package and the one that Shebley hadn't – after Graff's body had been found.

"I knew that one katar could counteract another," added Cranston, "so when I checked on the history of Pagan Min, I realized that his brother and successor, Mindon Min, probably survived him by keeping himself equally armed. Their father, King Tharawaddy, was just the sort to provide each princeling with a royal weapon and let them find their own way in life – or death."

Cranston had picked up the katars. He was holding one in each hand, studying their identical features, even to the magnificence of the matched Balas rubies.

"Pagan Min" – Cranston weighed one dagger – "and Mindon Min." He looked straight at Talcott, who was huddled above his handcuffs. "I bluffed you today, Talcott, with the talk of Frescott's Burmese pamphlet. I wanted to see if my theory would work out – and it did.

"You came here armed as usual with your extra dagger, thinking you might have to murder Frescott and blame it on Shebley, all over the hundred thousand dollars you stole from Benisette. I was the person who picked up the dagger that was lying on Frescott's desk. I suggested that everyone be searched, knowing that when the mate was found on you, the dilemma would be perfect.

"You could neither admit that you had snatched the dagger from the desk, nor that the one in your possession was a duplicate. That was just the situation to swell the murderer in you and make you show your hand.

"And by the way, Shebley?" – Cranston called this through the door as Cardona was leading the murderer out – "your job on the air-holes clinches the case. You wanted to prove crime against Graff, but you branded yourself. Not just because Graff couldn't have stayed in the chest overnight.

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"Someone else could have sneaked up in the morning, killed Benisette in your rear room, and packed him away. There would still have been time for such a murderer to sneak out again, but not to drill the dozens of air-holes that were too tiny to be useful. You were the only man who could have found such time, Graff, there on your own premises."

Later, when they were riding away from the museum, a question struck home to Margo Lane.

"The night I went to the penthouse," exclaimed Margo. "Why did Shebley say he didn't phone Talcott?"

"Because he didn't," replied Cranston. "The man who did phone was Graff; he thought that Talcott might help him out."

"But Graff said he was Shebley –"

"No he didn't. He mentioned Shebley and then Talcott said: 'If you get down to fine points, Shebley –' and he stopped there because he saw you."

"Why, that's so!" expressed Margo. "Just before that, Talcott mentioned Frescott. He was starting to compare Shebley's case."

"What Talcott was going to say," stated Cranston, "was this: 'If you get down to fine points, Shebley could have used the dagger himself.'"

"Then Talcott murdered Graff to cover up?"

"Yes. He expected Graff to come to Shebley's and he did, up the fire tower and in the other window that Ankhea left open. Coming up by the elevator, Talcott saw his chance and used it. With Shebley tangling with Frescott, Talcott saw that Graff's death would point to one or the other."

There was a note of finality in Cranston's tone, but it didn't quite complete the theme. Margo and Shrevvy were chilled by a strange laugh that rose suddenly within the cab. A laugh that came from Cranston's lips, unseen in the dusk. The same mirth that had stirred within the museum, back to which it now floated from the departing cab. Louder, longer, more strident than before, it must have reached Professor Frescott and Ankhea.

Though weird, the tone was heartening to those who deserved The Shadow's confidence. As the laugh faded, its echoes clung, as though night itself was cherishing The Shadow's triumph over crime!

THE END