

CITY OF GHOSTS

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. THE CITY THAT DIED

THE passengers aboard the Silver Bullet stared from the windows in surprise, when the sleek streamliner glided to a stop at Pomelo Junction. Except for a dilapidated station, there was no sign of human habitation.

As for the branch line that connected there, its track was nothing but a double streak of rust curving off to nowhere through the Florida pine woods.

Its pause no more than momentary, the Silver Bullet was moving south again. Persons at the observation window glimpsed the tall passenger who had alighted, standing with his bags beside him. Then he, like the station, was gone from sight, as the streamliner whirled past a main-line bend.

Back on the weather-beaten platform, Lamont Cranston smiled as a rattly touring car jounced up to the station. Its driver, beefy-faced and shirt-sleeved, clambered out to meet the arrival. He took a look at the bags and the hawk-faced gentleman who owned them, then queried:

"You're Mr. Cranston?"

Cranston's reply was a quiet acknowledgment.

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The beefy-faced man introduced himself as Seth Woodley, and gestured toward his rattletrap car. Cranston saw the word "Taxi" on a printed label that was stuck to the windshield.

"I'm from Leesville, the county seat," vouchsafed Woodley. "That's where they sent your telegram. They said you were fixing to get off at Pomelo Junction and would need a taxi."

"Quite right," returned Cranston. Then, as Woodley was putting the bags in the car: "How long will it take you to drive me to Pomelo City?"

A satchel dropped from Woodley's hand as the fellow turned about. His eyes squinted in the late afternoon sun. The same glow brought a glister from the gold fillings in his back teeth, so wide was his gape.

"You're fixing to go to Pomelo City?"

"I am, if you can take me there," replied Cranston, calmly. "Since the branch line has been abandoned" he was looking toward the rusted track "I presume that the highway is the only route to Pomelo City."

Woodley's jaw clicked shut. Grimly, he gestured Cranston into the car; then took the wheel. They rattled off along a well-paved highway, with Woodley driving in silence.

CRANSTON'S eyes were taking in the scenery. The ground differed somewhat from other areas of Florida, for this was a "hammock" region, the term derived from small ridges, or hammocks. The slopes were well wooded with pine, while gullies showed clusters of cypress, indicating swampland.

In fact, as the scene progressed, it improved. The car rolled past fenced-off orange groves, with sprinklings of other citrus trees. Fertile slopes showed rows of young tuna trees, promising future profits to their owners.

It was not until Woodley slowed his car to take a side road, that the reason for the fellow's grimness became apparent.

Then Cranston saw a battered sign pointing to Pomelo City, the name scarcely legible. He observed the road ahead a single lane highway of red brick. The road, itself, was proof that something was wrong with Pomelo City.

Brick highways dated years back. Built in single lanes, they forced passing cars to turn out along the sand shoulders. When traffic warranted, they were widened, by concrete strips on either side.

This road had not rated such improvement. On the contrary, it had been allowed to deteriorate. Grass was sprouting up among the bricks; in some cases, there were gaps in the wabby, irregular surface.

Woodley took those bumps as a matter of course, even though they shook the chassis of his ancient car. There were times, though, when he yanked the wheel frantically, to avoid an actual catastrophe. Those were the times when he spied bricks that were upended in the paving.

Along the fringes of that grass-sprouting road, Cranston soon spied scenes of true desolation. One slope showed a pitiful array of withered stalks that had once been promising tuna trees. A level field displayed sawed-off stumps that represented a former citrus grove.

"The Medfly got those trees," spoke Woodley, gloomily. "They had to chop 'em down. A funny thing, the Medfly. No more trouble from it anywhere in Florida, except around Pomelo City."

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They were approaching a bend where the tilted, broken roof of a farmhouse poked up from the ground level. Woodley nudged his thumb in the direction of the new exhibit.

"A sinkhole," he said. "Lots of 'em start around here, but the ground don't usually cave right underneath a house, like it did there. That only happens near Pomelo City."

Cranston's gaze was fixed toward the ruin, as if he wanted to observe the sinkhole itself. Woodley gave a chuckle, slowed the car as they completed the curve.

"Here's a real sinkhole for you, Mr. Cranston!" he said. "Plumb in the middle of the road. That's one reason why nobody drives over here any more."

He was taking a sandy detour that skirted the sinkhole. Cranston saw the hollow from the brink. The sinkhole looked like the shallow crater of an extinct volcano. Measuring a hundred feet across, it showed ground that had sunk twenty feet.

The cavity was lined with sand, except where gaunt stretches of broken limestone showed a miniature cliff formation. Mixed with the sand at the bottom of the sinkhole were trunks of small trees and chunks of paving.

"When the rainy season comes," announced Woodley, as he swung from the detour, back to the brick road, "that sinkhole will fill up. Right now, we're having a drought, and it's been harder on Pomelo City than anywhere else. See that grapefruit grove?"

Cranston saw the grove, but needed Woodley's statement to recognize that the trees had ever borne grapefruit. The grove was barren; like the fruit, all leaves were gone. The trees, themselves, seemed wilted.

"They tried to save it," said Woodley, glumly, "by pumping water from the lake. Only, the lake went dry. Yes, sir, the bottom dropped plumb out of it, like it has with Pomelo City!"

THE lake came into sight. It was nothing but a pitiful expanse of caked clay, that gave off the odor of rotted fish. Cracks in the clay denoted limestone cavities, that had opened when the water level sank. Those gaps had sucked the lake dry.

Beyond a thinned woods appeared Florida's symbol of a town: a large water tank set on three tall legs. That tower, with its conical roof, was Cranston's first view of Pomelo City.

At a distant view, it was quite the same as many other man-made reservoirs that Cranston had seen while a passenger upon the streamliner. It was different though, when the car came closer.

Then, the rust of the supporting tripod was visible. The scarred tank showed its lack of paint. Gaps could be seen in the cone that topped it. Odd blackish splotches showed near the uppermost point. Woodley pressed in the clutch pedal, raced the old motor to a roar.

Immediately, the blotches took to wing. They were buzzards. Frightened by the noise of the approaching car, the huge birds circled away from the water tank. Their actions showed that they intended to return to their roost when the car had passed.

"You can't fool a buzzard," declared Woodley. "They know when anything has died. They know that Pomelo City is dead, even though people are staying there because they won't believe it! You'll see for yourself, Mr. Cranston."

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The car struck the short main street. It jolted over broken layers of concrete, which were matched by the remnants of shattered cement sidewalk that lined the ruined thoroughfare. On either side were crumpling buildings that had once been stores.

Some had boarded-up fronts, as weather-beaten as the station platform at the junction. Others simply displayed gaps, instead of show windows. Between the sidewalks and the crumbled curbs were frowsy brown-leaved palm trees that looked on the verge of collapse.

Passing a ruin that had once been a theater, Woodley drew up in front of a stucco-walled building that looked like a three-story blockhouse. Above the entrance was a sign proclaiming the place to be the Pomelo Hotel.

Alighting, Woodley carried the bags into a lobby that was furnished with tumble-down wicker chairs. While the taxi driver was shouting for the proprietor, Cranston eyed the hotel register.

It bore the proprietor's name, Martin Welf, at the top; otherwise, the page was blank, indicating that the hotel had no guests.

Welf arrived at Woodley's shouts. The proprietor was a portly, baldish man, who stuttered in bewildered fashion when he learned that Lamont Cranston intended to become a guest.

When Cranston had registered, Welf picked up the bags and started toward the stairway. He was obviously a one-man staff: clerk and bellboy, as well as hotel owner.

Woodley grunted thanks, when Cranston handed him a ten-dollar bill as taxi fare and said that change would not be necessary. Plucking his passenger's sleeve, Woodley confided:

"Maybe you won't like it here, Mr. Cranston. I'll tell you what I'm fixing to do. Sheriff Harley has allowed that he ought to come over here some night on account of talk he's heard, about some folks starting trouble. I'll offer to make the trip this evening."

Welf was calling wheezily from the second floor: "Right this way, Mr. Cranston!"

"So if it ain't to your liking," added Woodley, quickly, "you can go back to Leesville with me, later tonight, Mr. Cranston."

Nodding his thanks, Cranston turned toward the stairway, wearing a smile that Woodley did not see. At the top of the stairs, Welf was waiting at the open door of a front room. He announced, apologetically, that the hotel chef had left, but that he could supply sandwiches and coffee if Cranston wanted dinner.

"I dined on the train," Cranston told him. "I hope, however, that the cook will soon return. I intend to stay in Pomelo City a long while, Mr. Welf."

HIS eyes wide with amazement, Welf backed from the room. Cranston locked the door and strolled to the front window. He saw Woodley's old car go bouncing away, watched it take the winding road from town.

Buzzards flapped up from the water tower as the car went past. Circling against the darkening sky, they returned to their roost. By then, Woodley's car had dwindled into the dusk. Cranston's last contact with the outer world was gone.

As Cranston watched the street below, feeble street lights flickered into being. They were pitifully dim, those lights, as they glowed through the dried clumps of leaves that hung from the drooping branches of the dead

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palm trees. They looked weak enough for a puff of wind to extinguish them.

Turning from the window, Cranston stepped to a chair, where Welf had placed a satchel. Opening the bag, he drew out a black cloak and slid it over his shoulders.

With that action, Lamont Cranston seemed to disappear, except for his hawkish face, which remained, like a floating mask, above the chair.

Next came a slouch hat. When he had clamped it on his head, Cranston's face was also gone. His hands merged with the gloom, like the rest of him, for he was encasing them in thin black gloves. Blended with the semidarkness, Lamont Cranston had become The Shadow.

A strange being that belonged to blackness, The Shadow had begun the mission that had brought him to Pomelo City. He had become a living ghost in a city that had died!

CHAPTER II. GHOSTS IN THE NIGHT

A TINY flashlight glimmered in the darkness. Its rays fell upon a batch of newspaper clippings spread upon a bureau so shaky that it wobbled at the slightest touch. In the increasing darkness of his hotel room, The Shadow was reviewing the facts that accounted for his visit to Pomelo City.

News of the town's plight had filtered to the outside world, but in such small and occasional dribbles that no one, other than The Shadow, had sensed the full import of what had happened to the place.

Singly, the clippings meant very little. They mentioned things that The Shadow had seen first-hand, today: the scourge of the Mediterranean fruit fly; the appearance of some sinkholes; the drying up of a lake.

Besides these were accounts of cattle epidemic, which had fortunately faded out; a reappearance of the supposedly extinct black wolf, which had once roamed wild in Florida; finally, reports of accidents that constituted a common sort hunters shot by mistake, and automobiles wrecked through chance collisions.

Added up, these facts produced a definite total. Hundreds of people had found absolute reason to move from the vicinity of Pomelo City. Citrus growers, farmers, even the native "crackers" of the backwoods, had met with circumstances that deprived them of livelihood and security.

Their exodus had caused townspeople to depart. Dependent upon the trade of the surrounding territory, Pomelo City had no longer been a prosperous place. The abandonment of the branch railroad, the collapse of the highway that linked the town to the world, were added occurrences dooming Pomelo City to oblivion.

Threaded through that change of circumstances lay a more insidious factor: that of tragedy. Over a year or more, the toll of life had been heavy. Curiously, the toll had been on the increase, as the total population dwindled. Hunting accidents, automobile crashes, had occurred in recent months.

Beneath all this, The Shadow saw the operation of an evil hand, one not content to let Pomelo City linger toward its finish. Harder, and repeated strokes had been delivered. Because of them, Pomelo City could aptly be termed dead.

The tiny flashlight went black. Stepping to the window, The Shadow gazed upon the street below, where night had fully encroached upon scrawny palms, until the feeble lights were merely flickery twinkles in the midst of thick darkness.

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With death, the town had become a city of ghosts. That term applied to The Shadow, the only stranger present. It also fitted Pomelo City's few remaining inhabitants.

Martin Welf, the hotel proprietor, was one. In the face of adversity, he was carrying on with a business that was little short of hopeless.

Whether it had guests or not, the Pomelo Hotel actually required a fair-sized personnel, merely to keep up appearances. Alone, Welf was handling a dozen jobs, in the place of employees who had deserted him.

ACROSS the street, The Shadow saw two building fronts that flanked an abandoned arcade. Both places had lighted windows. One was a real estate office, that bore the name of "Chester Tilyon, Realtor."

At a desk visible through the window sat a haggard man with gray-streaked hair, who kept looking toward the street, as if dreaming of long-past days when people actually bought houses and rented property in Pomelo City.

The other building was a department store. What stock it still had, mostly cheap clothes and farming implements, was confined to the show windows on the ground floor. Inside, a few lights showed barren counters.

Standing in the doorway was the man whose name appeared above: "Louis Bayne." His clothes were no advertisement for the wares he sold, for his attire was shabby, and too large for him. From the drawn appearance of Bayne's face, The Shadow decided that the man was half starved.

In hope of selling the new clothes that he still had in stock, Bayne was wearing his old ones. Worry, as well as poverty, had caused him to shrink from a man of bulk to a creature that could pass as a living skeleton. Two cars were on the street. Both were of expensive makes, but very old. Tilyon's car, parked near the real-estate office, appeared to be in fair condition; but Bayne's antiquated sedan was scarcely more than a wreck. One fender was gone; the radiator shell was badly bashed. Moreover, the car bore added scars, such as a dented door, that denoted a recent accident.

The sheer shabbiness of the desolate scene made it seem that nothing could stir up action. Remembering the buzzards on the water tower, The Shadow could picture the huge birds watching Tilyon and Bayne, hoping that one or the other would soon die on his feet. Both men seemed to be waiting for something that could never happen, either in their favor, or against it.

Then a motor's rumble announced the unexpected. An old touring car rambled into sight along the main street, scraped against a leaning palm tree, and disgorged four rough-dressed men. Visitors had come to Pomelo City.

They were men from the backwoods, the sort who came to town on Saturday night. Two of them approached Bayne's store and began to look at the show windows, while the proprietor eyed them anxiously. These men weren't customers; that became apparent when they turned their attention to Bayne's car.

The Shadow saw Tilyon get up from the desk in the real-estate office, to see what was going on. A moment later, Welf appeared at the front of the hotel.

There was a challenge in the air: something that indicated ill feeling between the local business men and the crackers who had come to town. Each group seemed completely concerned with the other; perhaps with special design.

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For The Shadow, watching from the window higher up, saw something that the men below did not notice; a thing, perhaps, which one faction might have chosen that the others should not observe.

A car had pulled into the rear street beyond the abandoned arcade. The Shadow caught the glimmer of its lights, just before they were extinguished. The very fact that the unheralded arrivals had chosen to come by a deserted back street, aroused The Shadow's immediate interest.

LEAVING his room, The Shadow moved rapidly toward the red light that denoted exit onto a fire escape. Descending, he arrived in a little courtyard at the side of the hotel, next to the old theater. Gliding through a narrow archway, he reached the front sidewalk.

Crossing the street was no problem to The Shadow. The dry-leaved palm trees threw shrouding darkness that offset the flickering street lights. It was simply a case of choosing the swiftest route to the desired destination.

Taking a wide route to circle the buildings opposite, The Shadow was a living ghost, blanketed in darkness. He rapidly reached the street in back of the arcade.

Darkness was thick, but by zigzagging along the narrow rear street, The Shadow expected to find the car that had pulled up behind the arcade. Instead, he reached a corner beyond Bayne's store without encountering anything. The fact meant that the car must have crept ahead without lights.

Feeling for the building wall, The Shadow retraced his steps, using his flashlight guardedly.

He came upon evidence at the back of Bayne's store: a door with a broken padlock. Though cheap, the padlock was a new one; it had probably been smashed within the past few minutes. Whoever had done the deed had entered the store, and should certainly still be inside.

Easing the door inward, The Shadow entered. He did not have to worry about the opening door betraying him. His flashlight was extinguished, and he had a background of perfect darkness. But the men who had already entered were less fortunately placed.

By the dim light from the front of the store, The Shadow could see them; three in number. They were crouched figures, creeping about among the unused counters, sprinkling something on the floor. The odor of kerosene was only too evident. Incendiaries were at work here, while Bayne, the storekeeper, was occupied out front.

Using creeping tactics of his own, The Shadow reached beneath his cloak and plucked an automatic from a holster that he had worn even before reaching Pomelo City. Whatever dirty work this tribe was up to, they were due for a surprise before they finished it.

As they were skirting back toward the rear door, The Shadow came into their very midst. The unknown men had him surrounded without knowing it, which was exactly what The Shadow wanted.

With counters forming an excellent shelter, The Shadow set finger upon the button of his flashlight. He was ready to press it, to throw a sweeping ray of thin, sharp light about the group. His lips prepared to voice a sinister laugh, The Shadow intended to take these antagonists unawares.

If they wanted battle, he was in the right position to return it; to their sorrow, not his own. The Shadow was entrenched among the counters, and he had a clear path of fire toward the rear door, should the marauders seek it when they fled.

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A sound made The Shadow pause. It was a creak of that very door; the one that he, too, had entered. None of the prowling men could have reached it; evidently, a fourth man had arrived.

Whispers sounded in the darkness, but they were wordless. The newcomer had simply passed a signal for the others to join him.

At that moment, it seemed policy to wait, since the actions of the prowlers were deliberate. The whispered signal had sounded like a mere preliminary to something more to come. So it was; but the coming action was the climax.

An object swished through the darkness, straight for The Shadow's head. Chucked blindly from the doorway, it almost found a target that the thrower did not know existed. With an action as rapid as it was instinctive, The Shadow flattened among the counters to escape the unseen missile.

The thing struck the floor beside a counter which, fortunately, sheltered The Shadow. As it landed, the object exploded with a forceful puff that shook the floor of Bayne's dilapidated store and made the counters quiver.

Though the blast was not heavy, the consequences were. The bursting bomb spurted liquid fire in every direction. The flames encountered pools of kerosene, licked up the inflammable liquid in one mighty gulp.

In a single instant, the whole rear of the store was lighted like a furious inferno, a mass that was rising ceiling high, with The Shadow trapped in its very midst!

CHAPTER III. BROKEN BATTLE

THE same instinct which had saved The Shadow from the bomb, was the factor that preserved him from the flames. Had he risen at the moment when the furious hell broke loose, he would have been ignited like a human torch.

Instead, he sprawled on the floor, his cloak sleeve drawn across his eyes. The lash of the roaring flame whipped above him, finding other tinder instead. The intervening counters took the blaze, leaving an air pocket in between them.

Though the seconds were few, they seemed interminable. During those moments, The Shadow could actually see the flame through his closed eyelids. He held his breath, for he could feel the scorch of the blistering fire that swept above him. Then, as his ears detected a louder crackle, he knew that his brief opportunity had come.

Liquid flame had spent itself. The counters and other woodwork were taking fire. Coming to his feet, The Shadow saw licking tongues of red; but the circle was incomplete. There were gaps between the counter ends, that offered temporary paths clear to the rear doorway.

Lurching, The Shadow started an amazing, twisty course. The flames had found new fuel, but they were too late to stop him. Their glare revealed the cloaked figure that was escaping them; but otherwise, they did not harm The Shadow as he zigzagged toward the rear door. Yet, in disclosing The Shadow's presence, the flames did damage enough.

Bayne, faced toward the rear of the store, saw The Shadow. So did the astonished crackers who stood out front. They yelled to their companions, who came running with shotguns, just as Bayne whipped out a revolver, to aim in The Shadow's direction.

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Beyond the flames, The Shadow was lost from Bayne's sight before the shrunken storekeeper could fire. But the men at the rear door were quick enough to recognize The Shadow as a foe. Themselves fleeing from the renewed blaze, they considered it a good place for The Shadow to stay. Fortunately, the shots that they fired were too hasty to score a hit.

Then The Shadow's drawn gun was busy, and the men at the rear were in new flight. Responding to their leader's yell, they dashed along the back street, diving for their car. Guns across their shoulders, they blasted at The Shadow as he lurched out through the exit.

As guns barked, The Shadow took a long sprawl. Landing shoulder first, he rolled across the street, beyond the area of light that came from the opened door. His foeman thought they had dropped him. Their guess was wrong.

The Shadow's dive was calculated. He wanted a spot where blackness would protect him from the shots that he knew would come. The next token that disclosed The Shadow's presence was a spurt from his own automatic. On hands and knees, he was answering the gunfire in swift, effective style.

A howl told that one foeman had fallen. Quick-witted pals yanked the fellow around the building corner. Another must have been clipped during the process, for there was every indication of delay while The Shadow was coming to his feet. Making for the corner, the cloaked fighter flattened against the wall, poked his gun past the building edge.

The wall was hot. Flames were roaring through the roof of Bayne's doomed store. The rising light was sufficient for The Shadow to pick out human targets, had there been any. But despite their delay with wounded comrades, his foemen had reached their car.

All that The Shadow had to shoot at was a taillight, as it whisked between two buildings on the other side of the narrow cross street. Speeding to the space in question, The Shadow caught another fleeting flash of the fleeing car as it whipped around a turn.

Pursuit of the firebrands was useless, but battle still offered. Shots were sounding from the front street. Speeding beside the outer wall of Bayne's burning store, The Shadow arrived at the front corner just in time to witness a sad tragedy.

Bayne, an emptied revolver in his hand, was wavering on the sidewalk in front of his blazing building. The men with the shotguns were spread among the palm trees; their shots had found the shrunken storekeeper.

It was the hope of saving Bayne that caused The Shadow to swing into sight. One of the armed men spotted him and shouted. Instantly, all were driving for The Shadow, firing the few shells that they still had left.

Wheeling for cover, The Shadow escaped the hasty shots, but he knew that his heroic effort had not succeeded.

As he swung back around the corner, The Shadow caught a last glimpse of Bayne, diving forward to the sidewalk. The shotguns had finished him.

Circumstances still called for the unexpected, and The Shadow provided it. As his new assailants rounded the corner, they were startled by the sudden attack that the black-cloaked fighter provided. Hurling himself into the midst of them, The Shadow began cross slashes with his automatic, using his free arm to ward off the clubbing blows of shotguns.

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Fully supposing that The Shadow would be in flight, the crackers were taken totally off guard. Their shotguns were bashed from their hands; stooping, The Shadow snatched up one of the lost weapons, used it to swing wide, sweeping blows that covered a wide range.

Welf and Tilyon, stooped above Bayne's body, were amazed when they saw four men come staggering around the corner, warding off imaginary blows. Neither Welf nor Tilyon spied The Shadow. His opponents in flight, the cloaked fighter was taking off to darkness, carrying a bundle of shotguns with him.

Two cars were rolling in along the main street. The driver of one saw the men who staggered from the corner; he drove ahead, intending to find what lay beyond. The men in the second car piled out to see what could be done about the blazing building.

By that time, The Shadow was gone. Picking a roundabout route, he crossed the street a half block from the burning store. The men who were looking for him had gone in the opposite direction; a quick path back to the hotel seemed a simple matter, and would have been, if another carload of backwoods residents had not bowled in from a side street.

Caught between the background of the conflagration and a pair of flickering headlights, The Shadow was again human game for another batch of misguided natives who carried shotguns; but this time, the weapons were fully loaded. As before, his only course was close range action, and he took it.

Wheeling aside before the car could run him down, The Shadow flattened and rolled beneath the car step. He came up, seemingly from nowhere, as men were piling out to look for him.

This time, shotguns talked, but they did nothing but split the air. The Shadow was slashing at his adversaries with a heavy automatic and plucking away the shotguns that he warded off.

Even more astonishing was the way in which he disarmed these newcomers. There were only three of them, and they weren't as ready as the previous crowd. They were relying, too, on gunshots instead of clubbing tactics. Tilting up those unwieldy barrels was mere routine for The Shadow.

Three dazed men were fumbling about, wondering where their guns had gone. The Shadow was around in back of the car, strewing the shotguns as he went. Vanished from the midst of his blundering opponents, he left them with the final impression that they had battled with other than a human foe.

They found their guns, when they looked for them; but discovered no trace of The Shadow. He had vanished, so they thought, through the blank side wall of an old garage. Their curious belief was inspired by the fact that the shotguns lay near that wall.

They didn't realize that The Shadow had reversed his course during their bewilderment. Across the street, he was fading into blackness behind the Pomelo Hotel.

REACHING his room, The Shadow discarded his black garb, while he watched the finish of the structures opposite. The flames had gutted Bayne's store; gobbling the wooden arcade, the fire was taking hold of the adjacent building where Tilyon's real-estate office was located.

Men were busy getting papers and furniture out of Tilyon's place. Among them, The Shadow saw Woodley, the Leesville taxi driver. Woodley's car and another had come from Leesville, and the second automobile evidently belonged to Sheriff Harley, for the man who stood beside it could have been no one else.

Tall, lanky, and long-jawed, the sheriff was shouting for men to forget the fire; good advice, since there was

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no way to stop the blaze. Not a breeze was stirring, and there was no chance that the flames could spread beyond the two buildings that they were consuming. The sooner it burned itself out, the better.

Carrying Tilyon's office equipment, men were crossing the street toward the hotel. Rapidly, The Shadow stepped out into the hallway, locking the door behind him. Descending to the lobby, he was waiting there when the carriers entered. With the group came Welf, followed by the sheriff.

Stopping short, Welf blinked. The hotel proprietor had forgotten that he housed a guest. Then, assuming that Cranston had witnessed the whole scene from the lobby, Welf introduced him to the sheriff. Taking the same thing for granted, Sheriff Harley proffered a hearty handshake.

By the time the rest had entered, The Shadow was in conference with Harley and Welf. Among the latecomers were the out-of-towners from the backwoods. Those who had riddled Bayne with shotguns looked very regretful. Solemnly, they laid their weapons in a corner.

They observed Cranston suspiciously at first; then, as his eyes calmly met their gaze, their doubts faded. They were convinced of one thing: that this leisurely-mannered, well-dressed stranger could not have been the foe that they and their belated friends had battled around the streets of Pomelo City.

His guise of Cranston serving him in perfect stead, The Shadow was soon to hear strange testimony regarding his own amazing prowess. Testimony to which he, as Cranston, could add details as a chance and impartial witness!

CHAPTER IV. THE SHADOW STAYS

SHERIFF HARLEY proved himself very versatile. He had taken over duty as police chief and fire marshal of Pomelo City; with those tasks settled, he showed new ability. The sheriff became coroner, judge, and jury, in investigating the causes of Bayne's death and the fire that swept the dead man's store.

Harley questioned the crackers first. He knew them all, and called them by their first names when he demanded to know why they had come to town this evening. A rangy, solemn-faced fellow named Jim Fenn decided to act as spokesman for the rest.

"We warn't fixing to start no trouble, sheriff," drawled Fenn. "We just allowed we ought to take another look at Bayne's car. Some folks don't appear satisfied about how it was smashed up."

"Bayne ran that car into a sinkhole," returned the sheriff, coldly.

"We ain't disputing you, sheriff," argued Fenn. "Only, we allow that Bayne might have bunged up his car first. He hit that sinkhole the same night that Joe Betterly was run off the road and killed, along with a couple of his kinfolk."

Fenn's companions murmured assent. It explained the feud between Bayne and the backwoods populace. The Shadow remembered one of the clippings in his collection, a small item culled from a Jacksonville newspaper.

A week ago, Joe Betterly, a local farmer, had been found dead with two companions, in a badly wrecked car, near Pomelo City. The crash had been attributed to a hit-and-run driver, though Bayne had not been mentioned. Such suspicion was obviously a local matter, confined to the backwoods dwellers.

Looking at Welf and Tilyon, The Shadow could tell by their expressions that neither held Bayne to blame.

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They seemed angered by Fenn's charges.

Sheriff Harley handled the tense situation admirably. Silencing mutters from both factions, he asserted:

"There's no harm in wanting to look at a man's car. Go ahead, Fenn. What happened next?"

"The fire started," declared Fenn. "All of a sudden, like somebody threw a match into a tank of gasoline. First thing we knewed, Bayne had a revolver out and was shooting.

"Into the store?"

"Yeah. Leastwise, until we was coming over to see what was up. We was fixing to give Bayne a help, only he forgot the trouble inside the place and turned on us."

"Still shooting?"

"Plenty, sheriff! Yelling he was going to kill the pack of us. We didn't like to use our guns, sheriff, but we was out in the open, and we hadn't no choice. I don't allow that we could do different than we did."

The sheriff turned to Welf and Tilyon. Despite their loyalty to Bayne, they had to agree that Fenn's testimony was correct.

"Bayne lost his head," conceded Welf. "I'll say this for these men" – he gestured toward Fenn and the other crackers "that they used their shotguns in self-defense. I'd like to know, though, if friends of theirs set off that blaze in Bayne's store."

"We'll get to that, Welf."

For the next five minutes, Sheriff Harley grilled the crackers in first-class style. They had one story and they stuck to it: Neither they, nor any of their friends, could have had a part in starting the fire.

"All right," spoke the sheriff, suddenly. "If none of you fellows had a hand in it, who did?"

Men shifted uneasily. They looked to their spokesman, Fenn. He muttered something; his companions gave him nods.

"There was somebody in that store, sheriff," said Fenn, slowly. "It was him that Bayne fired at. I seen him, sheriff" Fenn drew a long breath "and he looked mighty like a ghost!"

SHERIFF HARLEY did not laugh. Instead, he drew a toothpick from his pocket and began to chew on it. After weighing the statement long and seriously, he questioned:

"Did he act like a ghost, too?"

Fenn nodded. He stabbed his finger toward the floor, made a wide circle with his arms.

"He was like that, sheriff," said Fenn. "In the middle of the fire. No human could have got out of there alive. He was all in black, except when the flames lit him up redlike. I don't allow he was the devil" Fenn shook his head begrudgingly "but he might have been Satan's twin brother."

Fenn's pals supplied emphatic nods.

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"We run into him later," continued Fenn. He was pointing from the lobby toward Bayne's store, where flames had dwindled, "when he was right yonder, by the corner. I'm saying this, sheriff: nobody but a ghost, and an ornery one, could have taken the shotguns out of our hands the way he did!"

Doubt flickered on the sheriff's face, until he caught looks from Welf and Tilyon. They remembered a surprising battle that they had witnessed.

"Fenn and his friends were fighting somebody," stated Welf. "But we didn't see who it was. The way they bounced back after they went around the corner, they might have run into a brick wall!"

"That's what the ghost did!"

The man who hoarsed the statement was one of the three who had come in the last car. He and his two companions began to chatter the details of their fray with The Shadow. They described their adversary as a mammoth batlike ghost.

"Plumb into a brick wall, sheriff! That's where the ghost went. And he cut through it without leaving a mark! Unless" the speaker hesitated, inspired by a fresh theory "unless he flew clear over it, like a buzzard!"

The sheriff's own men remembered the excitement at the corner. They were sure that an unknown fighter had been on the ground when they arrived. The speed of his disappearance inclined them to the ghost theory. Veering to that view—point himself, the sheriff finally turned to The Shadow and questioned:

"Did you see any of this, Mr. Cranston?"

"I was in my room," came Cranston's calm-toned reply, "shortly before the trouble started. I am positive that I saw the lights of an automobile on the street in back of the arcade. That is the only new evidence that I can offer."

The sheriff looked relieved. The report of a mystery car indicated human hands, not ghostly ones.

"In the case of Betterly and his kinfolk," decided the sheriff, "we came to a verdict of death caused by persons unknown. Bayne was exonerated, and that finding stands.

"This fire tonight was set by persons unknown. The same parties, maybe, that ran Betterly's car off the road. As for Bayne's death" the sheriff pocketed his toothpick "he just got excited. Your plea stands, Fenn: self-defense."

Strolling over to the corner of the lobby, where Chester Tilyon had placed the desks and filing cabinets from his real-estate office, Sheriff Harley remarked approvingly:

"A good idea, Tilyon, setting up your business here. Pomelo City never was much of a town, but you and Welf are all that's left of it. It's safer for the two of you to stick together."

FENN and the other crackers were moving from the lobby, deciding that they had been dismissed. The sheriff had dropped the ghost theory, but they still clung to it.

Catching their mutters, The Shadow heard one man argue that it might have been Betterly's ghost. The others didn't agree. Feeling badly about Bayne, they decided that their feud was a mistaken one. It was Fenn who suggested another possibility.

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"I seen ghost lights t'other night," he voiced, in a low, confident drawl. "In that empty filling station on the abandoned road. Nobody but a ghost would be hanging around a place like that, the way it's like to fall into the sinkhole under it."

Fenn's idea carried weight, judging from the nods that his companions gave as they left the hotel. Looking toward Tilyon and the sheriff, The Shadow observed them still engaged in conversation. Neither had heard what Fenn said.

But Welf, standing behind the desk, was close enough to hear. Welf's elbows were propped up; his chin was resting in his hands, while his eyes were half closed in a sleepy fashion. His pose, as The Shadow analyzed it, could be a pretense.

Sounds of departing cars came from outdoors. Fenn and his backwoods friends were leaving town. Judging from the direction that the cars took, none was going toward the abandoned road that Fenn had mentioned. Joining Tilyon and the sheriff, The Shadow gave a sidelong look toward Welf.

A sly smile showed itself on Welf's lips. Then, shaking himself from his pretended drowse, he came over and joined the others. His expression became poker-faced, as he listened to Sheriff Harley.

"There's been strangers roaming this territory," the sheriff was telling Tilyon. "I heard that from Graham Clenwick, when I was over to his ranch. He thinks they're cattle thieves, but maybe they're worse than that. Beginning tomorrow, I'm going to search every shack in this county."

"I'm suspicious of strangers. That don't apply to you, Mr. Cranston" Harley smiled toward The Shadow "because any man who comes out into the open is to be trusted. I mean strangers that stay in abandoned farmhouses. We've found traces of them."

Starting toward the door, the sheriff was met by Woodley, the taxi driver, who whispered something to him. The sheriff nodded; turning about, he said:

"Maybe you're fixing to go to Leesville, Mr. Cranston. If you are, we'll wait until you get packed."

"No, thank you, sheriff," replied The Shadow, calmly. "I prefer the quiet of Pomelo City. I take it that tonight's commotion was something out of the ordinary."

Grunting a good night, the sheriff left, accompanied by the astonished Woodley. Turning to Welf and Tilyon, The Shadow added, in his same even tone:

"I like your hotel, Mr. Welf. You can count upon me as a steady guest. I am also glad to see that you are in business, Mr. Tilyon. Tomorrow, I would like to talk about buying some real estate."

WHILE both men stood speechless, The Shadow strolled toward the stairs. Welf and Tilyon, the last of the diehards doing business in Pomelo City, had met a person more remarkable than a ghost. They had found a customer.

As for The Shadow, his disguised lips voiced a whispered laugh as he reached his darkened room. Reaching for cloak and hat, he resumed the black garments that he had so recently discarded. They, like his guns, would be needed for another venture, to begin very soon.

The Shadow intended to visit the forgotten filling station where Fenn had seen the "ghost lights." Perhaps it was the present habitation of the "persons unknown" responsible for the death of Louis Bayne. He was in no

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hurry, however, to begin his expedition. There was something else that he expected first.

Listening at his partly opened door, The Shadow could hear sounds from the lobby below. He was checking on Welf and Tilyon. He heard a good night, spoken in Welf's voice; then footsteps on the stairs. Oddly, the sounds dwindled as they reached the second floor; but The Shadow knew why.

Welf, having lulled Tilyon, was advancing on tiptoe, to listen at the door of his lone guest, Cranston.

Silently closing the door, The Shadow heard Welf's sneaky approach. Soon satisfied that his guest had retired, Welf stole away. The Shadow moved toward the window; outside, feeble street lamps had been extinguished, but the scene glowed dimly from the embers of burned buildings across the way.

Swinging out through the window, The Shadow lowered himself beside the wall. A clinging thing of darkness against the grimy old building, he remained unnoticeable until he dropped. Even then, his cloaked shape showed but fleetingly.

Peering through the corner of a window, The Shadow saw Tilyon in the lobby. The real-estate man was seated at a desk, busy with papers that he was taking from an open filing cabinet. Tilyon was too occupied to notice what was going on behind him.

Martin Welf was stealing down the stairway from the second floor in a fashion remarkably catlike, considering his portly build. Past Tilyon, Welf eased toward a doorway to the kitchen, threw back a pleased grin when he reached his goal without detection. From the kitchen, Welf could easily get outdoors and go his own way without Tilyon's knowledge.

There was only one plausible answer as to Welf's destination. He was going to the abandoned filling station that he had heard Fenn mention. Welf knew that the dwellers there were human not ghosts, as Fenn supposed. Whether Welf regarded them as friends or foemen, was a question yet unanswered.

But Martin Welf would not be the only visitor to that forgotten spot, nor the first. Already, another figure was on the move, starting swiftly for the same goal, to be there ahead of Welf.

He was one who, more than any other, could claim the title as the ghost of Pomelo City, for he had been mistaken for a weird specter this very night.

The Shadow!

CHAPTER V. THE BURIED GHOST

Two slanted sentinels reared themselves in darkness. They were the battered, paintless gasoline standards that fronted the abandoned filling station on the forgotten road just outside of Pomelo City.

Like the tilted standards, the building itself was askew. It was another evidence of the ill luck that had dogged all enterprise in the neighborhood of Pomelo City. The owner of the filling station had been unfortunate enough to build the structure over a future sinkhole.

Gradually, honeycombed rock had given way, until the owner had considered the place unsafe. With business gone, he had left these parts, abandoning the building to a fate that was gradually overtaking it.

The oddity was that the filling station had not already collapsed. Even in darkness, its walls gave the appearance of a strain too great for further support.

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Shrouding a tiny flashlight in the folds of his cloak, The Shadow found the reason for the building's survival, as he approached the side wall. Attached to the filling station was a sort of shed that served as a garage and workshop. Planted on solid ground, the shed served as a prop against the canted building.

Evidently the filling-station proprietor had been up to date, for the shed had a grease pit, a thing uncommon in rural Florida.

Perhaps the digging of the pit and the installation of large gasoline tanks had aided the progress of a hidden sinkhole. The pit, however, was still intact, except that its concrete lining was badly cracked.

The shed had no door, but its rear wall was complete, serving as a lopsided wedge against the weight of the leaning service station. How long it would last was a question; but any severe test, such as a heavy rain or a strong wind, would undoubtedly dispose of the last prop and complete the building's doom.

There was a door leading from the shed into the filling station proper. Trying it guardedly, The Shadow found that it was bolted from the other side. Leaving the shed, he circled the structure. Reaching the far side, he saw the "ghost lights" that Fenn had mentioned.

They were eerie, those lights, strange streaks of glow that would appear spooky from a distance, but which were very simply explained by closer observation. They came from cracks in the wall, and a dim space above showed that the roof widened into a large fissure.

Reaching the roof was an easy task for The Shadow. He returned to the back of the shed, used the outside of the rear wall to reach the lower roof. Then, getting a clutch between spread boards beneath the torn tar paper, he worked his way to the gap that he had observed.

THE interior of the service station, viewed from above, was nothing but a large, bare one-room shack. It had two doors one at the front, the other at the side leading into the shed.

Its windows were boarded over and the present occupants had stuffed the crevices with newspaper, something which they had failed to do with cracks high up the wall and along the roof.

At present, there were two occupants. They made a thuggish-looking pair, with their ratlike faces. Guns bulged from their hips; their conversation came in snarls.

Their talk began when one reached for a bottle of liquor that stood on a big empty carton which served them as a table. The other stopped him, with the comment:

"Lay off, Skate! Tony wouldn't like it."

"O.K., Dingbat," returned Skate. "What Tony says goes. Only, it's been a long time since we've talked to Tony Belgo."

The name was familiar to The Shadow. Tony Belgo was a big-shot New York crook whose disrepute equaled his misdeeds. It was unusual, however, to encounter Belgo's outposts in a remote section such as this.

"We've hung around here long enough," asserted Skate, as if to excuse his desire for the bottle. "The way we've been sneaking from one farmhouse to another, the yaps will be thinking we put the jinx on this burg."

"Let 'em think it," snapped Dingbat. "Tony told us to stick with Enwald, didn't he?"

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"Yeah, but what's it getting us?"

"We'll know when Enwald gets back. He's about due."

The statement was correct. From his vantage point on the roof, The Shadow could observe something unknown to Skate and Dingbat. A car with dim lights was creeping along the abandoned road, obviously heading for this filling station.

It couldn't be Welf. If the hotel man had used a car, he would have been here long ago. Obviously, it must be the man called Enwald.

While The Shadow watched, the car purred up to the station and nosed into the shed that housed the grease pit. Dingbat caught the throbs of the motor when it arrived. He unbolted the door in answer to a rapped signal.

The man who entered was sallow and peak-faced. His expression was a glum one, and the first thing he did was shoulder Dingbat aside in order to reach the bottle. After a long drink, Enwald squatted in a rickety chair and stared at his two pals.

"Well?" demanded Dingbat. "What about it? Going into town?"

"Not tonight," returned Enwald in a smooth but dejected tone. "Hell busted loose there! It wouldn't be smart, showing up right after the sheriff was on deck investigating a fire that burned half the town."

Dingbat and Skate showed interest. They wanted to know who started the blaze.

"The crackers, I guess," declared Enwald. "Nobody would be starting fires to collect insurance money. The companies wouldn't pay on anything in a burg like Pomelo City."

He reached for the bottle again. Dingbat offered no objection, as he had with Skate. He simply inserted a reminder, which he voiced with a significant growl.

"Tony's waiting to hear from you, Enwald," said Dingbat. "You sold him on the proposition of going after this guy Clenwick, who owns the big ranch. Better not forget it."

"I'm not forgetting it." Enwald's tone carried its easy purr. "There's something you fellows want to remember, too. Tony is leaving the whole thing up to me. If I say the job looks good, Tony will go ahead with it. If I say to lay off, he'll listen."

"That's all right by me. Only, Tony will be sore if he don't hear one way or the other."

"He can wait a day or two more. Right now, I'm going to have another drink. Then we'll clear out of this dump and pick a better place to stay, tonight."

THE only break to the ensuing silence was the gurgle of liquid pouring into a glass. Passing moments, however, brought recollections to The Shadow. He was piecing past facts to the present, summing up the existing factors in and around Pomelo City.

First, there were the residents of the jinx town itself: Welf, Tilyon, and formerly Bayne. Next, the backwoods faction, as represented by Fenn and the other natives. Both of those groups had suffered, apparently, from the hoodoo that dominated this territory.

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Third in the list was a rancher named Clenwick, mentioned earlier by the sheriff, later by Enwald. That brought The Shadow's thoughts to the fourth faction, at present on actual display: Enwald and the two thugs supplied him by a crook named Tony Belgo.

Enwald had come here to make trouble for Clenwick. Behind such trouble lay crime. All that could have a bearing on events in Pomelo City earlier this evening. It could date back farther, to the time when a hoodoo had first struck this region.

The fact that Dingbat and Skate knew nothing about the fire until Enwald told them, merely indicated greater depth to the plot. There might be other groups of thugs posted elsewhere, all under Enwald's control.

He was a smooth-looking person, this Enwald; his very manner marked him as something of an enigma. He was the sort who could be working on his own, while pulling a deal with Tony Belgo.

Was Enwald linked with Martin Welf?

As The Shadow pondered on that question, slow, crunching footsteps sounded from the gravel in front of the filling station. A flashlight blinked, then darkened. Enwald must have caught the sound, or spotted a gleam through some crack in the wall, for he spoke hastily to his companions.

"Douse the glim," undertoned Enwald. "Somebody is out front. Get to the shed. I'll join you."

Dingbat blew out the oil lantern that illuminated the bare room. Footsteps moved about; The Shadow could hear the drawing of a bolt. Then came silence, long and painfully slow. Stretching toward the spot where the roof crevice widened, The Shadow worked his legs through and downward.

He was dangling in darkness, above a space where all was silent. The only sounds were from the shed. Whether Enwald had joined the thugs at the car did not matter. If the sallow man still remained, The Shadow would be able to handle him alone. Hanging by his hands from the gap in the roof, The Shadow prepared for the drop, then let go.

With a surprisingly slight thump, a black shape landed in blackness. A gloved hand was drawing an automatic, the instant that The Shadow reached the floor. With a soundless whirl, The Shadow was away from the landing spot, toward the door that led to the shed. Had Enwald been on hand to spring at the arrived intruder, he would have found nothingness.

But Enwald was gone. The Shadow heard his voice from the car. A moment more, The Shadow would have been on his way to the shed, to trail the crooks, leaving the empty nest to Welf; but an interruption ruined the move.

The door of the shack flung inward, a flashlight bored the darkness. There was a sharp, elated cry from the front of the place a tone that The Shadow recognized as Welf's. Though incoherent, it told all.

Welf had found the ghost!

The Shadow was directly in the path of the burning flashlight. He looked like a ghost, but he was human and Welf knew it. Ghosts didn't carry guns, whereas The Shadow did.

IT was Welf who stood in danger; not The Shadow. The thing to do was drive Welf back before Enwald and the thugs came after him. To accomplish that, The Shadow wheeled to the depth of the room, shoving his gun threateningly toward Welf. Instead of quailing, Welf opened fire.

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His first shots were hasty; therefore, wide. Knowing that Welf would try to trap him in the nearer corner, The Shadow did the unexpected. He reversed his course, toward the door to the shed that served as garage. There, he could meet incoming thugs, slug them back with a surprise attack, and save Welf from death. A perfect plan, had Enwald decided to return.

But Enwald had a different idea. As The Shadow reached the door to the shed and yanked it open, a motor roared beyond. With a lurch, the car left its parking spot above the grease pit. Carrying Enwald and his pals as passengers, it smashed through the rear wall of the shed!

Enwald had done more than make a getaway. He had broken the prop that saved the filling station from ruin. The rumble that followed the motor's roar was a sound far more formidable. Welf's wild shots sounded puny in comparison with the splintering crashes that thundered from every wall.

The flashlight found The Shadow at the doorway to the shed. Welf aimed, accurately for once, and pressed the trigger, but his shot was too late to drill the figure that he mistook for a ghost. The Shadow was no longer there when Welf fired.

The Shadow was gone with the dropping floor, into engulfing blackness. The frantic dive he took was long, but downward, smothered beneath the caving mass of walls and roof. With one huge shudder, the doomed building had collapsed, carrying The Shadow into the lurking sinkhole beneath.

From a living fighter, The Shadow had become a buried ghost!

CHAPTER VI. TWO MEN HOPE

WHATEVER his own fate, The Shadow had certainly saved the life of Martin Welf. So suddenly had things happened, that Welf was unable to realize the result until it was all over. His gun emptied, he was still tugging the trigger, and holding his flashlight out, when he saw that he no longer had a target.

That wasn't all. Everything else was gone the car, the shed, as well as the filling station. Welf stared, unbelieving, then lowered his flashlight. Beyond a spot that had once marked the doorway to a dilapidated building, lay a sea of debris.

A sinkhole, shaped like an inverted cone, had swallowed the remnants of the collapsed building. Rubbish lay like waves, half a dozen feet below; probably the pile of shattered planking extended to a depth of twenty feet.

Welf's foot slipped on the edge; he dropped the flashlight as he caught his footing. The torch clattered down into the loose junk and disappeared. Staggering back, Welf gripped one of the tilted gasoline standards, clutched it to make sure that he was on solid ground.

Off in the distance, the astonished man saw the dwindle of dim lights. He realized that a car had shaken itself clear from the falling wreckage and carried away some occupants.

Who they were, or how many, Welf could not guess. But he knew that one being a ghost, perhaps had remained, to be buried beneath the collapsing building.

Welf shuddered. He remembered The Shadow's gun, the thing that had made him think the black-clad figure to be human. But he recalled that the gun had not answered his revolver shots. Nor had Welf's shots seemed to take any effect whatever upon that specter in black.

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It must have been a ghost the ghost of a man with a gun. Perhaps it was the embodiment of the jinx that had ruined Pomelo City, for the collapse of the old filling station simply represented another disaster to the town.

With that thought, Welf turned about, began a groping, stumbling course back toward the town itself. He had the urge to travel fast, but couldn't. Not only did he lack a flashlight to pick his way along the miserable road, but his knees shook so badly that they could scarcely support his portly frame.

Not once did Welf look back toward the ruin. He wanted to forget it, fearing that the ghost would manage somehow to emerge from its tomb. Such a thing seemed possible to Welf's strained imagination.

It was possible. It happened!

EVEN while Welf's stumbly footfalls still sounded from the poor paving, there was a stir amid the wreckage in the sinkhole. A gloved hand slid upward, tested a shattered crossbeam, pressed it to one side. Boards slipped downward, missed a slouch-hatted head that promptly shifted aside.

The Shadow was playing a grim game of jackstraws. In the midst of crisscrossed beams and planks. He had made one amazing escape from destruction; a swift one. Now, he was engaged in a slow-motion effort to get back to solid ground, with every move threatening doom.

At times, boards slipped endways; their slide made the whole mass settle deeper. Yet The Shadow, fairly close to the surface when he began his trip, managed always to gain a new grip and a solid foothold. Head and shoulders up from the debris, he caught a long strip of metal, gave an upward pull.

There was a clatter as he came free. Boards rattled downward as he wrenched past them, but their fall was not a long one. They filled the actual space that The Shadow had left, and the sudden way in which they choked the gap was an explanation of The Shadow's self-preservation.

When the ground had given under the smash of the collapsing building, the near wall of the grease pit had crumpled with it. But The Shadow, diving in that very direction, had found a clear path to what remained of the pit.

There, flattened beneath a half wall of concrete, he had lain in a protecting pocket, while timbers had slid into the sinkhole itself.

Chunks of wood, mostly the ruins of the shed, had imprisoned him, but when settled, they had not formed a serious barrier. Fortunately, the building was of somewhat flimsy construction, whereas the concrete was strong.

The metal strip that The Shadow had gripped was the ledge along the remaining side of the pit. Firmly fixed in the concrete, it gave the very sort of hold he needed to come back to the surface. It was well, though, that he emerged when he did.

Rumblings sounded from below, as the sinkhole made new inroads. As he came to his feet, some distance from the pit, The Shadow heard a crackle that marked the yielding of concrete. Those crackles were followed by the dull thump of disintegrated stone, finding its way downward in chunks.

WHEN Martin Welf reached the hotel, he was too shaky to attempt a stealthy entry. He stumbled in through the front door, and his arrival brought a startled outcry from Chester Tilyon, who was still busy at his desk.

Sagged in a chair, Welf related the details of his journey. He told Tilyon how he had overheard Fenn talking

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about ghost lights out at the old filling station.

"I was afraid the sheriff would make another blunder," explained Welf. "It seemed better to go out there on my own and take a look around. But it seems" Welf shook his head ruefully "that I did some blundering myself."

"You certainly let some trouble makers get away," declared Tilyon. "But what about this ghost you saw?"

"I don't know," returned Welf, slowly. "Maybe there wasn't one, Chester. Whoever went away in the car certainly would not have left anyone behind."

"Probably not," agreed Tilyon. "But suppose that someone else was looking around there, just as you were?"

The question made Welf stare at Tilyon. Both were so concentrated on the subject at hand that neither saw the moving blackness entering the lobby from the kitchen doorway. It had crossed to the stairway and blended shadowlike into the upper darkness, when Welf suddenly gulped:

"You mean Cranston?"

Tilyon nodded solemnly. Welf came to his feet and started shakily upstairs. Tilyon followed; stood by when Welf knocked at Cranston's door. At last, a sleepy voice responded.

Welf gave a grateful sigh. He didn't know what to say, so Tilyon did the talking for him.

"Sorry, Mr. Cranston," said Tilyon. "We thought you were still awake. We're having coffee downstairs, in case you would like to join us."

Hearing Cranston accept the invitation, Tilyon motioned to Welf. They went downstairs and hurriedly began to get the coffee ready before Cranston arrived. When they heard his footsteps descending, Tilyon undertoned to Welf:

"Don't mention your trip tonight. Let's boost the town, the way we intended. It's our only chance for a comeback, Martin. Cranston may be interested."

Tilyon did the boosting, while the three drank their coffee in the lobby. Pomelo City wasn't a bad place at all, the way the real-estate man described it. He laid a map upon his desk and indicated a large red circle, with Pomelo City in the center.

"This is a pomelo area," stated Tilyon. "As you probably know, the term 'pomelo' is the correct name for grapefruit. When growers first came here, they specialized in grapefruit, so the town was later called Pomelo City.

"We had our boom days. The town grew, like the groves. Finally, we settled back to normal, an overbuilt town; but we had a population of several hundred, and the place offered a real future. Growers were raising oranges, as well as grapefruit; slopes were planted with tuna trees, to meet the rising demand for lacquer.

"Farmers occupied the sparser lands, what was left was bought by Graham Clenwick, a very wealthy rancher, who began to improve the local cattle. Then" Tilyon gave a depreciating shrug "well, we just ran into a jinx, that was all."

Cranston's eyes were steady, questioning. Tilyon finally decided to admit all facts. He mentioned the Medfly,

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sinkholes, drying lakes, the appearance of the black wolf, unreported elsewhere in Florida. People had become fearful; chance accidents had caused others to migrate.

"Those things could hardly have been designed," argued Tilyon. "At least, not all of them. It's been slow panic, encouraged by superstition. Business went dead as a result. But Welf and I have stayed, and so has Clenwick.

"He's had his troubles. He had to slaughter his first herd of cattle, because of some disease that ruined it. But Clenwick is banking on the future. He knows that Florida is the future land for cattle raising. There are large ranches throughout the State, and Clenwick intends to make his as good as the best."

TALK of Clenwick interested The Shadow, since he knew that the wealthy rancher was the cause of Enwald's presence in this vicinity. Casually, he encouraged Tilyon to mention Clenwick further. Welf put in an impatient interruption.

"Let's talk about Kewanee Springs," he said to Tilyon. "That will interest Mr. Cranston more than anything else he could hear about."

"In just a moment," smiled Tilyon. "I'll finish the Clenwick story first."

Tilyon ran his finger along the map, indicated a road that ended in a tiny black square.

"This is Clenwick's present residence," he said. "It's the old Severn mansion. The place is owned by Laura Severn and her brother Roger, who's an invalid. The house was built a hundred years ago, and it's belonged to the Severns ever since. They are right nice people.

"The trouble is, they had to sell most of their property, this generation did. All they have left is the house and the grounds around it. That would have gone, too, if Graham Clenwick hadn't helped them out. He bought up the mortgage so they wouldn't be evicted, and he's living there at the house, paying them enough rent to carry the interest charges."

Tilyon might have kept on talking about Laura Severn and her brother, if Welf had not reminded him that the discussion concerned Kewanee Springs, as its principal theme. Tilyon promptly moved his finger to the right of the road that showed on the map.

"The Springs are over here," he said. "They form the main source of the Kewanee River. Like a lot of other large springs in Florida, they give so large a flow, that the river is navigable right up to the source.

"There's millions of gallons of water flowing from those Springs, every day. Those millions of gallons may mean millions of dollars, Mr. Cranston! Not just from Kewanee Springs, but from what the place could do to bring back Pomelo City. Kewanee, when developed, ought to bring a hundred thousand tourists here every year.

"We've got the town, all waiting for them. They'd fill it, Mr. Cranston. We wouldn't have to worry about citrus groves, tuna trees, and ranches. As the only gateway to Kewanee Springs, Pomelo City would make the boom days look like child's play!"

Tilyon's enthusiasm was real. He began a description of Kewanee Springs, terming the place as "Nature's Wonderland." He was talking in terms of golden grottoes, crystal waters, and unspoiled jungle, when Cranston intervened with the practical question:

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"Who owns Kewanee Springs?"

"We do," inserted Welf. "Tilyon and I. If you'll back the development, Mr. Cranston, we'll give you a one-third interest, with certain costs deductible. We can talk such terms later but first, you ought to see the Springs."

"I believe that I have heard of Kewanee Springs before," recalled The Shadow. "There is an Indian legend in reference to the place, is there not?"

Tilyon gave an uneasy laugh.

"Yes," he admitted. "Some story about a devil that used to drive the Seminole Indians away from these parts. There are people who still believe it. The legend has had its part in causing superstitious people to leave here.

"But this jinx stuff can't go on. Intelligent people laugh at talk of ghosts. In fact, it's the type of thing that ought to bring them here. My idea is to meet the situation head-on: play up the Seminole devil, and make him work for us!"

THOUGH Tilyon was no longer trying to make a sales talk, he was actually succeeding with one. His theory of how to beat the Seminole devil was better than his description of Kewanee Springs. Welf was observant; he saw that Cranston was interested. When Tilyon paused to take a breath, Welf inserted the suggestion that they start for Kewanee Springs in the morning.

That ended the discussion for the night. Back in his room, The Shadow gazed out into darkness and whispered a soft-toned laugh. Clenwick, the ranch owner, and his friends, the Severns, could wait until tomorrow night.

Then, The Shadow would find a way to look in on them, as he had with Enwald and the thugs furnished by Tony Belgo. The Shadow was confident that future adventures after nightfall could be handled with less dire consequences than those which had attended his recent foray.

Meanwhile, in Kewanee Springs, with its legend of the Seminole devil, The Shadow might find some new clue to the strange hoodoo that had turned Pomelo City into a forgotten city of ghosts!

CHAPTER VII. DEATH BY THE BRINK

MORNING looked peaceful in Pomelo City. Charred ruins opposite the old hotel had improved the scene, if anything. Bayne's store and Tilyon's real-estate office had been as scarred and ramshackly as most of the structures that still remained, while the obliterated arcade could have been termed the town's outstanding eyesore.

Discounting the ugly buildings, the dead palm trees and the battered paving, The Shadow found the outlook pleasant. The horizon showed pine woods and distant cypress clumps, while the ground had green patches of luxuriant palmetto.

Except for the buzzards that roosted on the battered water tower, the distant view was typical of Florida. To all appearances, this territory had a future. Two men, at least, believed in it: Welf and Tilyon.

Those two were waiting breakfast, when their new friend, Cranston, joined them. Welf had appointed himself cook and had handled the job well, as the bacon and eggs proved. During the meal, the three chatted about outside matters, avoiding all discussion of Pomelo City.

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The first indication that local subjects were still troublesome came when a car pulled up in front of the hotel. A voice shouted through the doorway; Welf hurried to the sidewalk, Cranston and Tilyon following.

Beside the car stood a man who was mopping his forehead with a grimy handkerchief. He pointed to the rear seat. There lay another man, his sightless eyes staring from a swollen purplish face.

"Bit by a coral snake," said the man by the car. "Too late to take him to the Leesville Hospital. My nerve was getting me, so I stopped here."

Welf looked at the body in the car. He gave a solemn nod, as he pronounced the one word:

"Dead!"

The man on the curb pocketed his handkerchief and climbed back into the car. He seemed somewhat relieved at learning the exact status of the victim.

"Guess I'll drive to the Leesville morgue," he said. "Good—by. I won't be seeing you fellows again."

The car pulled away. Welf watched it pass the water tower. He looked relieved, too, because the buzzards did not swoop down. Evidently the big birds were overfed.

"There go the last two orange growers," remarked Welf, glumly. "The live one says he won't be back. I don't blame him for "

Welf stopped at a warning glance from Tilyon. Both looked at Cranston, who appeared quite unperturbed. Tilyon suggested that they get started for Kewanee Springs.

Ten minutes later, the three were riding from Pomelo City in Tilyon's car. From the sand road that they traveled, the scene was lifeless, except for the thin smoke of distant brush fires, a common sight in Florida, where natives frequently burn out the underbrush from wooded patches.

Ahead lay a thick stretch of vivid green, which took on a truly tropical appearance as they reached it. Parking the car at the entrance to the Springs, the visitors followed a footpath beneath huge live oaks, where great beards of Spanish moss hung from massive boughs.

The woodland had a cavernous effect; a profound silence gripped the setting. Sunlight was dwindled by the mossy branches, producing a cool, comfortable effect. A limpid pool came into sight, completing the picture of a natural paradise.

KEWANEE SPRINGS occupied a great limestone chalice, its brim fringed with palmetto. Above were pines and oaks; off in the distance were the tufted tops of tall cabbage palms.

The pool itself was of perfect blue, an absolute reflection of the sky. At spots where trees bent above the brim, the blue hue faded. There, every detail of the bank was mirrored by crystalline water.

A few hundred feet across, the pool showed a gap in the farther bank. That was the beginning of the Kewanee River, perpetually supplied by its unfailing source. Clusters of floating hyacinths added a touch of colorful splendor to the pool's outlet.

The squatly hulk of a flat-bottomed boat was drawn up beside the shore. Posts set in the gunwales supported a weather-beaten canopy. A pair of battered oars lay in the stern. When they reached the boat, Tilyon pointed

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to its interior.

An oblong well ran from bow to stern. It was built on the principle of a centerboard well; high walled, so that no water would come up through it. The bottom of the well consisted of framed sheets of glass.

Tilyon explained, unnecessarily, that the canopy cut off the sunlight, thus rendering objects visible through the glass bottom. He took the oars, while Cranston and Welf sat on either side of the oblong well, laying their coats on the seat beside them.

Shoving the boat out from the shore, Tilyon propelled it across a shallow stretch of eel grass. He reached a deeper space, where the grass parted to display a limestone hollow. He announced the depth as thirty feet, though it seemed that the bottom was within a hand's reach.

Fat, big-horned catfish were lolling in the cavity; among them, a smaller species: striped fish called breame. Large turtles flapped idly beneath the plate glass, poked their noses upward and seemed to wonder at the substance that they struck.

Drifting from that spot, the boat reached another fissure in the rock, where the limestone had a yellowish glisten.

Tilyon called the spot the golden grotto, and pointed out long, slinky fish, curiously spotted. They were the leopard gar, creatures of prey, like their namesakes.

Crossing another patch of eel grass, the boat reached an immense cavity. Looking up at the bank, The Shadow saw a high rock, its exterior broken in steplike fashion. Its angles continued down beneath the water, to form a ledge twenty feet below the surface.

Those twenty feet, however, did not constitute the entire depth of this cavity. Below the ledge was a sheer drop, which Tilyon estimated as sixty feet in total depth.

"The Devil's Rock," he said, pointing to the shore. "They call the shelf below the surface the 'Devil's Ledge.' Under the shelf is the dwelling place of a great warrior's spirit.

"Ages ago, according to the legend, this pool was shallow and dry. A drought settled on the land, and when pleas to the rain god brought no result, a Seminole chief mounted the forbidden Devil's Rock and offered himself as sacrifice to the evil spirit dwelling in the earth.

"Immediately, the solid limestone split below him and a vast river of water gushed into life. In keeping with his promise, the chief hurled himself into the new-formed pool, and was swallowed beneath the broken ledge. There, he dwells with the earth devils, but at times his ghost appears upon the Devil's Rock.

"Seminoles claim to have seen him standing there; but at any sign of a human presence, he plunges into the pool, vanishes beneath the ledge, and does not return until his next appointed hour."

THE SHADOW was listening carefully to Tilyon's version of the legend. In all such stories, there was usually a basic truth. Looking into the depths of the huge spring, The Shadow analyzed the possible facts that might have produced the Indian tale.

Having recounted the legend, Tilyon was producing statistics. The great spring, he declared, was actually a subterranean river, fed by other underground streams. Its volume of water varied from twenty to thirty million gallons daily, according to the season.

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Enough water to supply the city of Miami, if anyone wanted to pipe it there. At present, the water went to Jacksonville, but not by pipeline. The Kewanee flowed into the Oklawaha, which in turn flowed into the St. John's River, on which Jacksonville was the principal port.

"I'm not thinking of this place as a reservoir, though," declared Tilyon, seriously, as he slowly rowed the boat from the great spring. "A trip like this is worth a dollar of anybody's money. We'll have a lot of new boats built, and equipped with electric motors.

"During the winter season, Kewanee should attract a thousand customers a day. We can add the feature of a jungle cruise down the river. They've done it other places, so Kewanee won't be unique. But the other springs look civilized. We'll keep Kewanee primitive."

He was pushing the boat toward the outlet, pointing out more limestone fissures as the boat passed across them. The Shadow noted that they differed in hue; some were blue, others chalkish in their whiteness. New varieties of underwater plants appeared as the boat progressed.

"If this scow doesn't hit a rock or an alligator, I'll show you the lower spring," promised Tilyon. "It's right around the bend, and you never saw a prettier woodland glade! Every time I look at it, I expect to see a flock of dryads or nymphs come dancing out from the palmettos. That one spot, alone, is worth more than "

Tilyon went voiceless. The boat had swung the bend. Staring straight ahead, he held the oars motionless above the water. The Shadow looked in the direction of Tilyon's gaze, and Welf did the same.

Near a small rock at the fringe of the promised sylvan pool was a girl who rivaled the forest nymphs that Tilyon talked about. Her slender, graceful figure was accentuated by the thin silken garment that adorned it.

Startled by the splash of a dropping oar, the girl raised her head and looked toward the boat. Her blue eyes opened wide; her lips parted in a soundless gasp. Alarm brought perfection to a face that was beautiful against a background of fluffy golden hair.

Behind the girl lay a bathing suit, with clothes that she had already discarded. Not expecting intruders in this isolated spot, the girl had approached the pool while she was undressing for a swim. At sight of the approaching boat, she drew folds of flimsy silk up toward her shoulders, gave a quick glance toward her other garments.

Then, realizing the scantiness of her costume, she acted upon a sudden impulse. Seeking quick escape from her plight, the girl twisted toward the pool, flung her arms ahead of her as she made a quick dive into the water.

At that moment, a log stirred from the bank. Only The Shadow saw it come to life. His casual eyes, alone, were taking in the entire scene, while his companions had their attention centered on the girl. The Shadow recognized the thing from the bank, just as it began to move.

It wasn't a log; it was an alligator. From ugly nose to tapered tail tip, it measured a full sixteen feet. Large enough to be a man-eater, the reptile was heading after human prey. The splash of the girl's dive, told that she was in the water, straight across the alligator's path.

NEITHER Tilyon nor Welf saw the sudden speed that their new friend, Cranston, displayed.

With his left hand, The Shadow gripped one of the half-rotted posts that supported the boat's frayed canopy. His right, whipping into the folds of his discarded coat, snatched something that he had buried out of sight.

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Just as the girl's golden-haired head bobbed up from the water, The Shadow went overboard in a sideward dive. He was still gripping the canopy post, and his sheer weight ripped it loose. Clutching the broken chunk of wood, The Shadow landed flat, his left side striking the water first.

Neither Tilyon nor Welf heard the ripping of the wood, nor did they notice the shiver of the boat. They were chilled by the scream that the girl uttered, as she saw the alligator's snout loom through the water, mere yards away. Frantically, she twisted about and tried to swim for shore, too late.

Big jaws had opened. The whip of the reptile's tail spurred the creature forward. Another second, and the cavernous mouth would have gulped for its helpless prey.

But the alligator never reached that golden-haired head, and the sleek shoulder just beneath it.

Into that wide-open mouth was thrust another head, along with a pair of ready hands. Daring the coming click of the creature's fangish teeth, The Shadow thrust in his left hand, with the stout cudgel that it bore. His right fist, too, was swinging into action, bearing an object that he had carried high and dry: a .45-caliber automatic.

The Shadow had brought rescue to the girl, only to dare the same fate that she had escaped. Death was due upon the brink of the tropical pool. Whether the human fighter would survive, or his reptilian foe gain victory, was a question that the next dozen seconds would decide!

CHAPTER VIII. THE BROKEN JINX

STARING from the drifting boat, Tilyon and Welf thought that they were witnessing the finish of their new friend, Cranston. They knew the dangers of battling a bull alligator in its native habitat. Not only had Cranston taken on the, largest 'gator that either of the witnesses had ever seen, but he was giving the creature all the odds.

Wrestling an alligator was one thing; an expert human might survive such combat. But to thrust head and arms into a 'gator's open jaws was a quick route to suicide. Unfortunately, Cranston had been unable to take another choice. His measure was the only method that could have saved the girl.

Raps from the stick that Cranston held would trouble the 'gator less than fleabites. As for the .45 in his other fist, its slugs could dent the reptilian's scales and nothing more.

Tilyon was grabbing an oar, lifting it, to take a blow at the 'gator's back. As he made that move, the oarsman realized its futility. Like Cranston, he was trying to combat a mammoth menace that was nothing short of a floating ironclad.

Neither Tilyon nor Welf had seen The Shadow in action the night before. Hence they did not guess that the fighter they knew as Cranston was capable of special measures in every struggle he undertook. Therefore, what they saw amazed them.

The 'gator's big jaws started shut as The Shadow thrust himself between them, but the teeth did not close upon a victim. Instead, the jaws stopped, retaining a yawn that was scarcely less than complete. The Shadow had used his first weapon more rapidly than the 'gator could bite.

The weapon was the stanchion from the boat. With a twist of his left wrist, The Shadow had turned the stout stick upward in the 'gator's mouth. A veritable wedge, the piece of wood was holding the big jaws wide.

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Had the stick been barbed, the measure would have proven more than temporary. But the ends were blunt; the alligator did not mind them. The creature waggled its broad jaw from side to side, threatening to dispose of the restraining stick. Only the power of The Shadow's clutch prevented it.

The Shadow's head was withdrawn from the 'gator's mouth, but his left arm was necessarily within it. Welf was shouting for Cranston to release the stick and swim away, but that wouldn't help.

The fierce "yonk–yonk" that issued from the 'gator's throat proved that the aquatic beast was fully enraged. The reptile had already proven itself a faster swimmer than the lithe girl who had escaped it. Only by fighting the creature to the death could The Shadow hope to assure his own survival.

Instead of loosing his hold upon the stick, he brought his other hand into action. From the sweep of his arm, the witnesses thought that he was going to club the 'gator's snout with his heavy automatic; but he stopped short of that mark.

The Shadow was simply keeping the gun above water. From the level of the reptile's nostrils, he dipped his fist and shoved the gun into the reptilian's wide–wedged mouth.

THE dart of a shirt–sleeved arm in front of its eyes caused the alligator to take measures of its own. The creature gave a wide lash with its tail; shoving its head down into the water, it carried its human foe with it.

Tilyon was busy thwacking with his oar, hoping to divert attack toward the boat; but Welf saw the 'gator's head, watched the creature's eyes take a long, outward bulge.

They were extending like miniature periscopes, those eyes, proving that the 'gator intended an underwater swim. It was starting the usual procedure that all alligators used when land prey proved too tough: that of keeping below the water's surface until its victim drowned.

With those extended eyes, the 'gator could pick its own path through the pool. It "yonked" again as it dipped its open jaws. Cranston's head dipped completely from sight. Only his right arm was visible through the side of the 'gator's open face.

The next "yonk" was suppressed by a muffled roar. The observers saw a flash within the alligator's mouth. The flash was repeated thrice, in rapid succession, each time with an accompanying roar. Those bursts came from The Shadow's gun.

He wasn't wasting shots from the .45 upon the reptile's scaly, bulletproof hide. With his right fist thrust far into the jagged mouth The Shadow was pumping bullets down the alligator's gullet!

Smoke was curling from the side of those big–toothed jaws, as the 'gator's head went beneath the water, except for its periscopic eyes. Glinting sunlight made it difficult for the men in the boat to see what happened to Cranston. The alligator's tail was lashing the water furiously.

Out of that lashing, the creature took a sideward roll. Its head swung above the surface. Big jaws waggled, then clamped shut. The upright stick was no longer between them. It had disappeared.

So had The Shadow.

For a moment, Welf was crazy enough to think that the alligator had swallowed Cranston entire. Then he heard a shout from Tilyon, who was pointing to the stern of the boat. Cranston's head had come into sight,

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twenty feet away from the stricken alligator. He still had his gun, but he had released the helpful stick. It was floating downstream.

The girl had reached the shore. Kneeling on the bank, she stared toward the pool, saw the alligator's lashing roll and watched its whitish belly come into sight. She knew that the creature was in its death throes, but she could not spy The Shadow. He was beyond the intervening boat.

Blood was marring the crystal water; it made an ugly, oily blotch that drifted with the writhing alligator. The girl mistook the crimson stain for the lifeblood of her rescuer. Coming to her feet, she stood on tiptoe, forgetful of her meager garb.

Water-soaked silk was clinging askew, as the girl poised her lithe body, ready for another dive into the pool; her purpose, this time, to aid her rescuer, if such were possible.

A rattle from the boat ended the girl's tableau. She saw Cranston's face come over the stern of the boat. Tilyon and Welf were helping him on board. He let the gun drop from his right fist, extended his hand to receive the congratulating clasps that his companions offered him.

The girl relaxed. Conscious of herself again, she turned about, gathered up a bundle of clothes and scampered into the palmettos. Gazing from the boat, The Shadow saw the green foliage close behind the girl's pink-clad form.

Tilyon pushed the boat to shore. The girl reappeared, wearing a dress that she had slipped over her shoulders; her feet were incased in sandals that she hadn't taken time to buckle. Brushing back the damp hair that strewed her forehead, she proffered her hand to Cranston, while her lips spoke heartfelt thanks.

Both Welf and Tilyon had met the girl before. She was Laura Severn, who lived in the old mansion where Graham Clenwick was a resident guest. They introduced Laura to Cranston.

"I WAS just a startled fool!" exclaimed Laura, in self-reproach. "I always look for 'gators when I'm ready for a swim. But today I wasn't quite ready when you all came along.

"I've never stayed when I've seen that big 'gator here. He's been watching for me, and he'd have gotten me this time" she emphasized the statement with a lovely shudder "if you hadn't come along, Mr. Cranston."

Calmly, The Shadow claimed the blame as his own, stating that it was the boat's sudden arrival that had caused Laura to so hurriedly seek the pool where danger lurked. His rescue, as he expressed it, was merely an effort to amend an error.

"It's mighty sweet of you," said Laura, "to look at it that way. But I still owe you thanks, Mr. Cranston, and my brother will feel the same. We'd be delighted, sir, if you would accept our hospitality while you are hereabouts."

Welf remarked that Cranston was a guest at the Pomelo Hotel. Laura smiled sympathetically; she knew that Welf needed guests, and would prefer that Cranston should not move to the mansion.

With true Southern courtesy, the girl made her invitation definite, at the same time allowing for Welf's interests.

"If you could have dinner with us this evening," Laura told The Shadow, "I'm sure that Mr. Welf could arrange to bring you to our house and call for you later."

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When Welf agreed that he could, The Shadow accepted the invitation. Laura shook hands again, gave a parting smile and left for the palmettos, to gather up the rest of her clothes and take the path home.

As the three men rowed back to the upper Springs, Tilyon kept vaunting the merits of Kewanee. He was still talking about the place when they reached his car and began the drive back to Pomelo City.

"We'll get that big 'gator and have him stuffed," decided Tilyon. "What an exhibit he will make! There'll be a story to go with it, too. Your story, Cranston: how you rescued the beauty from the beast.

"The Indian legend will do for the upper Springs. Maybe people won't believe it, but they'll like to look at Devil's Rock. They'll believe the story of the alligator fight, though, when they get to the lower Springs.

Glancing sidewise as he drove the car, Tilyon saw Cranston nod, and was pleased. He felt sure that this wealthy stranger from New York would aid in the development of Kewanee Springs and give Pomelo City its real chance for a come-back.

The Shadow's thoughts went farther than Tilyon supposed. The Shadow foresaw that Pomelo City would automatically regain life, when the menace that enshrouded it was gone. Whatever that mysterious menace, it accounted for the ceaseless jinx that had brought death and mystery to these parts.

The jinx was broken. By his rescue of Laura, The Shadow had ended the long line of certain tragedies that had thinned the inhabitants of this region. More than that, The Shadow had gained an opportunity he wanted.

This evening, as Lamont Cranston, he would be a guest at the Severn mansion. There, he would meet Graham Clenwick another man who, like Tilyon and Welf, was staying on the ground despite the existing hoodoo.

From Tilyon and Welf, The Shadow had learned much; but it was all that they could offer. He was confident that Clenwick could supply more facts of value. The Shadow was making progress in his campaign to restore Pomelo City.

Sooner or later, he would have the answer to the riddle that had made the place a city of ghosts!

CHAPTER IX. AT THE MANSION

IT was Tilyon who drove Cranston to the Severn mansion, at five that afternoon. They took a long way around, so that Tilyon could point out some features of the extensive area that constituted Clenwick's cattle domain.

In Florida, straggly towns like Pomelo City were often termed cities, though they had never boasted more than a few hundred inhabitants. It seemed, therefore, that talk of ranches would also be exaggerated. Such was not the case.

Florida cattle ranges were huge, rivaling many in the West. In recent years, they had risen to vast proportions, bringing many cowboys to the State. Dude ranches, too, had been established in sections of Florida, as The Shadow had learned from wealthy friends.

Clenwick's ranch was a big-time enterprise. After passing a desolate stretch where wavering brush fires burned, Tilyon pointed out grazing cattle in a thinned area of timber land.

"Good looking beasts," he observed. "Not scrawny, like the kind the crackers raise. There's no buzzards hovering around here, waiting for cows to drop dead. But those are stock that Clenwick sold to some native.

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The crackers let their cattle roam the open range. Clenwick's property is all fenced in."

They reached the fenced area. The Shadow saw more cattle, among them Brahman steers, imported from Texas.

A mounted cowboy, evidently one of Clenwick's cattle hands, was riding through the woods. He tilted back his ten-gallon hat, to observe the car more closely. Recognizing it as Tilyon's car, he waved a cheery salute.

"Clenwick is keeping the place policed," said Tilyon, approvingly. "What Sheriff Harley said is true. There have been suspicious persons in this neighborhood."

Taking a short cut along a sand road, Tilyon drove in the direction of Kewanee Springs, until he struck the road that led to the mansion. Following that road, they rode through a massive old gate and came upon a sight that only old Florida could have offered.

Time must have stopped when the mansion house was built. The old colonial structure stood beyond a perfect carpet of green lawn, shaded by the finest specimens of live oak anywhere in Florida.

As at Kewanee Springs, the trees gave a cavernous effect, the streamers of Spanish moss resembling stalactites dipping from the ceiling of a grotto. But the space was vaster, and through the open spaces The Shadow could see the white of magnolia trees in full blossom.

The air was sweetly scented with the odors of many flowers. The whistling chirp of the mocking bird brought melody to the surroundings.

Alighting from the car, The Shadow turned to view the scene, while Tilyon drove away. When the sputter of the motor had faded in the distance, the visitor was impressed by the almost mystic silence that pervaded this century-old setting.

Even the mocking birds had quieted. Dreamy laziness held sway. The Shadow's own thoughts were drifting into the past, when a welcoming voice spoke from the mansion doorway:

"Good evening, Mr. Cranston!"

LAURA SEVERN was standing on the veranda. Smiling in greeting, the girl added new charm to the scene. She was attired in a simple frock, which harmonized with the surroundings. Her hair was fluffed again, and daylight, filtering through the lofty trees, gave it the hue of old gold.

In gracious fashion, she ushered the visitor into the mansion. From the quiet central hallway, she pointed out the spacious library and the ancient dining room. Then, conducting Cranston through a rear door that led out beside the long wing of the house, the girl suggested:

"Suppose we visit my brother Roger. Mr. Clenwick has not yet returned from the ranch, so you can meet him later. But it isn't far to where Roger is. He's down near the Seminole Punch Bowl."

The Shadow was quite willing to meet Roger. He was also intrigued to learn more about the Seminole Punch Bowl, whatever it was. Laura led the way along a rustic path that followed a quick-rippling brook. A quarter mile brought them to a tiny lawn in the center of thick circling pines.

A man was stretched out in a wheel chair. Hands clasped behind his head, he was staring upward between his shirt-sleeved elbows. He wore a scowl on his pasty face; the contortions of his lips indicated ugly mutters.

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Laura gave an anxious glance toward Cranston, then called softly:

"Roger!"

Instantly, the man's manner changed. Coming around in his wheel chair, Roger's face was all smile. With a friendly greeting, he extended a warm hand to the visitor.

"Accept my thanks, Mr. Cranston," said Roger, "for rescuing my sister. Laura told me everything that happened, and I agree that the fault was hers, not yours."

During the next half-hour, Roger Severn kept up a lively conversation. He talked about places where he had been, but always his statements were dated. They referred to things of five years ago, or more, before Roger had become the victim of a spinal ailment.

Roger's chat was gay, but it masked bitterness with the world. He was wearing out his strength in conversation. Noting it, Laura told her brother to rest while she showed Cranston the Seminole Punch Bowl, on the other side of the tiny glen.

The bowl was a shallow pit of packed stones that received the little brook. Swirling water formed a whirlpool that slackened as it filled. Then, under pressure, the water was sucked down through the stones.

Filling again, the bowl repeated its action at half-minute intervals. In its small way, the vanishing brook that ran into the Seminole Punch Bowl was as interesting a phenomenon as the great subterranean river that issued from beneath the Devil's Ledge at Kewanee Springs.

It was time to return to the mansion. With a weary smile, Roger decided that he would rather remain at the glen and have his meal brought there. The Shadow walked back to the house with Laura; as they entered the rear door, they heard the clatter of hoofs from the front.

A man dismounted from a horse, handed it to another horseman, and entered the house. A servant had turned on the hallway lights; in the glow, The Shadow saw a tall, heavily built man advancing with long, sure strides.

Seeing Laura, the newcomer swept his rancher's hat from his head. His face was broad, square-jawed, beneath his high-bridged nose. Fixing keen eyes upon Cranston, he finally turned back to Laura, expecting her to introduce the visitor, which she did.

THE man was Graham Clenwick. He hadn't heard the story of Laura's escape from the alligator. The girl told it in vivid detail; Clenwick's face becoming solemn as he listened. He didn't treat the adventure humorously, as Roger had.

When Laura had finished, Clenwick laid his left arm around the girl's shoulders in a protective, fatherly gesture. He extended his right hand to The Shadow in a forceful grip. His thanks were voluble; he gave them in a booming voice.

"There have been too many tragedies around here," announced Clenwick, soberly. "Fortunately, none have fallen upon this household, but I am fearful that they might. You must promise me, Laura, that you will stay away from that dangerous Springs."

Giving a halfway promise, Laura departed for the kitchen, to see about dinner. Clenwick turned to Cranston.

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"This is a remarkable country," declared the rancher, "but a very fearful one. Nature has made strange freaks in this terrain, particularly the sinkholes. I heard today that a new one caved through, carrying an abandoned filling station with it."

Casually, The Shadow asked about the sinkholes, inquiring about such matters as their width and depth.

"Most of them are small and shallow," declared Clenwick, "but apparently they enlarge with years. Take the Giant Sinkhole, for example. Picture a rounded cavity a hundred feet across, withered trees leaning over its brink, dead brush clinging to its precipitous walls. At the bottom, a stagnant pool, so deep that no one has ever measured it.

"When I came here, the Giant Sinkhole was the worst of all local hazards. Cattle wandered into the pit, because the clay brink gave under their weight. For all we know, human beings may have blundered into that fearful trap."

Pacing the floor with a heavy stride, Clenwick gradually lost his solemn expression. He brightened, as he stated:

"I ended the menace of the Giant Sinkhole by fencing it with barbed wire. I have done the same with other sinkholes on my property. I have won the friendship of the natives hereabouts, by supplying them with wire for the same purpose. Every time a new menace appears, I try to counteract it."

Laura entered, to announce that dinner was ready. During the course of the meal, Clenwick began to talk about the jinx that hung over Pomelo City. Like Welf and Tilyon, he argued that it was purely local superstition; but he proposed a different remedy.

"We've got to forget Pomelo City," he boomed. "A difficult step for Welf and Tilyon, but it's better than their plan of rotting with the town. Look at what happened to poor Bayne! I tell you, that town is a city of ghosts!"

"Having seen Pomelo City, Mr. Cranston, I know that you will agree that it is little better than a cemetery. Soon, Welf and Tilyon will be legends, like the Indian ghost of Kewanee Springs. I understand they want to develop the Springs. Have they approached you on the subject?"

The Shadow nodded.

"A good investment," decided Clenwick. "One that I would take up, except for my sole interest in ranching. But first, they should forget Pomelo City. The right step is to abandon that forsaken town and make Kewanee Springs an attraction in its own right."

Clenwick's proposition had soundness. As they retired to the library, he was stating how a lodge and cabins could be built at Kewanee Springs, bringing tourists directly to the place.

"A fresh start is the only way," said Clenwick. "My experience proves it. My ranch, which adjoins this mansion, is building steadily. When ticks and other plagues injured the weaker cattle; I brought in Brahmans.

"I've helped the local cattle raisers, poor fellows, by taking over mortgages that the banks wouldn't handle. I supplied them with stock when their own cattle died. I'll turn this whole area into the best grazing land in Florida "

CLENWICK paused, head tilted, a cigar raised halfway to his mouth. A car had rolled in through the driveway; its smooth hum marked it as a strange one, since most of the local automobiles were rattletraps.

Though Clenwick couldn't place the car by the sound of the motor, The Shadow recognized it. He had heard that same smooth hum the night before, when a car had rolled into the shed beside the abandoned filling station.

The coming of that car promised an early answer to a pressing riddle. Clenwick's visitor was to be the sallow man named Enwald, the smooth crook who was leagued with the Manhattan racketeer, Tony Belgo!

As Lamont Cranston, The Shadow was perfectly placed to learn facts that might pertain to future crime, as well as gaining clues to a mystery of the past the jinx that hovered above Pomelo City!

CHAPTER X. CRIME'S MISSION

USHERED into the library by a servant, the sallow-faced visitor introduced himself by his full name: Roy Enwald. Smooth-mannered and presentable, Enwald looked like anything but a crook. Perhaps it was his lack of company like Dingbat and Skate that gave Enwald gloss on this occasion.

Nevertheless, the shrewdness of his peaked features showed that Enwald might be a schemer in his own right. An odd contrast, his voice had a tone of real sincerity, as he purred:

"I'm a friend of Terry Knight."

Clenwick clapped Enwald on the shoulder.

"You're welcome, then!" boomed the rancher. "Any of Terry's friends are friends of mine!"

Smiling, Enwald lighted a cigar that Clenwick tendered him. Introduced to Cranston, Enwald shook hands very cordially, then looked around the room.

"I expected to find Terry here," said the sallow man, smoothly. "This is the last place where I heard from him."

"Terry has the wanderlust," returned Clenwick, with a broad smile. "He never stays anywhere more than a few months."

"He stayed in Texas a long while."

"Because he was looking for oil. When he found the fields too crowded, he became a rancher. That's how I happened to meet him. My business is raising cattle."

Enwald nodded at Clenwick's statement.

"So I learned in Pomelo City," he said. Then, turning to The Shadow: "Like yourself, Mr Cranston, I am a guest at the Pomelo Hotel. Which reminds me that I have a message for you. Mr. Tilyon says that he will call for you at half past ten."

The message delivered, Enwald returned to the former subject. He wanted to know if Clenwick had heard from Knight after his friend had left Florida. Clenwick shook his head.

"Soon after I came here," he explained, "I had a letter from Terry, stating that he was out of a job. So I wrote him to come to Florida. He was enthused, for a while, over the ranch that I had started; then he lost interest."

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"He was on his feet again, and had enough money to head for Mexico. So he left, claiming that he could make a place for himself in the oil fields that the Mexican government were taking over. I wasn't surprised that he wanted to go. Terry never did care much for cattle raising."

Enwald nodded. Then: "Do you think that everything is all right with Terry?"

"It must be," replied Clenwick, warmly. "Otherwise, I would have heard from him. Terry never writes" Clenwick gave a deep chuckle "except when he's down and out!"

A VOICE was calling from the rear hall: Laura's. Since the others were busy, The Shadow strolled out to learn what the girl wanted. Laura greeted him with a winsome smile.

"Here's your chance to help both members of the Severn family," she said. "I just wheeled Roger in from the glen, but I can't manage to bring the chair up the back steps. Could you handle it for me, Mr. Cranston?"

The Shadow agreed that he could. Out back, he found Roger slumped in the wheel chair. Laura's brother was too tired to disguise his impatient mood. He pointed to the car lights that he saw in front of the house, and demanded:

"Who's the new visitor?"

"A chap named Enwald," was Cranston's reply. "He says that he is a friend of Terry knight."

"That lout!" snapped Roger. "What a time he gave us! Clumping into the house at all hours of the night, messing everything with his grimy boots. He was always behind on his pay for board and lodging, too."

"How long was he here?"

"Two months or more. It was ghastly! But he did us two good turns. He brought Clenwick here, by informing him that this was good cattle land; and after that, Knight went away, to Mexico. Clenwick hasn't heard from him since, and I term it good riddance."

The Shadow had swung the chair into the house. From the rear of the hall, Roger caught his first glimpse of Roy Enwald. Clenwick had introduced the visitor to Laura. Enwald was talking to the girl. Clenwick had gone into the library.

As The Shadow pushed the wheel chair closer, Clenwick came into sight. Enwald gave a sallow-lipped smile, muttered a good night and turned suddenly on his heel. He left the house rapidly; they heard his car drive away.

"What was that fellow saying?" demanded Roger, as the chair reached Laura. "Why did he leave so suddenly?"

"He was just talking about Terry Knight," replied Laura. "I told him that when Terry was our only boarder, he used to tramp everywhere, night and day. I said that Terry liked the country round here, until he tired of it."

"And then?"

"Mr. Enwald said that he had heard of some very lovely places hereabouts "

Roger raised his scrawny fists in interruption, shook them toward the door. His temper broke.

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"But Enwald meant Kewanee Springs!" stormed Roger. "I could tell by his smirk that he was jesting at your expense, Laura, because of what happened there this morning. If I had strength, I'd go after that cad and choke him!"

Roger's hands were writhing furiously. It was Clenwick who finally managed to soothe the invalid. When Roger sank back into the chair, Clenwick undertoned:

"I'll get him upstairs. After that, I'll turn in myself. It's been a hard day at the ranch. Good night, Cranston. Laura will chat with you until Tilyon comes."

When Clenwick had worked the wheel chair up the stairs, Laura turned, to see Cranston glancing at his watch. Noting that it was only half past nine, The Shadow questioned:

"You have a car of your own, Miss Severn?"

Laura nodded.

"Could I borrow it until tomorrow? I don't like to bring Tilyon all the way out here."

Conducting The Shadow to a barn that served as a garage for several cars, Laura gave him the keys to her coupe, and waited to close the door when he had left. The car rolled from the barn; Laura spoke earnestly through the window.

"Really, Mr. Cranston," said the girl, "Roger was hopelessly bewildered tonight. He didn't mean the threats that he made against Enwald, Roger always finds fault with something, or someone, after a tiring day."

"I understand."

WITH that quiet statement, The Shadow drove away. His words, however, had more significance than Laura knew. The Shadow understood why Enwald had talked to the girl; why the fallow man had left so suddenly.

Roy Enwald formed a curious link between the missing adventurer, Terry Knight, and the New York racketeer, Tony Belgo. Enwald had come here to find out something, and had learned it. Because of that, Enwald had resolved upon a future course, a drastic one.

The Shadow intended to reach the hotel, to confront Enwald and learn more facts from the fallow man's own lips. That accomplished, The Shadow would have more links to the riddle of Pomelo City, town of ghosts!

Parking the car some distance from the hotel, The Shadow approached a fire escape that would take him to the second floor. Enwald was already in his room, as a light showed. But, as The Shadow reached the fire escape, sounds from above told that other visitors had arrived ahead of him.

Reaching the second floor, The Shadow stopped at his own room, to don garments of black. After that, he approached a door where a crack of light showed beneath. Using a special pick, he probed the lock. Easing the door inward as silently as he had unlocked it, he saw Enwald in conference with Skate and Dingbat.

Lowering a glass from his lips, Enwald thumped it on the bureau, reached for a bottle to pour himself another drink. His expression showed an ugliness that he had managed to restrain while at the mansion. His tone was raspy, when he stated:

"We're going through with it. The thing's a setup! Clenwick lives at the old house. The only other people

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there are a girl and her crippled brother, except for servants, who don't count. The flunkies are quartered in old buildings out back."

Skate put a question: "What about the hired hands?"

"You mean the rancheros?" Enwald's purr had returned. "They live over with the cattle, where they belong. We'll wait until the rest of our crew shows up. I'll tell them to go ahead; because if the mob moves in there quiet, it will be a cinch to snatch Clenwick without anybody knowing it."

Skate and Dingbat conferred, while Enwald went back to his bottle. The sallow man wasn't interested in the conference; he had told his story. He caught mutters, though, and understood them.

The thugs were agreed that they should kidnap Clenwick tonight, as soon as the mob arrived, and take him as a trophy to the big shot, Tony Belgo. From their comments, it was plain that Belgo was a high-powered crook who was taking up kidnapping as a new specialty.

"If the jab goes sour tonight," remarked Skate, "we can make it look like we were after cattle. If we lam, Tony can dope out the next move."

"That makes sense," agreed Dingbat. "All that worries me is whether Clenwick is worth a couple of million bucks, like Enwald says."

Enwald finished his drink and gave a nod. His purred tone became a raucous pitch.

"He's worth plenty," declared Enwald, "and he'll pay up, Tony Belgo will know how to put the heat on him. I told Tony how to handle it, and I was right. But Tony won't begin until I'm miles away "

MILES suddenly lacked interest to Enwald. He was thinking in terms of a few feet the distance between himself and the door. Bleary-eyed, he fancied that he had seen the door ease shut, though it was supposed to be locked.

From somewhere outside came the rumble of a car motor; its sound ended abruptly. Dingbat forgot Enwald, sprang to the window and beckoned to Skate.

"It's the mob, all right," informed Dingbat, in a whisper. "They knew that Enwald would be here at the hotel. This is where Tony told them to come."

At that moment, Enwald was thinking in terms other than the mob and Tony Belgo. He had even forgotten Dingbat and Skate. Springing from beside the bureau, Enwald pounced to the door, grabbed the knob and gave it a quick turn.

He yanked. The door flew inward, sprawling the sallow man back upon the floor. Skate and Dingbat heard the noise and wheeled about, tugging guns from their hips. Their throats voice hoarse shouts.

A tall figure occupied the doorway. He was a being cloaked in black. Burning eyes peered above the gloved hand that had discarded its tiny lock-picking instrument for a more formidable object. The muzzle of a .45 automatic waggled back and forth between Skate and Dingbat, holding the two crooks motionless.

The thugs knew that this black-cloaked challenger was no ghost. Well versed in crime, they recognized a superfoe long noted for his skill at tracking down men of evil.

The Shadow!

How crime's most deadly enemy had traced them to this forgotten town in Florida they couldn't guess. Vaguely, they connected his arrival with a prowler who had come to the abandoned filling station the night before; but they thought that they had settled that foolhardy wayfarer.

The thugs were loosening their grip, ready to drop their guns, when intervention came in their behalf. Enwald supplied it, for the sallow man, influenced by drink and local legend, actually believed that he was viewing a ghost.

With a crazed shriek, Enwald grabbed a chair; from hands and knees, he threw it madly, defiantly, and with surprising accuracy.

Twisting, The Shadow threw up a warding arm. The chair glanced from his shoulder, but his shift, the duck of his head, gave the illusion that he was staggered.

Momentarily, he had lost his aim toward Dingbat and Skate. Inspired by Enwald's mistaken bravado, the two surged through the doorway, to grapple with the fighter in black in the hallway. Revolvers spoke, but The Shadow jerked Skate's gun hand upward, clashed Dingbat's weapon with his heavy automatic.

Crooks were joined by another fighter, more furious than they. It was Enwald, reeling into the fray, armed with an empty bottle. One against three, The Shadow was engaged in battle that offered a serious problem even if he won it.

Victory would not suffice unless The Shadow kept his presence in Pomelo City undiscovered. Otherwise, The Shadow's coming campaign would come to naught before he started it.

The Shadow knew too well!

CHAPTER XI. DEATH BELOW

LOCKED with two thugs like Skate and Dingbat, The Shadow held advantages that his antagonists did not suspect. He had long ago trained himself to battles of this sort; and in actual experience, he had frequently utilized the many tricks he knew.

Thuggish fighters were all alike. Given odds in their favor, they used them recklessly. In certain ways, The Shadow preferred to handle two such foemen, rather than one. A pair would always behave true to form.

Skate and Dingbat were doing just that. Each was trying to clutch The Shadow with a free hand, and get a gun fist into play. The Shadow, both hands in sweeping action, was actually equalizing the struggle.

He had hauled a second automatic from beneath his cloak, and the way he sledged those big guns was a sight to be remembered. Back against the wall, he was slashing past the hands that grabbed for him, striking the gun fists of his foemen.

Guns blasted. Their shots were wide, including the ones The Shadow loosed. But the whine of bullets past their ears did not please the brawling mobbies. Stirred to new frenzy, they tried to batter past The Shadow's guns. That was when he grappled.

Whirling, he spun the two men about with him. On the outside of the circle, they were flung hard along the farther wall, as the reeling trio ricocheted against it.

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Jolted, they lost their grip upon The Shadow. They came back for more, but not as promptly as they had at first. This time, one or the other seemed due for a blow from one of The Shadow's descending guns.

It was Enwald who spoiled the picture.

Wielding the bottle, Enwald had been trying to swing it over the heads of his pals to reach The Shadow. That was one reason why the cloaked fighter had wheeled away from the far wall. Enwald's swings had come too close.

There was no calculating the fellow's strokes. Enwald wasn't of the thug type; he was a fighter who had an individual style. His drinks had handicapped his accuracy; but with that loss, he had gained an eccentric touch that was highly dangerous.

His blows might come in from anywhere, when least expected. The Shadow had to keep away from Enwald, for the present.

The sallow man was driving in again, before The Shadow could settle either Skate or Dingbat. Grappling with one thug, The Shadow reeled him against the other, who also came to grips. Again, the three were in a spin, The Shadow the center of it, before Enwald could smash home a blow.

Opportunity came The Shadow's way.

Close to that spinning path was the broken chair that Enwald had flung into the hallway. Stopping short, The Shadow hooked one foot against it. Past the glaring faces of Skate and Dingbat, The Shadow saw Enwald lunging forward with the bottle. A hard kick, a sideward shove the thing was done.

The Shadow and his two adversaries were gone from Enwald's path but the chair was there. The sallow man tripped over it. The bottle went clattering along the hallway like a bouncing tenpin. Enwald went headlong after it, in the fashion of an overbalanced bowler.

Again, The Shadow's feet were busy, tripping the legs about him. He went to the floor with the two struggling thugs, snapping a shot as they fell. The bullet found Dingbat's left shoulder, as a frenzied snarl told. Viciously, Dingbat shoved his gun for The Shadow, pressed the muzzle home.

This time, The Shadow failed to shove the revolver aside. Dingbat pressed the trigger. An agonized shriek sounded through the hallway. The gun muzzle wasn't poking The Shadow's ribs. Skate's body was the obstacle. Dingbat had blasted his own pal with a mortal shot.

PUTTING an elbow clamp on the arm above Dingbat's gun hand, The Shadow hoisted the wounded crook to his feet. Shoving the fellow farther along the hall, The Shadow gave a sideward twist to meet Enwald's return. The sallow man was coming back again. He had reclaimed the big quart bottle and was gripping it by the neck, swinging the thing like a bludgeon.

In fact, Enwald's hand was already sledging downward when The Shadow saw him. Nothing could have stopped the bottle's descent for The Shadow's head; not even a warding lift of The Shadow's right arm, for it was held too low.

Nor could Enwald be stopped. His drive, his swing, had become matters of momentum that were beyond control. But the bottle was a different matter. The Shadow's right hand tilted its gun straight upward, in a fraction of the time required for a full lift of his arm. The Shadow fired.

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There wasn't any bottle when Enwald's descending hand slashed inches away from The Shadow's face. Chunks of glass were flying, some bouncing from the brim of The Shadow's slouch hat. Enwald was gripping the jagged-edged bottle neck; nothing more.

The Shadow's bull's-eye had been a whiskey label, and he scored a hit. The bullet from the .45 burst the bottle like a soap bubble, a half yard from The Shadow's head.

Enwald's follow-through carried him at an angle past The Shadow. Half sprawled to the floor, the sallow man was wondering what had become of the bottle.

That didn't bother Dingbat. He was concerned with matters of his own. Twisting his one good arm, the thug managed to release it from The Shadow's grip. Dingbat lost his revolver in the effort, for he couldn't tug it past The Shadow's elbow. When the gun hit the floor, the crook didn't stop to snatch it up.

They were close by the stairway leading down into the lobby. Knowing that The Shadow would be after him, Dingbat made a headlong flight down the stairs, shouting incoherently as he went. He was hoping that arriving mobbies had entered by the lobby. They had.

As Dingbat took a long, hard tumble to the tiled floor of the lobby, The Shadow saw Tilyon and Welf darting into the kitchen. They were away in time to avoid an entering mobster crew, five strong.

The crooks heard Dingbat's howls, saw him sprawl. From below, they glimpsed the vague outline of The Shadow at the top of the stairs.

Revolvers barked, too hastily for accuracy. Down from the stair top stabbed answering tongues of flame. The Shadow's shots clipped the first two of the incoming mob; after that, his bullets were digging chunks out of the lobby floor, for the others had turned about.

Guns spoke outdoors. Descending a half dozen steps, The Shadow saw Sheriff Harley and a few other men alighting from a car. The law had arrived to take its part in the fray. It wouldn't do to let crooks stay barricaded in the lobby.

That was why The Shadow lashed bullets to the full. He wasn't out for hits, for the mobbies were beyond the angle of his range. His purpose was to drive the whole band out into the street, where the sheriff's squad could round them up. The Shadow did not stop his barrage until his guns were empty.

THE system worked. Unwounded crooks were gone, preferring battle in the open spaces to The Shadow's flaying fire. Their crippled pals, ignored by The Shadow, were staggering after them.

Stumbling in the rear was Dingbat. The fellow caved in as he went through the doorway.

Dingbat was through. His wound, plus the skull-cracking fall upon the lobby floor, indicated that he would not long survive his dead pal, Skate.

The Shadow had not forgotten Enwald.

Others were mere mobsters in the employ of a big shot, Tony Belgo. Roy Enwald was different. He was a man with a plan a schemer who had been living in this territory, giving orders to a pair of aids that Belgo had furnished.

More than a mere "finger man" working with Belgo's snatch racket, Enwald knew a lot more than he had told

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the thugs who worked with him. He was a schemer in his own right, Enwald, and his alliance with Belgo could well be a mere side issue, to further purposes of Enwald's own.

Most important was the fact that Enwald's presence in this area had been coincident with recent tragedies which had the definite earmarks of crime. Enwald, under proper questioning, could certainly tell a lot. Deprived of the protecting thugs, he should be an easy man to capture.

Turning toward the second floor, The Shadow made a quick drop to the steps, poking a gun over the top one. The move was timely. Enwald had found Dingbat's lost revolver, and was looking for The Shadow. Sight of a looming gun muzzle across the step edge was enough for Enwald.

He had nothing to shoot at, except the pair of blazing eyes beneath the brim of the slouch hat. Afraid to trust his hurried aim against the point-blank fire of The Shadow, Enwald fled along the hall toward the fire escape.

The Shadow did not fire. He sprang up from the steps and took up the pursuit. Reaching the fire escape, Enwald turned about, too late. The Shadow was upon him.

One gun cloaked, the intrepid fighter in black was using his free hand to grab for Enwald's revolver. In his other fist, The Shadow swung a heavy automatic that was a permanent bludgeon; not something that could be shattered, like Enwald's vanished bottle.

Struggling as The Shadow enveloped him, Enwald threw his weight against the iron rail of the fire escape. Rusted metal gave; the thing flapped like a hinged gate. Over the edge they went, Enwald screeching from the folds of the black cloak that covered him like a pair of closing bat wings.

How Enwald managed a midair twist remained a matter unanswered. Usually, The Shadow performed such an action when diving along with a foe. By rights, Enwald should have taken the full brunt of that fall, but he managed to fling sideward and give half the shock to The Shadow.

Fortunately, the courtyard was no longer cement. It had filled, some time ago, with thick mud, now turned to powdery clay. The grapplers rolled apart when they struck the two-inch layer of soil. Neither was out of combat.

The jar, however, produced opposite effects. It drove some sense back into Enwald's drink-befuddled brain, whereas The Shadow found himself in a temporary daze.

AS he crawled for shelter beside the pitch-black wall, The Shadow couldn't quite remember where he was.

He fancied that he was in dark, watery depths awaiting the jaws of a powerful alligator. Memory of his battle at Kewanee Springs brought back kaleidoscopic pictures of Laura Severn.

The Shadow visioned her on the pool brink; then in the water. Next, he saw her in the glen chatting with her brother; finally, he placed her in the mansion talking with Roy Enwald.

That thought jerked The Shadow to the present. It wasn't an alligator that he had to battle; it was Enwald. The fellow was somewhere in the darkness, with a gun.

Through his thin glove, The Shadow felt the cold metal of an automatic. The .45 was close beside his knee. Lifting the gun, he crawled along the wall toward the open but pitch-black rear space of the courtyard.

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Even the handicap of carrying a lifted gun did not prevent The Shadow from making a soundless trip. The thing that betrayed him was a loose chunk of stucco, that dislodged from the wall as his cloaked shoulder brushed it.

Slight though the clatter was, it brought a response from the front of the court.

A figure rose against the grimy yellow stucco that formed part of the archway to the street. The form was made obscurely visible by the glimmer of a feeble street lamp flickering beyond. Raising himself against the rear wall, The Shadow tried to steady his gun, in case his position should be exactly guessed.

The man by the archway shifted. Without realizing it, he shoved his head and shoulders into the glow. He twisted his face back and forth and The Shadow saw the sallow features of Roy Enwald, though they seemed oddly blurred.

There was a flash of the man's teeth as Enwald gave an ugly leer. It was matched by the glitter of his revolver, when he lifted the gun to chin level. There were no more sounds of battle from the front street. Enwald's voice came in grated tone, no longer an oily purr:

"I'll get you!" rasped Enwald. "Whoever you are wherever you are –"

He was wagging the gun somewhat in The Shadow's direction. Hearing no further sound, Enwald began to shoot. Spattering bullets chinked the stucco, one shot close to The Shadow's shoulder. In the midst of a dizzy sway, The Shadow pressed his own gun trigger.

Enwald heard the shot that blasted from the darkness. Clapping his hand to his chest, the sallow man staggered. Dropping the revolver, he clutched at the archway, lost his hold and rolled to the clay.

The Shadow did not see that fall. He had performed a soundless slump of his own, but not from the effect of Enwald's bullets, for none had struck him. Sheer effort to shake his daze had been too much for The Shadow's giddy senses.

Echoes faded from the courtyard. All was silent in that blackened square. Quiet had come anew to the city of ghosts. Of all spots in Pomelo City, the tiny courtyard between the decrepit hotel and the abandoned theater seemed the proper residence of departed spirits!

CHAPTER XII. AGAIN, THE GHOST

MINUTES passed before a whisper stirred the courtyard. It was a sibilant tone, one that carried a spectral touch. It came from the archway where Enwald's body lay. In the darkness, it actually seemed that voice could have come from the dead man's ghost.

Then, like a wraith from darkness, the whispering being appeared. The Shadow had come out of his daze; he had groped to the archway to look at Enwald's body.

The single shot had killed the sallow man. It had been a question of Enwald's life or The Shadow's. Despite the frequency of Enwald's fire, The Shadow had survived. The gaping bullet hole in Enwald's body told why.

There was no hope of hearing more from Enwald. From the fragmentary statements that the man had made, The Shadow would have to piece together the rest of crime's story. He could hope to do so, now that he had covered the matter of his presence on the scene.

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Cater-cornered across the street, some distance beyond the short row of flickery lights, was the place where The Shadow had left Laura Severn's car. Steady again; the black-cloaked fighter glided out from the archway. Keeping to the shelter of the brownish palm trees, he picked a blackened stretch and blended with it as he crossed the street.

Once in the coupe The Shadow rolled his cloak and hat beneath the seat. Loading his emptied automatics, he tucked them into the holsters that he wore beneath his coat.

Starting the motor with a quick press of the starter pedal, The Shadow drove the car up to the hotel. He alighted in the guise of Cranston, a quizzical expression on his face as he saw Welf and Tilyon peering from the lobby. The two hurried out to meet their friend.

Another car swung the corner; it was a large, high-powered roadster. Before Welf or Tilyon could take to cover, a voice stopped them. Another friend was clambering from the roadster: Graham Clenwick.

The broad-faced man wanted to know all that had happened; so, for that matter, did Cranston. It was Tilyon who gave the details.

"It started soon after the new guest came back here," related Tilyon. "In my opinion, that chap Enwald had a lot to do with it. The shooting began upstairs, probably in his room. While Welf and I were wondering what to do about it, a whole crew of hoodlums invaded the place.

"We ran for the kitchen. We saw the crooks go dashing out. The sheriff arrived at about that moment, but he and his men couldn't stop the mob from getting to their car. The last we saw of them, they were speeding away with the sheriff after them."

The Shadow inserted a dry comment, in Cranston's tone. He remarked that Laura had offered him her car, that he had taken time coming back to town. This was one occasion when he had been too late to help take care of trouble.

Clenwick expressed the same sentiments.

"I was surprised that you left so early, Cranston," he said. "When I came downstairs, I found that Laura had gone to bed. I called up to her; she said that you had taken her car. Having no one to chat with, I strolled over to the ranch.

"I learned that the sheriff had stopped there. He'd seen suspicious parties in the neighborhood, so some of my men had gone out in a car to help him look for them. I came back to the house, took the roadster and drove in here."

CLENWICK didn't realize that his account showed a great flaw in Cranston's. It left a half-hour gap, at least. Laura certainly couldn't have returned to the house, turned out all the lights, then managed to undress and go to bed in any time short of ten minutes.

The walking distance from the mansion to the ranch was at least ten minutes more, which meant twenty for the round trip that Clenwick mentioned. All of which made it very curious that Cranston, even if he had driven very slowly, should have arrived at the hotel only a few minutes ahead of Clenwick.

There was a point, though, that pleased The Shadow. Clenwick had no way of really knowing just when Cranston had reached town; not unless Welf or Tilyon told him. They, in their turn, were too stirred over other matters to bother about driving times or distances.

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Actually, The Shadow had made a very rapid trip in from the mansion, making the journey in about the shortest possible time. A glance at his watch told him that he had spent another fifteen minutes in Pomelo City, from the time when he looked in on Enwald's conference until he saw the fellow dead beneath the archway.

It was important to let that quarter hour be forgotten. Changing the subject, The Shadow put anxiety into Cranston's tone, when he asked if crooks could have gotten into his own room.

Neither Welf nor Tilyon had thought of that possibility. They decided it would be wise to go upstairs, to see.

On the second floor, the four men found Skate's body, along with plenty of gunfire evidence, including Enwald's shattered bottle. They noted that Cranston's room was untouched; but Welf, peering along the hall, saw the dangling rail of the fire escape.

Using flashlights, they descended the fire escape and probed the courtyard. It was Tilyon who came across Enwald's body. Turning to Welf, Tilyon said:

"I guess Enwald was the one who fought off the mobsters. They must have gotten him in the finish."

Welf shook his head.

"There was more to it than that," he declared. "You know it, as well as I do. The ghost was back again! We saw him, didn't we?"

Tilyon was loath to acknowledge the fact; but finally, he did. Once committed, he was emphatic. Turning to Clenwick and Cranston, he asserted:

"Ghost or no ghost, he was there, at the top of the stairs. The same man the crackers talked about. He looked like a big black blot, except for the shooting he did. His guns were spouting like a turret of a battleship!"

Cranston's response was a smile, intimating that his friends had over-employed their imaginations. But Clenwick accepted the story seriously.

"It must have been the ghost," Clenwick argued, "because I'm sure that Enwald wasn't on the level. His talk about Terry Knight was a subterfuge. Maybe Enwald knew Terry once, but he was merely using the fact as an excuse to call on me. Don't you think so, Cranston?"

The Shadow nodded.

"Terry couldn't have sent Enwald here," added Clenwick. "Not a chance of it! A rough chap, Terry is, but always a square-shooter. I'll write to friends of mine, to see if they have heard from Terry. If we can locate him, I know that he will give us the real facts regarding Enwald.

"From the looks of the fellow" the rancher was gazing at Enwald's body "I'd say that he came from the Southwest. But I would also venture that he belonged to some band of border outlaws, of the sort that used to trouble us in Texas. He looks like a thieving bird who joined a different flock."

CARS were rolling in along the main street. A great variety of men poured from them. The first car contained the sheriff and his deputies. The next held a quota of Clenwick's big-fisted ranch hands.

The rattletraps that followed were filled with natives of the sort who had invaded Pomelo City the night The

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Shadow arrived there. The crackers weren't wearing guilty looks on this occasion. They had done their share, along with the law.

"We nearly nabbed those mobsters," announced the sheriff, ruefully. "They finally slipped us, but they had to lighten their car by throwing some dead pals overboard. Bring out the bodies, men."

Deputies brought out the bodies, two of them. The Shadow recognized one as Dingbat. The other was a crook that The Shadow had wounded in the lobby. The thug's body showed other bullet holes, received during the running battle from which the crook-manned car had escaped.

"Your boys helped a lot," said the sheriff, to Clenwick. "It's lucky I talked to them this afternoon and told them to be posted. They came along just when the crooks almost had us ambushed."

The sheriff wanted details of the shooting at the hotel, for his arrival in Pomelo City had been a chance one at the time. Tilyon gave his previous account; this time, he included the ghost, simply terming him as "somebody upstairs."

That reference did not escape the natives. Shifting their shotguns, the men from the backwoods began a spreading murmur. The sheriff shouted for silence.

"What if the fellow is a ghost?" he demanded. "He's on our side, isn't he? If I ever meet him, I'll shake hands with him!"

The mumblings silenced, but it was evident that the muttering men weren't anxious to be members of the sheriff's welcoming committee. From the way they shifted their double-barreled shotguns and looked across the street, then up to the hotel, they had their own idea of a greeting for a ghost.

If they met him, they'd deliver a salute in the ghost's own direction. Observing their expressions, The Shadow was forewarned.

"You're going to Leesville, sheriff?" The Shadow quietly inquired.

Sheriff Harley grinned.

"I allow you'll be going along tonight, Mr. Cranston?"

"Not at all," was the calm response. "I'd simply like you to send a telegram for me, to my broker in New York. I'm finding Pomelo City a very interesting place, sheriff. I have resolved to extend my stay here."

Later, The Shadow gazed from the window of his hotel room upon the main street of the ghost town. Again deserted, the scene showed faintly under the glow of a rising half-moon. Softly, The Shadow's lips phrased an understanding laugh.

He had fitted the picture better than he hoped. He could see a curious, yet simple, answer to the menace overhanging Pomelo City. Some facts that looked large were small; other factors, mere trifles, were highly important.

The thing to do was to wait, but not for long. Should certain complications come and they were likely the issue would be forced. When that happened, The Shadow's turn would come.

CHAPTER XIII. COMING CRIME

DURING the next two days, a lazy lull lay over Pomelo City. Even the buzzards atop the water tower sat morose and listless. Things weren't dying around the ghost city, because there were so few creatures left to die.

True, sudden death had taken toll, but that hadn't helped the buzzards. The sheriff had promptly removed the bodies of dead crooks. No further threats had come to Pomelo City to disturb the local residents, Tilyon and Welf, or Cranston, the one out-of-towner.

There was life at Clenwick's ranch and the backwoods near it, where farmers and cattle ranchers were finding new opportunity under Clenwick's protection. Life, too, at the mansion where Lamont Cranston was a regular caller.

On his visits, The Shadow chatted often with Laura Severn and her brother Roger, but they talked very little concerning the strife that had occurred in Pomelo City.

The case of Roy Enwald was closed.

It was fully conceded that Enwald and the thugs accompanying him were responsible for certain troubles in this region. To them could be attributed the accident that had forced Betterly's car off the road, resulting in three deaths; also, the fire that had ruined Bayne's store, bringing another death in its wake.

The sheriff claimed that robbery had been Enwald's purpose, but that the fellow had picked the wrong town. Finding that Pomelo City had nothing to offer, Enwald had resolved to look over the Severn mansion. It didn't occur to the sheriff that there might be a deeper plot, backed by a certain big shot named Tony Belgo.

Only The Shadow knew that fact. He was acting upon it. His telegram to New York was actually a message to his secret agents, telling them to locate Tony Belgo.

However, Sheriff Harley was not idle. He was determined to make sure that nothing else happened in the Pomelo City area, and he adopted effective measures to prevent it. There were only a few roads leading into the terrain, and the sheriff had posted deputies on all of them.

Clenwick's crew of ranch men were taking moonlight rides on horseback. They weren't just looking for stray cattle, those Florida cowboys that Clenwick had imported from other regions. They were watching for stray crooks, chance leftovers from Enwald's band.

The natives, too, were on patrol, with shotguns, for ostensibly the same purpose. They were more anxious, though, to meet the black-garbed ghost that had worsted them in one fray at Pomelo City. In fact, the county was considerably stirred, and rumors of the Pomelo City trouble became news in all parts of Florida.

LATE that second afternoon, a group of men were seated in an eighth-story room of a Jacksonville hotel. Their faces were of a thuggish variety, but they were well groomed enough to pass muster. Jacksonville wasn't entirely unacquainted with hard characters from the Northland.

In fact, the city was a favorite stopping-off point for such gentry, when en route to Miami. Mobbies had a habit, sometimes, of staying in Jax until they learned how things were doing, farther South.

If their mugs didn't have too much of the rogues'-gallery look, and they behaved themselves, it wasn't difficult for them to stop at good hotels.

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Tony Belgo never had any trouble putting up his crew. His face was thick, flat-nosed, with pudgy lips; but people seldom noticed it. Tony had a way of distracting their attention by flourishing a roll of bank notes big enough to choke any hotel clerk.

Tony never choked clerks, though. He simply let them faint when they saw the size of the figures on the bills that made up the big roll.

Tilted in a chair, his back toward the screened window that overlooked the St. John's River, Tony was summing up certain facts for the benefit of his supporting cast.

"See what this bladder says?" Tony flourished an evening paper that bore the Jacksonville imprint. "The hick sheriff is covering all the roads. What can he do? There's no State coppers here in Florida."

One of the mobbies began an objection. He had been in the crew of two nights ago. Things could be pretty hot around Pomelo City, he testified.

"We'll make them hotter," promised Tony. "Enwald found out the thing was a setup. That's what Dingbat told you, didn't he, before he croaked?"

"Yeah," came a reply, "and he was saying something about The Shadow, too."

Tony Belgo gave a leer.

"The Shadow's in New York," he said. "He popped in on some racketeers the other night, and scared 'em nearly cuckoo! He can do a lot, The Shadow, but he can't hop from Florida to New York inside a couple of hours."

Swinging from his chair, Tony stepped to a bureau and yanked open the drawer. He drew out a rolled map, spread it on the table.

"You know the dodge we've been working," he told his mob. "Bringing in aliens was a pretty sweet game, while it lasted. Only the G guys are wise to it. They're patrolling pretty heavy along the Indian River, just inside those islands along the coast.

"They've been looking over that cruiser that we've been keeping at Fernandina. If we start off on a fishing trip, we'll have cutters tailing us. So I'm having the cruiser brought here to Jax. She'll show up tomorrow. When night comes, we'll start on a hundred-mile trip."

Crooks were anxious-eyed. They knew that cutters would be outside the port of Jacksonville. Tony saw their worry and gave a guffaw.

"We're not heading out to sea!" he chuckled. "We'll take a trip in the wrong direction. We're going inland!"

Tony traced the route along the map. He let his finger run southward, almost to Lake George, then marked the westward bends toward the headwaters of the Oklawaha. He came to the tiny line of the Kewanee River, traced it to its source.

"Nobody's watching the river," chortled Tony. "It lands us about a mile away from that house where Clenwick is staying, with no roads in between."

Rolling up the map, Tony tossed it back into the drawer. It wasn't necessary for him to add further details.

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Whether the scheme was his own, or purely a suggestion made by Enwald, it was a perfect one. A secret visit to the heart of a guarded district would assure the easy kidnapping of Graham Clenwick, for the rancher would be taken entirely unaware.

"Climb into your tuxedos," Tony told his mobbies. "We'll make the rounds tonight and look over some of these night spots they've got here in Jax. You've got an hour to get dressed, because I'm going down to see about a place to dock the cruiser."

Tony Belgo wasn't the only person who went to the dock. He was trailed there, in another taxi, by a well-dressed young man who was also interested in mooring a boat.

The young man in question was Harry Vincent, a secret agent of The Shadow. He found out all he wanted.

WITH dusk, Lamont Cranston was ready to leave Pomelo City for another dinner at the home of Laura Severn. While he lingered, chatting with Tilyon, Woodley drove in from Leesville. The taxi driver brought a telegram from Cranston's broker.

Since the wire concerned business, Cranston took along a brief case when he rode out to the mansion. He hired Woodley's taxi for the trip, and as they bumped along, The Shadow read the wire. It was the second coded message that he had received.

The first had stated that Harry Vincent had gone to Jacksonville because Tony Belgo was known to be there; it had also referred to a ruse staged by Cliff Marsland, another of The Shadow's agents.

Cliff had put on a black cloak and hat, to spring a surprise party on a few of Tony's racketeering friends in New York.

The Shadow had ordered that ruse, and it had worked. Not suspecting that The Shadow was in Florida, Tony Belgo was prepared to show his hand, according to the present telegram. He was bringing in a cabin cruiser from Fernandina to Jacksonville, by Harry's report.

Since the boat wouldn't be on hand until the next day, there was time for Cliff and other agents to join Harry in Jacksonville. From then on, they would be on their own. The Shadow could depend upon them to do whatever was required.

When dinner was ended at the mansion, Laura wheeled Roger out to the glen, where he liked to stay on moonlight evenings. Clenwick invited Cranston into the library; eyeing the visitor's brief case, the rancher asked:

"You've made a deal on Kewanee Springs?"

"Not yet," replied The Shadow. "Tilyon has been pressing me" he opened the brief case, to take out a thin sheaf of papers "but I preferred to talk it over with you, first."

Chewing a cigar, Clenwick read over the papers that Cranston had brought. He sorted them as he went along, until they became two piles.

"I agree with these." Clenwick slapped one heap. "The Kewanee proposition is sound. But Tilyon is still too optimistic about reviving real estate in Pomelo City."

Opening a large map, Clenwick showed a penciled circle representing the Pomelo City area. The mansion

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was just within the circle; Clenwick's ranch was closer to the center. Clenwick began to tap large dots that were also within the area.

"These are the sinkholes," he said. "This is the Giant, the worst of the lot; but all of them are bad. The blue ones are the old; the red, the new."

The sinkholes made actual pockmarks on the map. Terming them a veritable plague, Clenwick moved his pencil to Pomelo City, which centered the circle.

"If a sinkhole shows up there," he predicted, "the town will drop through with it. This ground is no longer good, except for pasture land, because we can fence off the sinks, like I have done."

"Over here, though" he moved his pencil to Kewanee Springs, outside the circle "we get away from the high hammocks. I own land there that I'd exchange for property inside the circle. Good land, for anything but pasture."

The Shadow saw Clenwick's logic. The rancher pointed out another fact. Down the Kewanee River, on land that Clenwick owned, was an old steamboat wharf. Should the Springs be developed, rival persons might start cruises from that point, coming up to the headwaters.

"The Kewanee is a navigable river," reminded Clenwick. "I might be forced to let boats dock there. But Tilyon and Welf, operating craft of their own, could rule others off if they owned that lower wharf."

Turning away, Clenwick crossed the room to obtain a fresh box of cigars. Back turned about, he did not observe the new interest that Cranston had taken in the map. Temporarily, The Shadow had dropped all consideration of sinkholes, cattle lands, and other property.

His finger was at the extreme corner of the map, which showed the city of Jacksonville. From there, The Shadow was tracing the course upstream, from larger rivers into smaller. His finger stopped near the head of the Kewanee, at the little wharf on Clenwick's property.

The Shadow voiced no laugh. Even his lips were smileless. His eyes, alone, displayed a gleam; their flash was triumphant. The Shadow had traced the same course as Tony Belgo. He knew the course that coming crime would take!

CHAPTER XIV. THE NIGHT PATROL

TOMORROW night!

The Shadow had divined the time set by Tony Belgo for the coming raid. The finding was one of simple logic.

Belgo wouldn't have his boat until tomorrow. Once the cruiser was on hand, he would want to use it. Tony Belgo was not the sort who would delay when time meant cash.

Smoking a cigar that Clenwick handed him. The Shadow nodded further agreement to the rancher's plans of property exchange. All of Clenwick's suggestions were good ones, the sort that could be answered with a nod.

Actually, Lamont Cranston was not listening to Graham Clenwick at all. In a sense, he was no longer Cranston. He was The Shadow, except in guise. He was making mental calculations, not in terms of land and dollars, but in water and time.

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A swift boat like Belgo's cruiser could leave Jacksonville at dusk, and be back at dawn, with a brief stop at the Kewanee River wharf. That was the way Tony would manage it. Therefore, the time of the big shot's arrival whittled down to a definite hour: the mid-point between dusk and dawn.

Tomorrow midnight.

What a perfect mesh the crook had spun for himself! This was one job that could be left to Sheriff Harley. The Shadow and his agents would remain in the background, while the local authorities laid their ambush.

Harley and his deputies knew the Florida terrain; Tony Belgo Co. didn't. The peninsular jungle was quite different from the badlands of Manhattan. Crooks would have no chance when the law came on the job. A few might, but The Shadow and his agents could take care of them.

Orders to the agents; a tip-off to the sheriff. Such were The Shadow's prospective moves. He could send the orders early tomorrow, and give the tip-off later. Unless some intervening calamity prevented The Shadow from performing those simple duties, the case of Tony Belgo would be settled.

From considering the future, The Shadow snapped back to the present. There was much to be done before tomorrow. The trapping of a big-shot kidnaper would not clear the mystery that had jinxed Pomelo City. Facts were out of place; they needed to be readjusted. No longer was there time to wait. The Shadow's moves must come tonight.

A delicate task lay ahead that of clearing up some local matters and keeping the facts from Tony Belgo, so the crook wouldn't know what might await him. It could all be maneuvered, though, before this night was ended.

Clenwick had finished with the papers and was handing them over. As The Shadow slid them into the brief case, Clenwick reverted to the map. He was still talking about sinkholes, when he saw Cranston close the brief case and rise with a smile.

"I think I understand the situation," affirmed The Shadow. "Good night, Clenwick. I'm going back to town, to talk with Tilyon."

"He isn't coming here for you?"

"No." The Shadow gave a leisurely gaze toward the window. "I told him that I would walk. The moonlight is ample tonight."

Clenwick wanted to go out to the barn and get his car, but Cranston resisted the offer. He didn't even care to leave his brief case and call for it tomorrow. It was very light, he insisted, and held it at arm's length to prove the statement.

THE brief case was much heavier than it looked. After walking a few hundred yards down the road from the mansion, The Shadow turned it over and opened a special compartment which formed an inverted V between the two sections that showed when the brief case was open at the top.

From that hollow center, he removed his cloak, his hat, and a brace of automatics. Girded with that equipment, The Shadow added gloves, which he took from a pocket of the cloak. The brief case found its way beneath a clump of palmettos.

Despite the moonlight, The Shadow was invisible. High foliage rendered a background against which he

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could easily blend. Taking a side path, the weird prowler became as much a creature of the night as any denizen of the Florida jungle.

Etched in The Shadow's memory were the salient features of Clenwick's map. All that he needed was direction, which he found with the aid of a flashlight and a tiny compass, which came from the end of the torch.

By occasional blinks, The Shadow picked a sloping route from the hammock region toward the Kewanee River.

Near the stream, he extinguished the light entirely. This was dangerous territory, as the night noises told. Strange cries of night birds, the calls of frogs that croaked with a bleat, were mild reminders of more formidable creatures that might be abroad.

Below a shelving bank, The Shadow passed a fringe of palmettos. In the moonlight, their curving stalks and bushy leaves gave the palmettos the appearance of an advancing army of mammoth snails.

A rattle came from that sector; The Shadow paused, then sidestepped. Past that danger spot, he again kept close to the palmetto bank.

Rattlesnakes gave warning; water moccasins didn't. Therefore, it was safer to stay by the palmettos than to step into the river edge. As for alligators, they were also present. Warning hisses sounded frequently as The Shadow followed the stream.

They weren't for his benefit, those sounds. The river jungle was so chock-full of animal life that every night produced the sounds of threatening conflict, when meddlesome jungle dwellers trespassed on each other's preserves.

It was strange, The Shadow thought, for men to claim ownership over property such as this, where they, the self-styled owners, wouldn't last a minute if they stepped in the wrong place.

MOONLIGHT revealed the river wharf, ahead. Working in through the brush, The Shadow kept his cloak tightly about him and pressed slowly ahead. Otherwise, the brambly twigs would have ripped the needed black garb from his shoulders. He struck the path he wanted, followed it to the wharf.

Warped, weather-beaten planking gleamed gray. Fish were splashing at the end of the battered pier. When The Shadow tore a cigarette apart and threw the pieces into the water, the hungry fish battled for the paper and tobacco.

An excellent attraction, Tilyon would call it. He would take to the idea of giving idle real estate in exchange for this usable landing place. It would be a sensible future: the Kewanee River under full development, with cattle grazing on grass that sprouted from the broken paving along the main street of Pomelo City.

But The Shadow was considering an earlier future. He was picturing this wharf as the chosen goal of Tony Belgo. It was an easy place to land; the next problem was the sheriff's ambush. Leaving the wharf, The Shadow started back along the path.

It led toward the mansion by a roundabout course. It was the only route that Tony and his mob could take, and it was ambush all the way. It had everything from rocks to palmettos, with little depressions that looked like budding sinkholes.

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Having viewed tomorrow's probable battleground, The Shadow cut away from the path. He passed the temporary buildings of Clenwick's ranch and gave the squatly cabins a wide berth. Away from the jungle, any ground was good. The Shadow set his course by the compass.

Trees loomed ahead; between them, The Shadow found a barbed-wire fence. He was at the Giant Sinkhole. His flashlight extinguished, he saw lanterns bobbing along the ground. They might mean some of the ranch hands; possibly, the lights were borne by natives on prowl.

The Shadow did not care to be mistaken for either a cattle thief or a ghost. But the choice he took to avoid either of those prospects was a far more hazardous one.

Flattening to the ground, he slid himself beneath the lowest strand of the barbed wire. Wriggling farther, he thrust his body over the very edge of the Giant Sinkhole!

Ground caved in, as Clenwick claimed it would. Like a beetle caught in a sand spider's trap, The Shadow was sliding into a one-sided vortex. His feet heeled the sand, sending it ahead; but there was no clutching the sheer limestone that scraped from beneath.

Arms flung wide, The Shadow managed to grip dried brush. Dead roots tugged loose under the strain; but by then The Shadow's hands were clutching for more. Some sapplings grew out from the steep wall; they stayed The Shadow's slide, until they bent too far.

It meant sure death to animals, that sinkhole, for they had no chance to seize the things that passed. For humans, too, it meant disaster, if the slide became too rapid. But The Shadow kept his downward skid under reasonable control.

He was barely sliding at the bottom, when he dipped into the slime that made a deep pool in the pit.

The stagnant ooze seemed rancid. Its greasy surface gave off bubbly sounds. Pulling himself from the muck, The Shadow clung to a chunk of projecting limestone and played his flashlight along the surface. Having studied the greenish pool, he turned off the light and rested.

LANTERNS glimmered above. A flashlight made a brief play down from the trees. Then, satisfied that no one would be foolhardy enough to venture a trip down into the Giant Sinkhole, patrollers went their way.

Inspecting the bank, The Shadow found projecting rocks that offered a chance to climb. He began the long trip upward, toward an irregular, inward curve that marred the rough circle of the brink. His flashlight aided his choice of bushes whenever he paused to rest; but his main guide was the moonlight.

At times, there were downward slips of several feet; but always, The Shadow knew where to reach for a solid hold. The hardest part was the sandy edge itself; the loose stuff crumbled away from whatever clutched it. The remedy was a long reach for the wire, which The Shadow caught between two barbs.

Resting by the trees, he gave a whispered laugh that joined with the breeze. It was welcome, that breeze, not because of its refreshing coolness but because it offered a chance for action tonight. The Shadow, through his meanderings, had come to one conclusion:

Stagnation was the cause of grief in this vicinity. Human affairs were in a scummy state, like the depths of the Giant Sinkhole. Only when stirred did men show life and an ability to understand. The battle with Enwald and the crooks had produced local alliances, but they hadn't proven enough.

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Something was needed to straighten out present misconceptions; to clear the way for solid union among the right men. Deputies, natives, ranchers, all working individually, was not the proper system. They needed to know more about one another.

There was a way to bring about that result.

Leaving the sinkhole, The Shadow headed into the wind, which came from the direction of the river. He paced off the distance that he wanted, a matter of a few hundred yards. Stopping into the brush, he struck a match.

The flame licked all around The Shadow's fingers, scorching them through his dampened glove. He was applying the match to the brush; moving in a crosswise direction, he struck another match, then a third.

Flames were rising. Looking along the line, The Shadow saw quick lashes of fire streak into the dried brush, eating it like tinder. He was striking a fourth match as he listened to the crackle of the blaze.

Then into the increasing roar came another rising sound: a peal of insidious mirth. Weird mockery that momentarily drowned the fire's crackle, then faded like the darkness that was vanishing from about the flames.

The laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XV. THE TRAPPED GHOST

WHATEVER fun or purpose The Shadow found in starting a first-class brush fire, he did not care to be connected with the deed. As he finished lighting a suitable line of blaze, he made for the path that led to the Severn mansion.

Following that sure but lengthy course, The Shadow neared the side lawn. He skirted the barn that garaged Laura's coupe and Clenwick's roadster, and finally reached the rear door that led into the main hall of the house.

Only the library was lighted, which meant that Clenwick was still up, though the others had probably retired. The Shadow wanted to talk to Clenwick; unfortunately, this was not a suitable time.

To return as Cranston would be difficult, for, in leaving, The Shadow had said that he intended to walk to town. To appear in the black garb of The Shadow was also inadvisable. Until the proper results had been produced, The Shadow intended to keep his presence unknown.

Therefore, he compromised by stealthily opening the back door and entering the hallway, where the gloom below the stairs offered an excellent place to wait. Great excitement was due, and news of it would be quick to reach the mansion.

It wasn't long before the clatter of hoofs came from the front drive. Clenwick heard the sound and strode out of the library. An excited ranch hand met him at the front door. In booming tone, Clenwick wanted to know the trouble.

"It's those fool crackers!" panted the man. "They've started another brush fire!"

"Another brush fire?" queried Clenwick. "What of it?" Then, his voice denoting sudden alarm: "Near enough to injure the ranch houses?"

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"It's blowing that way," returned the man. "It hasn't got to the Giant Sinkhole yet, but it's pretty close."

Clenwick gave an angry exclamation.

"I've tried to educate those crackers," he asserted, "but they just can't get it through their heads that brush fires can spread after they've cleared a patch. Call out all hands and beat down that fire."

"They're working at it, Mr. Clenwick."

"What about getting some help from the crackers?"

"They're all over toward town. But some of the sheriff's men showed up. I think we've got the fire under control. Want me to ride over and get the crackers?"

Clenwick gave the suggestion a short consideration, then shook his head.

"I'll take your horse and find them," he said. "You run back to the fire. I'll tell those crackers what I think of them, and then send them over to help out."

THE two men left the house. From the rear door, The Shadow could see the glare of the fire, a flickering beacon. In a sense, that fire represented The Shadow's present hopes. He was expecting it to clear up more than mere brushwood.

Going through the hallway to the library, The Shadow began to look around. Always, he had been too busy chatting with Clenwick to really examine the place. Interested in maps and papers that he found, The Shadow gave little attention to the time that passed.

As he finished with a batch of loose papers, he glanced toward the rear window. The glare from the distance had faded, which meant that the brush fire might be out. Stepping from the library, The Shadow moved to the rear door and opened it.

For a moment, his cloaked figure was outlined against the hallway lights. A sharp cry greeted him; it was answered by another. Turning, The Shadow made for the front door. His arrival there was a signal for even louder whoops.

Clearing the steps, The Shadow made a quick return to the shelter of the veranda, just as shotguns ripped loose.

The crackers, heading toward the brush fire by way of the mansion, had found the missing ghost!

From a front room, Laura Severn heard the tumult and sprang from bed. Clad in a silk nightgown, she ventured to the window; there, she became the lone witness to a singular fray. The smooth, moonlit lawn was ringed by men with shotguns; others had come through the back of the house to reach the front door.

All of the natives were blasting away at something that they couldn't see. Gun stabs were answering them from thick flower beds along the veranda, but always from a different spot.

Confident of mowing down their prey, the crackers did not bother to reload. That fact brought the next act of the drama. Out from the cover of the veranda wheeled a black-clad figure, pumping bullets from a pair of big automatics. Foemen dived for the bushes, as the strange fighter crossed the lawn spurting bullets like a revolving turret.

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The ghost!

Though the thought sprang to Laura's mind, she realized that this battler couldn't be a ghost. He was human, like herself, and he had become the prey of a motley crowd of half-crazed men whose superstition ruled them.

More crackers were coming up through the woods. They blocked The Shadow's route, caused him to make for the palmettos. The others, finding time to reload, were bellowing as they took up the trail. They were fifty against one, by Laura's estimate, until the girl halved those odds herself.

Digging her feet into a pair of slippers, Laura grabbed a dressing gown and flung it across her shoulders. Dashing downstairs, she sped out through the front door, shouting after The Shadow's pursuers. Though she carried no gun, Laura believed that she might call off some of the frenzied horde.

MEANWHILE, The Shadow was keeping up the most futile battle that he had ever experienced. Ducking through groves of tall pine, he deserted the needle-carpeted ground for a cluster of palmettos.

Twisting from that clump, he followed a path to a rough clearing that took him to a small swamp. Skirting the bad ground, he found another path and followed it.

All the while, he was keeping busy with his guns. Pausing between long dashes, he reloaded, trying to gauge his direction in the moonlight. Men with shotguns were as thick as mosquitoes, but they had a pleasant habit of blasting away at anything that looked black.

Constantly beyond their range, The Shadow saw them duck whenever he fired. They didn't know that it was unnecessary. The Shadow had no quarrel with these misguided men. Thinning their ranks wouldn't help him. He hadn't enough ammunition to down all the crackers in the county.

His one plan was to elude them; to let them believe that the ghost had staged another vanish. But there were too many on the job for The Shadow to complete his apparition act. Inexorably, it seemed, he was being boxed in the direction of Kewanee Springs, near the upper pool.

As he continued his zigzag retreat, The Shadow recognized that the natives had identified him with the ghost of the ancient Seminole chief. They were driving him toward the place where they believed he belonged: the Devil's Rock!

Such was apparent to Laura, also. Along every path she saw converging men, heard the shouts they uttered. They were blocking The Shadow everywhere, and they wouldn't listen when she shouted.

Frantically, the girl decided that her only hope would be to reach the Springs ahead of them. Perhaps a few would heed her when she arrived.

Ignoring the paths, Laura took a straight course toward the Springs. She didn't care if rattlers and other hazards lay along the way. It was her job to stop murder, no matter what the cost. Her purpose was good, but her choice of routes a poor one.

As she stumbled through thick palmettos, she felt her dressing gown lashed from her shoulders. Past that clump, she ran into a quagmire that everyone else had avoided. Her slippers lost in the muck, Laura stumbled badly on rough ground, until she reached a thick mass of brush beyond which lay the pool.

She thought that her hair was streaming across her eyes, until she whipped it aside and found it to be Spanish

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moss that she had accumulated from low tree branches. Shouts were far away; so were the incessant blasts of shotguns.

Still intent upon her goal, Laura entered the last hazard, to find that it was the worst of all. She had to plunge through the low bushes with her arms across her eyes. Her nightgown was shredded by the brambly brush.

When the girl finally floundered through and fell breathless on soft ground, the moonlight showed an array of pink, silk patches fluttering from the brush behind her.

Beneath the shelter of a tropical foliage, Laura could here the murmur of Kewanee Springs. Crawling painfully forward, she spread aside the foliage and thrust her head through. She had reached a low, flat-slabbed bank at the edge of the upper pool.

WHAT Laura saw held her tense, totally forgetful of the ordeal that she had undergone. She had reached her goal too late; but, singularly, a lull had come before the climax.

Men were clustered in little groups about the large pool, but they no longer shouted. They were holding their shotguns at irregular angles, staring at something in the moonlight.

They were looking toward the Devil's Rock. On that high-jutting level stood the ghost that they had sought. Foemen flanked him, others were behind him, all waiting for the signal that no one gave.

He was a tall, thin shape The Shadow. His cloak draped from his shoulders in truly spectral fashion. Beneath his down-turned hat brim his eyes alone caught the moonlight's gleam, to throw back a burning, challenging sparkle.

His gloved fists held weighty guns. Each .45 was a thing of threat. The Shadow's fifty foemen had heard those automatics talk steadily. All believed that many of their number must be lying dead along the paths.

With all their fusillades, they had not downed the ghost. Half a hundred strong, all wanted to make the final test, but none of the entire group cared to be the first. In this moment, The Shadow stood triumphant, but his glory could not last.

One move that marked him human would be his last. A single gunner, going berserk, would start the rest by delivering a shot. Well did The Shadow recognize the precarious condition of that lull. It could not last; therefore, he chose to be the one who ended it.

Lifting his head, The Shadow gave forth a burst of sardonic laughter; a taunt that seemed to voice his willingness to die or live. It was victorious, that laugh, even though doom might be its sequel.

Such was The Shadow's challenge to the fates that had hitherto never failed in his behalf!

CHAPTER XVI. INTO THE PAST

As strange-voiced echoes quivered above murmuring waters, men shifted uneasily all along the bank. Startled, they looked upward and about them. The trees, it seemed, were answering The Shadow's mirth.

Crouched in her hiding spot, Laura felt a shudder that tingled every inch of her. Chilled from head to foot, she felt that she was really gazing at a ghost. Yet reason told her that the being on the rock was human.

Too human. That challenge might be his last. She wanted to shout out, as she had intended, but she began to

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realize how very small and helpless she really was. Her cry, if she gave it, might become the death signal that fifty men awaited. If she came into sight, she might be mistaken for another ghost—a white one.

Under the light of the half moon, the whole scene was eerie, so unreal that Laura could hardly credit it. Yet she knew the place, and recognized the men who stood about. Their reality convinced her that The Shadow must be actual.

A mutter stirred the bank. The Shadow had moved. His hands went close to his cloak, then made a wide, outward sweep. Those hands were gunless; The Shadow had slid his automatics beneath his cloak.

Nevertheless, with open hands, he seemed even more formidable. His action indicated that weapons were unnecessary in the combat he could give.

The mutter, though, was restless. Men were tilting gun muzzles toward the Devil's Rock, each looking askance at his fellows. Given a few seconds longer, those guns would have been well aimed and The Shadow knew it.

With a quick sweep of his arms, he clasped his hands above his head. He was falling forward as he made that sweep; his legs supplied a piston push. Almost before anyone realized it, The Shadow was off on a long dive into the depths of Kewanee Springs!

Guns blasted as The Shadow sliced the water. The first reports brought more. Flattening behind a tiny mound, Laura hoped that no shots would reach her. Fifty shotguns, each fired twice, made a cannonade that appalled her.

Echoes made those blasts sound like the saluting fire of an entire regiment. When she realized that no more shots would be forthcoming, Laura again spread the foliage and peered through. The men along the banks were staring at the water, waiting for The Shadow to reappear.

Nothing showed upon the water except a slouch hat, and it was floating, brim upward, like a tiny boat.

Remembering the contour of the pool, Laura wondered if The Shadow had struck the sunken Devil's Ledge. Then, recalling the length of his dive, she was sure that he had gone beyond it.

Enough shot had been discharged to weight a human body to the bottom of the Springs, had The Shadow received those slugs. But Laura could remember the slight splash of a straight-diving figure before the fusillade broke loose.

New mutters came from clustered men along the shore. They kept watching the water, counting off the minutes. They gave The Shadow five. When that time limit ended, they began to disperse, slowly at first, then quickly. From where she watched, Laura could hear wild scrambles as the last of the crackers left.

None had been desirous of beginning the gunfire at the black-garbed ghost upon the Devil's Rock. Similarly, none wanted to be the last to leave the roaming specter's haunt.

Very suddenly, Laura realized that she was alone upon the scene. Reaching the flat slab beside the bank, she crouched there, still fascinated by the pool and actually quite frightened.

Soft moonlight revealed a scene of strange solitude, wherein a sad and shivering girl kept gazing at a slowly drifting slouch hat.

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LIFTING her eyes, Laura looked about. Her shudder ended, and she laughed. She tried to pretend that the whole thing was a dream; that she had merely left the house and stolen to the Springs on a moonlight escapade. The rest, she decided, could all be imagination.

Reality ended that mental journey. Laura's shoulder ached from a fall she had taken; her feet were bruised from the run across the rough ground. Her arms and thighs bore scratches from the brush, red streaks that she could count in the moonlight.

Looking toward the pool again, she saw the floating hat. It had drifted very close. Gingerly, Laura stretched from the brink and gripped the object.

At first, she was terrified to find it real. Then, sensing that it was the only proof of a tragedy, she arose, taking the hat with her.

Stumbling painfully, Laura found a path that led her home. All the way, she carried the hat pressed tightly beneath her arm. She wondered if it would vanish, like its owner; but it didn't.

Laura still had the hat, when she reached the soft lawn. She enjoyed the touch of the velvety grass as she stole across it toward the house. There were lights on the ground floor, but the doors were wide open. Convinced that no one was about, Laura entered and hurried upstairs, taking the hat with her.

As she dropped the hat on a chair, a sudden question gripped her. If The Shadow proved real, as the hat proclaimed who could he be?

Certainly not a ghost. Therefore, he was human. A very brave human, who would risk anything

With a sob, Laura sank beside the bed and buried her face in her hands. Only one man that she had ever met would have risked his life in a reckless plunge that promised no retreat. That man was Lamont Cranston, the rescuer who had saved her from the alligator.

Her sympathy toward The Shadow was immediately explained. Despite his black garb, she had recognized him. She had wanted to save him, but had failed.

Like the Seminole chief of the Indian legend, he had plunged from Devil's Rock, to be swallowed in depths from which he could not return. But the chief was legendary; Cranston was not. He could never live in an imaginary abode ruled by the spirits of earth.

Hoofs clattered outside the house. Laura heard Clenwick's voice. He was talking with other men; they were coming indoors. Checking her sobs, the girl reached for clothes that lay beside the bed and began to dress. The process completed, she stared at her reflection in the mirror.

Even the moonlight showed that her eyes were tear-brimmed, but Laura did not care. She didn't even notice the wisps of Spanish moss that still hung from her hair. Picking up the slouch hat, she went downstairs.

LAURA found Clenwick talking to the sheriff. The tone of Clenwick's voice was an amazed one.

"I still can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "Not on the testimony of five hundred men, let alone fifty!"

"They say they found the ghost here," insisted the sheriff, wiping the smudge of brush-fire ashes from his sweaty forehead. "When they chased him to the Springs, he went back to his home."

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"Nonsense! I was here only a short while before. I saw no ghost. They had a ghost on their minds, those fools! When I came galloping up, they yelled out to ask if the ghost was after me."

"You must have come in a big hurry."

"I did," acknowledged Clenwick. "I didn't know that you chaps had the fire under control. I told the crackers to take the short cut past the house and give a helping hand."

The sheriff shook his head. He was a man who accepted the testimony of witnesses only when their statements corresponded.

"I'd like to talk to someone reliable," asserted Clenwick, "who could swear on oath that some person, ghost or no ghost, dived into Kewanee Springs. I'd believe it, if such a witness could produce evidence to prove it!"

Laura stepped into the library. Solemnly, the girl spoke two words:

"I can!"

She extended the moist hat to Clenwick. His mouth half agape, the big man listened to Laura's story, while the sheriff drank in the tale with a similar expression. When Laura had finished, Clenwick offered the hat to Harley. The sheriff shook his head.

"Keep it here," he suggested. "I've got to go down to the Springs and look the scene over. Tell me, Miss Severn, could you identify the man who plunged into the pool?"

"I think," said Laura, slowly, "that he was Lamont Cranston."

Clenwick started to claim that such was impossible, then stopped himself.

"Cranston was here!" he exclaimed. "What's more, he started to walk back to town. But why would he have returned without telling me? And why should he have masqueraded in black, pretending to be a ghost?"

"Maybe he was fixing to surprise the crackers," returned the sheriff, soberly. "If he was, he did. Too well!"

The next hour was an anxious one for Laura. At the end of it the sheriff returned, bringing the unhappy news she feared. He had found no traces of a body at the Springs; in Pomelo City, he had learned from Welf and Tilyon that Cranston had not returned there.

Expressing the faint hope that Cranston had gone to Leesville in Woodley's taxi, the sheriff said that he would inquire when he reached the county seat.

When Harley had gone, Clenwick picked up The Shadow's hat, eyed it solemnly, and placed it upon the mantel above the library fireplace. As he turned to speak sympathetically to Laura, Clenwick heard the sound of a long-choked sob, then the clatter of heels upon the staircase.

Laura was seeking the solitude of her room.

While she undressed, the girl was sobbing. In bed, she actually wept herself to sleep. The sinking moon had almost faded when its beams showed Laura slumbering, her sad face streaked with tears.

The same gleam cast a dying silver upon the unrippling surface of Kewanee Springs, revealing the full depths

of that crystalline pool. The water showed no traces of a black-garbed body.

Like the Seminole chieftain, The Shadow was a figure that had vanished into the past. A new legend that rivaled the old, he had taken the personality of Lamont Cranston with him.

CHAPTER XVII. BEFORE MIDNIGHT

THE next day was a gloomy, cloudy one, touched with a chilly atmosphere not uncommon in the Florida climate. In fact, the day itself seemed to represent the misery that Laura Severn felt when she thought of her vanished friend and rescuer, Lamont Cranston.

The missing man had not been seen in Leesville. Sheriff Harley brought that news, along with a telegram from Cranston's New York broker. Clouds were clearing when the sheriff called, for it was late in the afternoon. But Laura's own gloom only thickened.

Dinner was very late, and during the meal Roger Severn displayed an unruly mood. Graham Clenwick had come in from the ranch, and was talking sadly and sympathetically about Cranston.

Tiring of the topic, Roger leaned forward in his wheel chair and punched the table with a power that made the dishes rattle.

"It's always Cranston!" he snarled. "What if something did happen to the fellow? He liked risks, and took them. That was his privilege, and he paid for it!"

Laura arose from the table. Her dewy eyes and tight-set lips showed the sorrow that burdened her. The droop at the corners of her mouth gave her features a melancholy loveliness; but that wasn't what impressed Roger.

Laura was primly dressed in black jersey suit, long-sleeved, with a minimum of white trimmings at cuffs and collar. She had worn it because the day was cool and the sleeves hid the bramble scratches on her arms.

But Roger didn't take those facts into account. He grabbed his sister's arm as she passed, swung her full about.

"So you're in mourning, are you?" he sneered, eyeing the black attire and overlooking the trimmings. "Well, you'd better get over it. There's enough misery around here, without anyone making more!"

When Laura tried to wrench away, Roger showed that his arms had power, even though his legs were weak. He twisted the girl around in back of the wheel chair.

"Roll me down to the glen," he ordered. "It's warmer, and the moon is out. I'm tired of looking at a couple of gloomy faces!"

He threw an ugly glance at Clenwick, who smiled back patiently. Laura wheeled the chair from the dining room, out through the back door, and down toward the glen.

All during that quarter mile, Laura underwent torture because of Roger's tyranny. His head turned toward her, her brother kept up sneering comments over the back of the wheel chair.

They were almost at the glen, when Roger broke loose with a bitter outburst that proved a real index to his mood.

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"Everybody lets me down," he grumbled. "Clenwick talked about sending me to a New York specialist, but he's been too busy to attend to it. Cranston handed me a lot of soft soap that I might have believed, if he hadn't shown himself a fool, last night.

"He said I'd forgotten how to walk; that if I made up my mind to it, I'd be on my feet again. He said if I couldn't do it on my own, he'd shock me into it. He argued that the strength of my arms proved that my legs were strong, too.

"So why should you have the weeps? Cranston didn't promise you anything, then let you down, Laura. But he did just that to me."

RETURNING alone to the mansion, Laura told Clenwick all that Roger had said. The rancher pondered; then:

"You don't think that Roger " Catching himself, Clenwick shook his head.

"If Roger could walk," he said, "he might have walked without our knowing it. With those tempers of his, he might have done lots of things, even to starting a brush fire. But no. It's impossible!"

Laura agreed, but not through present regard for Roger. She reasoned that if Roger ever managed to walk, his enthusiasm would offset his ugly destructive moods.

Finding solace in a book, Laura temporarily put aside her woes, though the effort was difficult. She totally forgot the passage of time, until Clenwick reminded her of it.

"It's after eleven," he told her, "and Roger is still in the glen. I'm going over to the ranch, but I can wait to help you bring the wheel chair up the back steps."

"How long will you be gone?" asked Laura.

"Not more than half an hour," replied Clenwick. "I merely want to pick up the day's report."

"Roger can wait," decided Laura, "until you get back."

As soon as Clenwick left by the front door, Laura hurried out the back. She was going to repay Roger for his spite. If there was anything he hated, it was waiting at the bottom of those steps for someone stronger than Laura to haul him to the top.

Laura didn't intend to tell Roger that Clenwick had gone out. She would pretend innocence, while her brother learned the fact for himself. If Roger became nasty, Laura could go inside, coil in the big library chair and read her book while her brother chafed outside.

Eager to prolong that revenge, Laura actually ran to the glen. She saw the wheel chair, pounced upon the rear bar to spin the chair about, another thing that Roger did not like. The wheel chair whirled crazily, and Laura took a somersaulting tumble.

Laura found herself staring at the moon, her weight full on her shoulders, which were draped by her skirt. Straight above, her stockinged legs showed slender and black against a large gray tree trunk, while the tips of her trim slippers were pointing at an angle toward the moon.

Her breath gone, Laura was too astonished to move. Tilting her head clear back, the girl gave an

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upside-down look at the wheel chair. The view made her gasp. Rolling away from the tree, she clambered to her feet and stared again.

The wheel chair was empty!

FRANTICALLY, Laura looked for Roger. When she saw him, her gasp was happy. All animosity left her at the sight.

Roger was on the other side of the glen. Crouched, he was using his strong hands to steady his wobbly knees. With slow, half-creeping gait, he was moving forward on his feet!

As Laura dashed toward him, Roger took a tumble, to land full length at the edge of the Seminole Punch Bowl. Writhing forward, he dipped his head and shoulders down into the tiny pool.

Fearing that Roger had hurt himself, Laura was shrieking as she reached him. But when she tried to draw him from the brink, he shook his head savagely. Gripping his sister's arm, Roger dragged the girl down beside him.

"Listen, Laura!" he gasped hoarsely. "It brought me here! The voice!"

Laura heard only the sighing gurgle of the disappearing pool. She fancied that Roger had fallen asleep and dreamed that the sound was a distant call. It was wonderful, though, that it should have stirred him into finding that his legs were good again. Laura tried to emphasize that point:

"You walked, Roger! You walked!"

Roger's hand tightened on Laura's arm. She listened, understanding that her cry had drowned a sound that Roger heard. Twice, the gurgle of the pool repeated; then, during the next interval, the voice came.

Up through the filtering stones drifted a vague, melancholy laugh—a tone that was eerie, yet real. To Roger, it had been a summoning call. To Laura, it was more: an echo, not just from depths, but from the buried past!

The laugh of The Shadow!

Laura was telling Roger that she had heard that same weird tone last night from the lips of the being in black atop the Devil's Rock. But Roger was too busy to listen. His arms in the Punch Bowl almost to his shoulders, he was hauling out the small stones in handfuls, shoving them to Laura.

Catching the idea, Laura flung stones on the ground as fast as Roger handed them to her. He was digging his way furiously down through the bottom of the pool.

The water level lowered while Roger worked; small stones began slipping through a cavity. Roger came to a large stone, the width of his body. It was wedged between two rocks.

His muscles bulging through his shirt sleeves, Roger strained upward. The large stone budged. Laura thrust her hands into the shallowed water and helped her brother with the stone.

Her strength, though frail compared to Roger's, added the needed poundage. They worked the stone away, managed to swing it to one side.

With the stone gone, the pool became a tiny waterfall. The trickle of the little brook took to a deep niche in

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one of the earth-rooted rocks. The open hole looked empty, but from it came a weary laugh, very close to the surface.

Turning his head to admit the moonlight, Roger caught the glint of eyes from darkness. A black-gloved hand arose, to paw at the slimy rock. Losing its clutch, the hand was slipping, when Roger grabbed the arm below it.

Again, Roger strained his shoulders. As he heaved upward, Laura clutched for the cloak folds that appeared. Another gloved hand wrapped itself across Roger's neck, to give him leverage. Two persons were tugging from above; the man below was aiding.

It was a hard drag through the rocky fissure. Roger and Laura might have failed, except for the cooperation that their burden gave them. Though his efforts were feeble, the cloaked being showed timely ability. Like a giant earthworm, he worked his body upward.

At last he was in the Bowl itself. His knees upon the stones near the side of the emptied pool, he clamped his hands upon the rock-rimmed edge. His face turned downward, the rescued being began a weary clamber. Hauling from either side, Roger and Laura turned that effort into a lurch.

Over the edge, the black-clad figure gave a forward stretch and settled on the soft, pine-needled soil, where his form relaxed, motionless. The faint laugh that trickled from his lips faded into a satisfied sigh.

The Shadow had fulfilled the famous legend. Following his plunge from the Devil's Rock, he had found the abode where fabled earth spirits were supposed to dwell. From that domain, like the Seminole chief of yore, The Shadow had returned!

CHAPTER XVIII. HOUR OF BATTLE

BROTHER and sister raised The Shadow from the ground. While Roger supported the black-cloaked shoulders, Laura gently tilted The Shadow's face into the moonlight. They recognized the face of a friend.

"You're right, Laura," said Roger, soberly. "It's Cranston! Bring the wheel chair. I'll get him into it."

In the chair, The Shadow lay motionless. Ready to wheel him to the mansion, Laura turned to Roger, who was standing near, leaning his weight against a tree.

"I'll come back later, Roger."

"You won't have to, Laura." Roger's smile was genuine. "I can walk!" He lifted his head proudly; then, remorse upon his sobering face, he added: "I'm truly sorry for anything I ever said."

Tears were streaking Laura's smiles by the time she reached the house. Brushing her eyes, she looked at the burden in the wheel chair. Cranston was heavier than Roger, and she had never managed to get her brother up the steps.

For a moment, she thought of waiting for Roger, who was plodding in easy stages along the path. Then, determination ruling her, Laura performed the formerly impossible. Step by step, with pauses, but no faltering, Laura worked the wheel chair and its occupant up into the house.

Rolling the chair into the library, she stopped it near the warmth of the fireplace, where embers were glowing in the grate.

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As Laura tried to revive The Shadow, his eyes opened. A momentary glow told that he recognized her. He began to mutter words that were partly incoherent: something about a great grotto, long, endless passages, and waters that sighed.

Piecing that story, Laura understood. The Seminole legend was based on fact known to the Indians. Under the Devil's Ledge was some cavern where a brave once had swum, to bring back a true, but fantastic, story. Indians had shunned the cavern; but they knew of its existence, and elaborated the tale.

Confident of the truth behind the legend, The Shadow had risked that dive last night. The weight of his garments and his guns had helped him stay below the ledge. Finding the banks of the subterranean river that flowed out into Kewanee Springs, he had remained there.

The Shadow's cloak, though torn and mud-stained, was very nearly dry. Remembering that this was the drought season, when the flow of the Springs was at its minimum, Laura recognized that the underground channels could not be filled.

She pictured The Shadow's long, painful journey from the river channel along those of underground streams that flowed into it. He had preferred that venture, rather than a trip out through the Springs, where the crackers might be waiting. The Shadow had been looking for another outlet.

He hadn't found one, but he had recognized the sucking sigh of the Seminole Punch Bowl when he came beneath it. The intervals, too, must have told him where he was. Knowing that Laura brought Roger there, The Shadow had waited.

A longer wait than he expected. Because of the cloudy weather, Laura had not wheeled Roger to the glen until evening. Picturing The Shadow's long wait, Laura suddenly realized why his strength had weakened. He needed food.

Hurrying to the kitchen, Laura brought back a glass of fruit juice and sandwiches which she hastily prepared. Noting that Cranston's eyes were closed, she laid the food on a table at his elbow, then went out to the back door.

She was wondering about Roger; perhaps the long walk from the glen had overtaxed him. Lacking the wheel chair, the girl went along the path without the accustomed vehicle.

STIRRING in the wheel chair, The Shadow looked about the library soon after Laura had left. He saw the fruit juice and drank it; then began to eat a sandwich. He saw his slouch hat on the mantel.

Rising a bit shakily, The Shadow plucked the hat from its perch and clamped it on his head.

A whispered laugh came stronger. This was where The Shadow wanted to be in the mansion where he had returned, after setting the brush fire the night before. Things seemed a bit disjointed, but The Shadow's laugh told that he expected them to clear.

His long journey through the underground caverns was a timeless expanse, that brought no definite recollection, until he noted a calendar that rested on Clenwick's desk. The rancher was particular about that calendar. The Shadow had noted, when calling as Cranston, that the day card was always correct.

The calendar said Wednesday, where The Shadow had expected Tuesday. Perhaps this night was nearly over, and Clenwick had changed the day card.

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Glancing toward the mantel, The Shadow saw the clock. Its hands showed quarter of twelve. Clenwick wouldn't have changed the date on the calendar before midnight.

This was Wednesday!

It would be midnight in fifteen minutes the time when Tony Belgo and his mob were due! Lost from the world, The Shadow had sent no message to his agents, nor had he given the planned tip-off to the sheriff.

There wasn't time to rouse men to action before the crooks arrived. Last night hadn't worked out as The Shadow wanted it. He had gained a peculiar status in this locality; one that might apply to Cranston, as well as to The Shadow. It would be difficult to reason matters with a mistrustful sheriff, even if The Shadow did manage to find the fellow.

Remembering the path that led up from the wharf, The Shadow resolved upon a swifter course. Every inch of the way could serve as ambush. It wouldn't take a squad to drive off Belgo and his hoodlums. A lone fighter could manage it. The task could readily be The Shadow's own.

His guns were dry; he still had ammunition. Pushing the wheel chair from his path, The Shadow strode out to the hallway and through the rear door into the moonlight.

Wavering as he passed the barn, he paused; then resumed his way toward the path to the wharf. He wasn't as steady as he hoped to be, but the night air would settle that problem. Nevertheless, it wasn't wise to hurry. The Shadow slowed his pace.

At that moment, Laura saw him, while helping Roger along the last stages of the trip from the glen. She pointed out The Shadow to her brother. As they saw the figure fade, they heard sounds from the house.

Clenwick had returned.

Leaving Roger, Laura dashed into the mansion, found Clenwick staring at the empty wheel chair. His look was puzzled, but it became an amazed one as the girl poured the story of all that had happened.

Hearing the details of The Shadow's return, Clenwick gazed toward the mantel, saw that the slouch hat was gone.

"He was delirious!" exclaimed Laura. "I could see him falter as he took the path toward the old wharf. We must find him and bring him back!"

Clenwick agreed. He told Laura to hunt for Cranston. Clenwick would hurry back to the ranch and assemble men to look for the wandering victim, in case Laura's search failed.

"We've got to bring him back," declared Clenwick, grimly. "If he runs into another crowd of crackers, it will be his finish! His senses certainly have left him, or he wouldn't be parading in that ghost masquerade of his."

ACTUALLY, The Shadow's senses were not at their best. He was stumbling badly along a path that had been easy going the night before. When he paused to listen for sounds of a motorboat, he fancied he heard the constant, sucking gurgle of the Seminole Punch Bowl.

Reaching for his flashlight to help find the path, The Shadow was puzzled when the torch wouldn't glow. Dimly, he remembered that it had failed him earlier, when he had tried to use it in the caverns, following his deep swim through Kewanee Springs.

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It took a close sound to make him listen. He could hear muttered voices, the scrape of footsteps. He saw a gleam, not from his own flashlight, but from one that was handled by a person farther down the path. He heard a savage command to "Douse the glim!"

Belgo's mob had landed at the wharf. They were on their way to the mansion, almost upon The Shadow, before he had even chosen the ambush spot he needed!

Galvanizing into action, The Shadow swished toward the palmettos. The ground was mounded; he tripped across a root. Tony's rasped voice came again, this time calling for lights. They appeared in plenty, large glares that swept the palmettos.

Whipping deep into those stalks, The Shadow had struck another mound. The palmettos were nothing more than a fringe that lined a hammock. He wasn't nearly set in ambush; he was in the open, with lights converging upon him!

Forced to open battle, The Shadow preferred it. His blood surged with the love for action. As often before in times of stress, The Shadow felt his whole strength and cunning sweep back into his veins. Better than any lurking spot, where his shots could be mistaken for another's, The Shadow had found the place that suited him.

He was on high ground, above the level of his foemen. To The Shadow, they were a bunch of skulking rats of the sort that he had often scattered in the past. They, on the contrary, were about to meet a foe that they never expected to find in this terrain; one whose power terrified them.

The Shadow!

The name, itself, was gulped half-coherently from choky throats as the joined beams of flashlights focused full upon the cloaked fighter in black. Those croaks were drowned by the rise of a fierce, strident laugh from the waiting master on the mound.

Puny pops of revolvers were likewise thundered under by the blasts that came from two huge automatics that appeared in The Shadow's black-fisted hands. Driving bullets straight for the flashlights, The Shadow obliterated those gleams before a single mobster could aim a telling shot in his direction.

Transplanted crooks, new to the Florida terrain, were finding a merciless treatment at the hands of the same foe who had so often driven them to cover along the sidewalks of New York.

The Shadow's hour of battle had arrived!

CHAPTER XIX. THE DOUBLE FIGHT

THE tune of blazing guns was music to The Shadow's ear: a harmony that wafted away all hazy impressions. From the moment that he began his rapid fight, he took to measures that promised to turn advantage into mastery.

His first step was a weaving retreat, necessitated by a simple reason. In his blind choice of the original position, The Shadow had placed himself between his foemen and the moon. The mound where The Shadow stood was still illumined, though the flashlights were gone.

To correct that situation, The Shadow swung across the mound. Crooks, urged by Tony Belgo, charged through the palmettos, only to be met by a devastating fire. Spreading, they took advantage of the darkness,

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to come in from the sides.

Their strategy failed. A shout from one gunner turned all eyes to another knoll. The Shadow was going across another hump, to entrench himself in a new position. Crooks followed warily, shooting a dozen times before The Shadow replied.

Even Tony Belgo did not guess The Shadow's purpose. Working from hammock to hammock, The Shadow was drawing the mob to clearer ground, where they, before they realized it, would be visible in the moonlight, too.

The speed of his retreat did not symbolize an urge for flight. The Shadow was simply preventing the crooks from flanking him the one thing that might destroy his scheme.

Behind a hammock near the open ground, The Shadow viewed a darkened patch to the right. If any of Tony's followers had circled that far, they would be dangerous. The Shadow was keeping a set eye on the spot, as he made another rearward trip.

A flashlight shone. The Shadow burned a shot toward the patched darkness. He made a whirl across a broad, low hammock, to bring the flanking men into the open. He expected a few, who would give themselves away when they charged. Instead, a dozen came.

They weren't mobbies; they were ranch hands. Accepting the challenge of The Shadow's single shot, they were taking him for a foe. The guns that they eyed beneath the wide brims of their Stetsons were handled by capable trigger fingers.

Bullets were thwacking hard against the trees, as The Shadow reached the open ground. The whoops of the gunning cowhands joined with pleased snarls of the mobbies, who were swinging wide to cut off The Shadow at the other flank.

Chance had produced strange allies. Whether purposeful or blind, their efforts were united. Both factions were out to get The Shadow.

It seemed certain that he would be a target, until the converging battlers looked for him. The Shadow was gone, as suddenly as if the ground had swallowed him.

As halted men stared through the moonlight, they saw the reason.

The open ground was jet-black. It was the wide strip that the brush fire had burned, the night before. More than a hundred yards in width, the sooty ground offered The Shadow the same cover as night. Flattened somewhere, he was crawling to a new position, his cloaked form rendering him invisible.

Black against black a combination that no eye could detect. Blindly, Tony's mobbies and Clenwick's men were slashing the turf with their bullets, hoping to score a hit.

In the midst of that crazy fray, Laura reached the scene, to stare as helplessly as she had the night before. She was away from the range of fire, and she could venture a short way from cover, because her dress was dark and kept her inconspicuous.

She knew that gunners were looking for The Shadow, and that her shouts could not stop them. Even the ranch hands wouldn't listen, though Clenwick might be able to manage them when he arrived.

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Probably, his men had heard shooting in the woods and had started there before Clenwick reached the ranch.

As for the group responsible for the trouble Tony's mob that came up from the wharf Laura had no idea who they might be.

Then into the search came a new type of weapon: a flare that exploded when it struck the ground. A flame bomb, that someone had thrown, it spattered a wide range of light.

Laura couldn't see the man who threw it; he was far across the blackened ground, up near the Giant Sinkhole. When they lashed upward, the flames whipped in the girl's direction, for tonight the breeze was toward the mansion, from the hammock ground above.

Lacking brush which they could kindle, the flames died rapidly; but Laura feared that the next puffy bomb might reveal The Shadow's position. Instead, The Shadow showed himself of his own accord.

Yells caused a score of men to look to the left of the sinkhole. Against the moonlight, they saw The Shadow, wrestling with a rangy foe. Cutting away from his first objective, the sinkhole, he had driven in upon the man who was tossing the flares.

Ironically, the fellow had been throwing those bursting objects beyond The Shadow. He had another fire bomb in his fist when the cloaked fighter pounced upon him. The flare left the hand that held it, but did not strike the ground.

Sledging his gun to his adversary's head, The Shadow plucked the bomb before it fell. The thing that hit the turf was the stunned form of The Shadow's surprised foe.

GUNS were ripping madly; men were on the move as they fired. The range was too great for them to score a hit, until a few came closer.

By then, The Shadow had almost finished a short-cut race to the sinkhole. Stabbing shots with one gun, he picked his nearest enemies while on the run.

Both parties were closing in upon him as he reached the fringing trees. Circling to the far side of the sinkhole, The Shadow could go no farther. He was being hemmed in by outspread enemies, who gradually closed in around the semicircle that marked the near side of the sinkhole.

The Shadow had chosen the little promontory that jutted into the wall of the great, steep funnel. His position was much like the one that he had held at Devil's Rock a central spot upon a girdling brink, where enemies were ready.

Again, retreat was useless, for the ground beyond was barren and unburned. Unlike Kewanee Springs, however, the sinkhole offered no chance at self-rescue by a daring dive.

The scummy murk that lay far below offered no suitable outlet.

Prone behind a few low stones at the sinkhole's jut, The Shadow felt the breeze fan over him across the murky hollow. It was blowing toward the men who crouched beyond barbed wire. Hidden in the fringing brush, they were pumping shots that The Shadow could not answer.

One of his reloaded guns was emptied, the other held a few spare shots. But to lift his head would be suicide. Bullets were spanking the stones, only inches from him.

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The Shadow's cause seemed gone. Soon, foemen would be working around from their present positions. Arriving, they would seal his doom through sheer power of numbers.

But The Shadow did not intend to have them reach him. Rolling half upon his back, he let his finger release the spring pin of the flare bomb that he had captured in his recent drive. With a toss that worked only from his wrist, he flipped the projectile over the sinkhole's brink.

The flare burst almost as it struck the scummy pool below. It was answered by a huge belch a vast explosive rise of flame. The whole bottom of the sinkhole seemed to rise in fiery deluge, as if The Shadow had primed the crater of a volcano!

Roaring upward, like thunder from the earth, the mighty mass of flame lifted the scrubby brushwood with it. That blazing fuel became the kindling that ignited the half-dead trees around the brink. A titanic beacon, reaching for the sky, the sinkhole emitted gorging flames that lashed to lengths of fifty feet above the edge.

The conflagration did not dwindle. Pressed by the breeze, it spurted its fiery shoots around the half circle of the opposite bank, away from The Shadow's shelter. He could feel its scorch, but not the fury.

His foemen were getting the latter. Some never rose; the surprise had taken them all too suddenly. The rest fled, yelling, most of them with clothing afire, their guns dropped behind them.

As they ran, they heard a sardonic burst of mockery as chilling as the flames were hot.

The laugh that told the triumph of The Shadow! Single-handed the master fighter had scattered a horde of murderous foemen who had trapped him by doubling their forces.

Upon those enemies, The Shadow had launched a cataclysm. He had stirred up nature's powers, to make the final thrust. With that deed, The Shadow had shattered the riddle that involved a city of ghosts.

CHAPTER XX. CRIME'S LAST STAND

LEAVING his own vantage point, where the ground was becoming overhot, The Shadow reloaded his automatics as he went. Bodies were sliding down into the roaring pit, which still resembled a volcano. By the vivid glare, The Shadow could see scorched men rolling on the ground.

A scattered few were fleeing in opposite directions the mobbies toward the wharf, the ranch men to their own preserves. None cared to return and resume battle with The Shadow. All wanted escape, but neither band was due to travel far.

Serving as a massive beacon, the blazing sinkhole was attracting new forces, who had heard the gunfire but had not managed to locate it.

At the wharf, The Shadow's agents were coming from a boat, in which they had followed Tony's mob. They were cutting off the kidnap crew.

Sheriff Harley and some deputies had heard the shooting from far away, and had driven for the ranch by car. Charged by an excited group of returning ranch hands, the sheriff's squad responded. Both factions that had battled The Shadow were finding new trouble that they couldn't handle.

Far off across the barren stretch, Laura saw The Shadow emerge from beyond the screening fire. She watched his actions, saw that he was checking on both frays, ready to join the one in which he was most needed.

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Realizing that she wasn't needed, the girl turned and ran back to the mansion.

Roger had dragged himself indoors, and was slumped wearily in his wheel chair. From the library window, he could see the flicker of the blazing sinkhole. He asked what it was about.

Wheeling him into the hall, where the rear door offered a better view, Laura began to relate all that she had witnessed.

Promptly, Roger stopped her. His eyes held a sharp look.

"You say that the ranch hands turned on Cranston?"

Laura nodded.

"Mr. Clenwick couldn't have reached them," she replied. "I was hoping that he would ride up "

"But he didn't?"

Laura shook her head, very ruefully. She noted that an odd expression was tracing itself on Roger's face.

"What if Clenwick had told those ranch hands to go after Cranston?" said Roger, slowly. "Would that explain things, Laura?"

"Impossible!" exclaimed the girl. "Why "

"Clenwick brought those crackers here last night," persisted Roger. "An accident that happens twice doesn't look so good to me."

Too hopelessly amazed to speak, Laura turned to stare out toward the fire. Roger, gazing in the same direction, suddenly smacked his hand against the wheel chair.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "The thing that Cranston knew last night. He was the one who started the brush fire!"

"But why?"

"He wanted it to reach the Giant Sinkhole. He knew it would give Clenwick's game away. He had to postpone the job until tonight; that was all."

Rising half from the chair, Roger pointed.

"You know what the experts have claimed for years," declared Roger. "They've said that there's oil in Florida. That's what Terry Knight was looking for when he came here. Petroleum! He found it in that old sinkhole!"

"He interested Clenwick in it, Terry did. The reason Clenwick started a ranch was to cover up the find. I can guess what happened to Terry. Clenwick got rid of him!"

An ugly voice spoke from the front hall. Roger caught a wheel of the chair and spun it. Laura turned with him; both Severns found themselves facing Graham Clenwick.

"YOU'VE guessed a lot, haven't you?" sneered the bulky man. "Yes, you've struck something, just like Terry

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struck oil! But that's not going to help you, or incriminate me! There's no law against a man finding oil on a ranch. It's happened often, in Texas."

Drawing a .38 revolver, Clenwick toyed with the weapon. As he proceeded, he emphasized his points by slapping the gun against his open palm.

"I turned Pomelo City into a ghost town," boasted Clenwick. "My men were the sappers who opened sinkholes. They spread the Medfly in the orange groves. They ran Betterly's car off the road. When the crackers blamed it on Bayne's accident, we started things in town."

Remembering the fire bomb that The Shadow had grabbed and taken to the sinkhole, Laura understood. The man The Shadow battled belonged to Clenwick's tribe. He had brought a supply of flares that they kept in stock for other uses.

"I even started a cattle plague," chortled Clenwick. "It made it look as if I had troubles, too. But it was worth the stock I lost. The local cattlemen went broke. I supplied them with new stock, and took over their mortgages as security.

"Just like the mortgage on this house. Any time I want, I can gobble the whole circle where the oil is! I don't want Kewanee Springs; it's outside the oil land. After tonight, though" he glowered toward the glare of the fading sinkhole fire "I won't be able to buy the rest of Pomelo City.

"A few weeks more, and Welf and Tilyon would have been all through. Only one man knew the answers; that was Cranston. He gave himself away too soon, by starting that brush fire last night."

As Clenwick paused, an odd smile played across his face. He was thinking in terms of The Shadow, and he evidently didn't think the cloaked fighter's triumph would last. Laura trembled when she saw Clenwick's expression, but Roger remained quite calm.

"You say that only Cranston knew," spoke Roger. "What about Roy Enwald?"

"Enwald guessed just one thing," returned Clenwick. "He suspected that I'd disposed of his friend Terry Knight. But if he figured that I had done Terry out of any oil, he probably supposed it was in Texas.

"He wanted revenge for Terry. First, he wanted to make sure he was right. Enwald pulled a smart one, that night when he was here. After I told him that I had invited Terry to Florida, he questioned Laura. She said that it was the other way around.

"That's why Enwald told a bunch of crooks they could come and get me. They showed up tonight, and Cranston The Shadow, they call him knew that they were coming. I didn't know it, but The Shadow was nice enough to stop them for me. He finished them like "

Clenwick paused, still juggling his gun. With a sudden side shift, he planted his gun muzzle against Laura's side. The girl gasped, but remained motionless at a signal from Roger.

A figure had stepped in from the rear door a black-cloaked visitor, whose hands gripped a pair of automatics. One weapon was lifted; but Clenwick had seen it in time to cover Laura, thereby insuring his own safety.

Cannily, the master crook had chosen to threaten another life, rather than risk battle with The Shadow.

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VERY calmly, in a style more Cranston's than his own, The Shadow accepted the situation. In a sibilant tone, he picked up Clenwick's statement where the unmasked crook had dropped it.

"Yes, I finished Belgo's mob," spoke The Shadow, "somewhat as you disposed of Enwald. But you missed another opportunity that night, Clenwick. I was lying, half-stunned, in that hotel courtyard, with both these guns empty, when you fired from the darkness."

From Clenwick's lips spat savage oaths, denials of The Shadow's statement. The crook was trying to cover his chagrin at having missed a chance that The Shadow termed an opportunity.

In reply, The Shadow delivered a whispered, taunting laugh. Clenwick's sputters stopped.

"I labeled you that night," The Shadow told him. "I heard what you told Enwald, about Knight. I spoke to Roger afterward, and learned just the opposite. Later, when you came to town, you told another story that had flaws.

"You couldn't have gone to the ranch for your car. There wasn't time. Your car was here, but you were trying the same system that I was. You wanted to cover the fact that you had been busy around town."

Approaching Clenwick as he spoke, The Shadow watched the man's expression. He knew that Clenwick, though at bay, was dangerous. Three persons needed to die in order for the master crook to cover up his crimes.

Those three were Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow, Laura Severn, and her brother Roger.

If Clenwick murdered Laura, as at present he was able, he would bring his own death. But if he could offset The Shadow, the crook would feel certain of success, for he would be dealing then with only a girl and an invalid.

Only one scheme could be in Clenwick's brain. The Shadow resolved to test it. He waited, knowing that Clenwick would soon speak. The crook's statement came.

"Suppose we make terms," suggested Clenwick. "Knight's death was really an accident. He fell down the Giant Sinkhole. With Terry gone, I just lost my head. Killing Enwald wasn't murder. You knew the fellow was crooked. So did I."

Though Clenwick's statements were mostly lies, The Shadow appeared to accept them. The features of Cranston were visible beneath his hat brim, when he spoke:

"State your terms."

"There's the front door," declared Clenwick, gesturing his free hand. "Walk on out, and go your way. I know that Laura and Roger will agree not to talk, when I give them a share of the oil property. Naturally, I won't harm them. I don't want to bring you back."

Both Laura and Roger saw catches in those terms, but The Shadow started to accept them. He walked toward the front door. Keeping Clenwick covered with one gun, he put away the other and reached for the knob.

Though Clenwick and Laura were both watching The Shadow, only Roger caught the commanding glint of the cloaked avenger's directed eyes. He understood the gaze. Graham Clenwick had forgotten one thing: that Roger Severn had learned how to walk.

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INSPIRED by The Shadow's confidence, Roger did more than walk. He sprang, covering the distance to Clenwick in a single leap. He bowled the big man to the floor.

Startled completely by the attack, Clenwick didn't press the gun trigger until he struck. By then, his aim was far wide of Laura.

Sweeping the front door wide, The Shadow stepped out into the moonlight. On the lawn were the men that he expected a score of crackers, all with shotguns. Clenwick had summoned them here, but hadn't told them why he wanted them.

Lifting his head, The Shadow delivered a long, weird laugh that stretched its defiant mockery above the topmost twigs of the huge oaks. With that challenge, the whole scene changed.

Men flung away their shotguns and fled. With the first break in the ranks, the rest followed suit. Clenwick had misjudged what would happen at that meeting; The Shadow had not.

Last night, The Shadow had proven himself a ghost, so far as the natives were concerned. Former suspicions became convictions, the moment they realized that the ghost had returned. No human being, so they supposed, could have survived last night's disappearing dive from Devil's Rock.

One gunshot sounded, not from the cleared lawn but within the house. Looking back through the door, The Shadow saw Roger rising, picking up a smoking revolver. Clenwick lay motionless on the floor.

The Shadow had held no doubts about that outcome. Graham Clenwick, on the verge of murdering Laura, had been easy prey for Roger Severn and the latter's powerful hands, the moment that The Shadow had given Roger opportunity to begin the fray.

Clenwick's crimes were bared. His death would bring credit to Roger, when the sheriff arrived to learn full facts. As for Clenwick's holdings, those properties and the oil they represented would revert to the actual owners.

Mortgages were held by Clenwick, but they could all be lifted. Tomorrow, Welf and Tilyon would hear from Cranston, offering loans to any persons who needed to reclaim their properties.

To Roger and Laura, such a loan would come from their old friend, The Shadow. As for the natives duped by Clenwick, they could regard their good luck as a "thank you" from their chance acquaintance, the ghost.

Reaching the wharf, The Shadow found his agents in a speedboat drawn up beside Belgo's deserted cruiser. Soon, the speedboat was gliding toward the Oklawaha River, with The Shadow at the helm.

As he steered a winding course by moonlight through the thick-walled river jungle, The Shadow gazed into the distance when the craft turned a low-banked bend.

His gaze was toward Pomelo City. The laugh that issued from The Shadow's lips was a token of departure to his two friends who lived there. A farewell to the city of ghosts, where life and prosperity would soon begin anew!

THE END