

CITY OF SHADOWS

Maxwell Grant

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CITY OF SHADOWS

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CHAPTER I. THE FUGITIVE

“Wa-a-augh—wa-a-augh—”

The strident tone of those distant shrieks startled Jack Denwood. Pausing among the barren trees, he tightened his grip upon his loaded shotgun.

Again the sirens wailed. This time, Jack located their general direction and had the explanation. He snapped sharp words at Queenie, his black-and-white English setter. The dog's growls silenced.

“It's all right, Queenie,” assured Jack. “Some poor devils have tried to make a break from Lancaster, that's all.”

Jack was rather pleased when the sirens finally quieted. Even though it was still mid-afternoon, the sound had given him the shivers. Despite himself, he felt a sympathy for the “poor devils” that he had mentioned, whoever they might be. Escaping from a State prison would probably be a huge ordeal in itself; to hear the sirens would make a man think that all the world was after him.

Maybe penitentiaries were necessary, but Jack Denwood wasn't entirely sure. At any rate, he was convinced

that they were overstocked with persons who had turned to crime as a last resort against poverty.

Jack began to wonder just what he and Queenie would do if they suddenly found themselves surrounded by a horde of convicts. Certainly a double-barreled shotgun, loaded for quail, wouldn't be sufficient to stave off a mass attack. All of which formed another side to the existing situation.

Lancaster Prison, as Jack remembered it, was about seven miles over the hills from his little hunting lodge. He and Queenie had covered about half the distance, which put them in what might be termed a danger zone. But that didn't particularly bother Jack, he still decided to look for quail, hoping that the bellows of the sirens had not scared all the birds from the neighborhood.

After a half-hour's tramp, Jack suddenly halted, snapping his fingers for the dog to crouch at his feet. He could hear the crackle of the brush and knew that men were moving into a clearing that lay just ahead. As he waited, Jack saw the men come into view.

They weren't convicts. One looked like a guard; the rest, four in number, were an assorted lot. The guard and one other man had rifles; the rest carried shotguns.

Spying Jack, they approached. While the guard waited with the rank and file, the other man with a rifle flashed a sheriff's badge.

"Seen any strangers hereabouts?" he gruffed.

Jack shook his head.

"I heard the sirens," he returned, coolly. "It strikes me that you fellows covered a lot of ground, getting over here so soon from Lancaster."

"That's new trouble," announced the sheriff. "We're looking for somebody that escaped this morning. The cons have found out about it, and I guess they're restless."

"Who's the man you're looking for?"

The sheriff tilted his head when he heard Jack's question. Studying the young man's expensive hunting outfit, he became somewhat impressed.

"We're looking for a woman," said the sheriff. "Her name is Betty Jevers. Ever hear of her?"

JACK nodded slowly. A surge of recollections were coming to his mind. First, he remembered that Lancaster was divided into two sections, one of which was a woman's prison. As for Betty Jevers, she was the notorious red-haired gun moll who had been sentenced there a year ago.

As Jack recalled it, Betty's crime had consisted in holding off a handful of State police while a band of wanted bank robbers had made a flight, without their swag. The crew had cleared the country, and one of them was Betty's brother. According to the girl's lawyer, that had been her only connection with the crooks.

The argument had not convinced the jury. The law, needing some human trophy, along with the recovered funds, had demanded a conviction of the gun moll, which had been granted, to the tune of twenty years. The term had struck Jack as an overlong one, considering that Betty's battle had produced no casualties.

"How come you hadn't heard about the escape?" demanded the sheriff. "The news went out over the air along

about noon. Don't you listen to the radio?"

"Not when I've got something else to do," retorted Jack. "Right now, I'm out hunting. Here's my gun, there's my dog. Any other questions?"

The sheriff grunted an apology; then, in a more polite tone, he asked:

"Where do you come from?"

"Middledale," replied Jack. "I left there early this morning. I have a hunting shack over on Round Pond. That's where I'm heading right now, since it looks like my chances of finding any quail have been ended."

"What's your name?"

"Jack Denwood."

The sheriff's face took a sudden change. He had heard that name before; so had everyone else in the surrounding counties. He knew that Jack's father, Henry Denwood, was the wealthiest man in the prosperous city of Middledale. The sheriff's next question came as a polite request.

"If you're going over toward the pond, Mr. Denwood," he said, "would you keep a lookout for this convict—this women we're trying to find?"

"Of course," replied Jack. Then, nudging his shotgun: "I might even mistake her for a quail. How would that be?"

"It would suit us. We're supposed to bring her in, dead or alive. Maybe I ought to swear you in as a deputy first."

"Don't worry. I'll take the consequence!"

Turning on his heel, Jack started in the direction of Round Pond, muttering to Queenie as he went along. His sarcasm had evidently been lost on the sheriff. Looking back, Jack saw that the posse had headed in the other direction.

Evidently, the sheriff felt quite satisfied that Jack would take care of the area near Round Pond.

As he stalked along, Jack decided to ignore completely any sounds that he might hear from the brush. He covered the few miles to the pond, followed its shore, until he neared a small summer cabin. There, Jack made a grimace at some "No Hunting" signs posted on those premises.

Jack had seen the old maid who lived in that cabin. Every year, she saw to it that her place was posted. So Jack always gave the cabin a wide berth; just in case some snooper happened to be there watching for anyone who crossed the premises carrying a gun.

A hundred yards farther on, Jack came to his own lodge. The door was ajar, as he had left it. He never locked it while hunting, for all he kept there was a few odd clothes, some bedding, and a small amount of food. Prowlers never bothered small hunting lodges in the daytime. That, at least, was Jack's opinion, until he pushed the door open.

Right then, he stopped with one foot on the threshold, halted by the sound of a quick, almost furtive gasp.

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BEFORE Jack's eyes stood a girl, motionless as a statue. She was close to a chair upon which lay khaki clothes that Jack recognized as old garments of his own, which she had taken from the closet where they belonged.

The girl was dressed in a drab gray outfit that had the look of a uniform. Her blunt shoes and cotton stockings were black, but her skirt and blouse predominated, giving her an entirely gray appearance as far as her shoulders.

More correctly, one shoulder; for she had drawn the sleeve from the other. The sunlight showed the bare shoulder to be a very attractive one; but that was to be expected, considering the girl's face. Viewing that lovely countenance, Jack felt a new sympathy toward Betty Jevers.

This girl didn't belong in the prison uniform that she wore. Her rounded face had rose-petal lips that showed a real tremble. Above a perfect nose were pleading eyes, so large that their blue hue was very apparent. Her hair, half down her shoulders, caught the sunlight from the windows, to form a burnished background to a portrait which Jack Denwood regarded as beautiful at first sight.

The girl's eyes were fixed on the shotgun that rested in the crook of Jack's elbow. The slight motion of his forearm jogged the barrels upward. The girl's lips went firm. She brought her arms upward, shaking one hand from its loosened sleeve.

She spoke. Her tone was low, but it lacked bitterness.

"You've caught me," she said. "I'll come along quietly. Take me to the prison. The sooner, the better."

"Wait a moment," suggested Jack, letting the shotgun barrels tilt toward the floor, "You're Betty Jevers—"

"If I told you I was someone else"—the girl's interruption showed her first tinge of bitterness—"you wouldn't believe me. So why waste time?"

"Because I'd like to complete the introduction," returned Jack, calmly. "My name is Jack Denwood. What we are, is another matter. Why you are here happens to be apparent. It seems that you would prefer some of my clothes to your own. You are quite welcome to them."

The girl stood speechless, but her eyes went wide open, expressing her astonishment.

"I might find something better," continued Jack. "There's a cabin near here belonging to a fussy old maid, who might have left some clothes there. I'll go look; meanwhile, you might as well put on those other things, in case I don't have luck."

Setting his gun in the corner, Jack snapped his fingers and gestured Queenie out through the door. He was smiling as he filled his pipe with tobacco. About to close the door as he departed, Jack remarked:

"I'm taking the dog, but I won't need the shotgun. Be careful with it, because it's loaded."

Outside the lodge, Jack Denwood turned deliberately about. Puffing his pipe, and with Queenie at his heels, he strolled in the direction of the cabin, calmly confident that he had nothing to fear from the notorious Betty Jevers.

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FOR half a minute after Jack's departure, the gray-garbed girl stood motionless. Then, almost mechanically, she approached a window beside the door and stared toward the shore of the pond. Autumn had stripped the leaves from the trees; she could see Jack plainly as he sauntered toward the cabin.

His red-backed hunting jacket offered a perfect target, although by this time he was out of gunshot range. To the girl, however, the weapon that Jack had left was merely another token of his friendship. Her whole expression was one of admiration for the man who so completely trusted her.

Then, again conscious of the fact that she still wore prison gray, the girl resolved to rid herself of that undesirable attire before Jack returned. She undressed rapidly, flinging the detested garments into a corner. Having shed the evidence that linked her to Lancaster Prison, the girl hastily put on the clothes that she had previously brought from the closet.

The prison outfit had been too large for her. Jack's spare clothes were also oversized, but they felt better and looked better. Socks and sneakers weren't too large to attract attention; she rolled up the cuffs of the khaki trousers and made them look reasonably neat.

The large size of the flannel shirt wasn't noticeable when the girl slid a sweater over it.

Bundling her hair, the girl finally captured it quite cleverly within the confines of a hunting cap. She was studying the effect in a mirror over the fireplace, when she heard a knock at the door of the lodge, then Jack's voice:

"May I come in?"

The girl went over and opened the door. Empty-handed, Jack started to explain ruefully that he had found no clothing at the neighboring cabin, then gave a surprised exclamation:

"Say! You look swell! We won't have any trouble getting back to town. Wait—step outside a moment. I want to look at you in the sunlight."

The girl obliged. Jack nodded approvingly.

"Your hair looks brown, the way you've fixed it," he said. "We won't have to worry. Where did you put those clothes you took off?"

The girl pointed into the corner of the main room. Jack handed her a ring of keys.

"The garage is over there," he said, pointing beyond the lodge. "Unlock the door and back the car out; the little key is for the ignition switch. Take the shotgun with you"—he reached for the weapon, unloaded it—"and put it in back of the seat."

"But—but where are you going?"

"Out in a rowboat, to sink your old clothes in the pond. There's a big stone down on the shore, that will be just the thing to keep them on the bottom."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Jack Denwood was piloting his expensive coupe along a road that led to a main highway. Beside him sat a very happy girl. On the space behind the top of the seat was Queenie; the dog's

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nose rested on the girl's sweated shoulder.

Jack had always regarded Queenie to be a good judge of human character, and the dog had taken to the girl immediately.

Smiling, Jack broke the silence.

“I think that we ought to consider the future,” he said. “Don't you agree, Miss—”

He hesitated, as if he couldn't remember the girl's name. She gave a carefree laugh.

“I've been thinking about my name myself,” she declared. “I really think I ought to have one, don't you?”

“You should; and it shouldn't be—”

She laid a finger on Jack's lips before he could mention the name “Betty Jevers.”

“My name,” said the girl, simply, “is Ruth Geldon. Do you like it?”

Jack nodded.

“It's my real name, too,” insisted Ruth. “The other name—well, it never was my name at all.”

A prompt explanation struck Jack, though he did not express it. Ruth's brother must have been using the alias of Jevers. Knowing it, the girl had claimed the same name, to protect her own. Such foresight was more than commendable; it decided Jack upon a plan which he had been about to offer.

“I live in Middledale,” he told the girl. “Why don't you stay there, Ruth, and take a job? Nobody would ever link you with the past.”

“You're sure of that?”

“Positive! I'll tell you why.”

During the next five minutes, Jack sketched his own personal history. His father, Henry Denwood, was the wealthiest man in Middledale—owner of the largest department store, the principal industrial plant, and much of the local real estate, which included several apartment houses.

Jack, himself, had ideals rather than ambitions. He tried to stress them lightly, but in so doing made them the more evident. Already, the factory was on a co-operative basis, and Ruth could easily guess that Jack's suggestion had been responsible.

“In a few years the employees will have the store, too,” said Jack, warmly. “Dad has decided to leave that for me to handle. He intends to retire in a few years, and after that—”

He hesitated. Watching him, Ruth smiled. Jack Denwood was a handsome chap, with his fine profile, his square jaw, and dark, keen eyes almost the color of his blackish hair. But the girl was not thinking of his looks. His enthusiasm would have made her regard him as handsome, if his features had been actually ugly.

“I understand,” spoke Ruth, softly. “You intend to use your fortune to benefit Middledale.”

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“Which is only right,” asserted Jack. “The Denwoods didn't make Middledale. The town made us! My father profited by coming there, and I intend to return the favor. Of course, I'm going to keep a sizable fortune for myself, but it will be only a small portion of our entire wealth.”

THEY were on the main highway, speeding into the dusk. Jack turned on the lights, then said quietly:

“All this, of course, is confidential. It belongs to the future, and I don't want to spoil it by too early an announcement. Let's talk about the present, and the matter of your job.”

Ruth was quite agreeable.

“At present,” Jack said, “Middledale has a city government which is termed a reform administration. It is supported by my father and another wealthy man, named Martin Albot. The mayor, Timothy Kesselbrock, is an old fogy, but honest enough in his way.

“We are all anxious to put through a new boulevard, which will develop a section called Western Heights into an excellent suburb. The vote on the proposition comes up within a few weeks.”

From Jack's tone, Ruth could guess that some opposition was expected. Jack came promptly to the subject.

“A lot of tin-horn politicians want to hold it off. If they can win the next election, they will swing the boulevard through a dumping ground that we call 'The Neck,' and include a bill to improve that section without cost to the owners.”

“Who happen to be the politicians?”

“Exactly! The city will spend millions, and they will clean up fortunes. The fact that my father owns land along the proper route is being used to discredit his real motives. Albot, too, has come in for criticism.”

The car had come to a ridge; ahead lay a valley carpeted with lights. As they rolled slowly down the slope, Jack pointed out the important sections of Middledale.

“Not long ago,” he chuckled, “Mayor Kesselbrock delivered one of his pompous speeches from Station MBX in our store. He was much impressed by Miss Robinson, the hostess at the radio station. He decided that his office needed a hostess to greet visitors, many of whom are women's committees.”

“Did he want Miss Robinson?” asked Ruth.

“He did,” replied Jack, “but she wouldn't take the job. To soothe his honor, I promised to obtain a hostess from some station outside of Middledale. I have been thinking that if tomorrow Miss Ruth Geldon called on Mayor Kesselbrock, with my recommendation, she would get the job.”

“Not if she called in these clothes.”

“She won't.” They had swung into the town and were pulling up beside a small, but modern, apartment house. “To begin with, Ruth, this is where you live.”

“But how—”

“We own the apartment house. I'll see the superintendent and get a key to a furnished apartment. You can stay there while I drive over to the store.”

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“Is it open in the evening?”

“For me, it is.” Jack's tone was brisk. “We have a late call delivery, and in an hour you'll have a flock of clothes to choose from. Phone me later, and we'll have dinner together.”

Two hours later, Jack Denwood was escorting a very gorgeous young lady into Middledale's best restaurant. Ruth Geldon, gowned in the best that the Denwood store could supply, was probably the last girl that anyone could have mistaken for the fugitive Betty Jevvers.

Ruth was vivacious, a girl of rare charm. Her taste in dress was excellent, as Jack could tell by the choice that she had made from the many clothes sent to her apartment. He noted, too, that her hair, as she had finally arranged it, still showed a tendency toward brown.

Jack's greatest reward, however, came when they had driven back to the apartment house. There, at the front door, the girl whispered:

“Thanks a lot, Jack, for everything! But I'll only need a few of those clothes. I'll send the rest back in the morning.”

“But you may need more—”

“Not until I can afford them. If the job pays as well as you claim it will, I'll take care of the bill by the first of the month. Besides, there's the apartment rent.”

“Don't worry about that!”

“I won't worry about it,” assured Ruth, firmly. “I'll pay it! Good night, Jack.”

As Jack departed, tears came to Ruth's eyes. She felt that she owed a debt to Jack Denwood that mere money could not repay. Somehow, Ruth was sure that if she remained awhile in Middledale, she could prove her gratitude to the kindly young man who had helped her from a serious dilemma at risk of his own good standing.

Had Ruth Geldon known the full state of affairs in Middledale, she would have realized that she had a double opportunity. The town that looked so placid from her window was a city of hidden crime.

However checkered Ruth's past, her future was to surpass it. In the evil schemes that stirred Middledale, Ruth was to hold a key position that would swing the balance between law and crime.

Such knowledge would have troubled Jack Denwood. He could reasonably have wondered whether a girl who had suffered from the law's devices would choose to uphold justice, rather than side with criminals in whose class she had been placed.

When the time came, however, Middledale would have a visitor whose keen observation would recognize whichever choice Ruth made.

That coming visitor was a being called The Shadow!

CHAPTER III. CRIME UNDER COVER

DURING the next week, Middledale had many things to think about other than the fact that the mayor had hired a very attractive brunette to give his sumptuous office the charm that only a hostess could supply.

Three accidents had marred a rather pleasant week. One was the plunge of an elevator in the Denwood Store; the other two had been bus accidents, involving vehicles of the Middledale Transportation Co., owned principally by Henry Denwood and Martin Albot.

Fortunately, none of those occurrences could be termed disasters. The elevator had fallen a few floors on its first morning trip, with only the operator on board, and he had not been severely injured.

In one bus smash, all the damage, as well as the blame, had been placed upon the truck with which the bus collided. In the other, the driver had pulled the bus out of a wild, downhill skid, bringing a batch of scared passengers to safety, shaken but unhurt.

True, the accidents had caused much stir and comment, even to the effect that they had been planned. But the citizens of Middledale forgot that very quickly. They were more interested in the big parade and general celebration that was due on Saturday night.

The event was in honor of Middledale's founders, and it was no secret that the principal speakers would boost the matter of the new boulevard through Western Heights. All Middledale, except the disgruntled politicians and their adherents, wanted that boulevard. Saturday's demonstration would be a suggestion that members of the city council vote in favor of it.

Highlight of the evening was to be the test of a superpowered bus acquired by the Middledale Transportation Co. The bus, it was claimed, could pick up to a sixty-mile speed over a surprisingly short range of ground, and it was going to show its merits on the main street before huge, roped-off crowds.

The transportation company wanted the franchise to operate such busses over the new boulevard, and guaranteed that it would handle traffic at no increase in fares. Even chronic malcontents were keeping their mouths shut, when people argued that the company would be giving better service without extra profit. The busses, if they came up to claims, would speak for themselves.

Long before that Saturday evening, natives of Middledale had forgotten all about an escaped inmate of Lancaster Women's Prison named Betty Jevers. It had been a bothersome week for redheads whose hair happened to be really conspicuous, but all that had ended with reports that Betty Jevers had been seen in Buffalo, Miami and San Diego, all on the same date.

Whether she had escaped to Canada, Cuba, or Mexico, did not particularly matter. One of the three girls in flaming tresses had probably been Betty, so she couldn't be in Middledale.

TONIGHT, Saturday, bands were blaring, fireworks were sparkling, and everyone was making merry; except, perhaps, two men who stood in a gloomy fourth-floor room of the Middledale Hotel, looking from a window that fronted on the main street. Even they could not have been classed as unhappy. In fact, they seemed rather pleased with the scene outdoors.

One was a sallow, cold-eyed man, with sleek black hair and short, pointed mustache. His lips were so tight that they scarcely seemed to open when he spoke, or poked a cigarette between them. He was well known in Middledale, but he didn't live in the hotel. His room here was held under another name than his own, which happened to be Monte Flade.

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A gambler by profession, Monte wasn't working at his trade. He owned the Orange Grove, the well-managed night club that was Middledale's real bright spot.

For months, Monte had been operating at a loss, but hadn't advertised the fact. He didn't care to have people wondering where his money came from; and whatever his present losses, Monte expected to write them off in the future.

The other man was rangy, with a large, coarse face distinguished chiefly by a permanent grin, which he couldn't control because he had abbreviated lips. His teeth were good but very large, especially the two uppers at the front of his mouth. Those adornments accounted for his nickname: Elk Wenner.

Monte's contemptuous grin began to fade as the glossy-haired man stared from the window. Turning to Elk, Monte delivered a tight-lipped warning.

"If things go sour tonight—"

"They won't, Monte," insisted Elk. "All we needed to know was how long that bus was going to be in the garage, and we found out."

"So what?" retorted Monte. "You bungled the other jobs, didn't you?"

"We put too much grease on those elevator cables," admitted Elk. "We hadn't figured that they'd slip until after a lot of customers were in the store. That was a tough thing to figure out, though, Monte."

"Yeah? It wasn't tough to rig that bus accident."

"You mean the first one, huh? We framed it as well as we could. The bus driver was smarter than the guy we had in the truck, that's all."

Monte didn't continue the argument; he simply stared from the window. Considering that a bad omen, Elk made a further protest.

"The other bus was lucky," he insisted. "We greased the hill as much as we could, without giving the whole thing away. The bus took a tail-spin when it hit the grease. That's the way it was supposed to happen. We couldn't handle the rest of it."

Cars were rolling slowly along the bedecked main street, greeted by the roar of the crowds. Monte gave an ugly snort.

"Look at old chin whiskers," he sneered, "bowing, and waving that plug hat of his. The town's prize nincompoop, otherwise known as His Honor the Mayor! That thing rolled in his pocket is a speech. In half an hour, Kesselbrock will be spouting worse than the fireworks!"

"Who's the dame with him?" queried Elk. "Say! She's real class, ain't she?"

"She works in his office," returned Monte. "I saw her there the other day. She's the hostess who handles the old ladies who come there howling that I oughtn't to be running a night club."

"That makes her all right then," approved Elk. "What's her name?"

"Ruth Geldon," replied Monte. Then, slowly, he added: "Yes, she is all right! I hear old goat-face is paying

her fifty per and thinks it's a lot. But it isn't enough for a dame that has brains along with looks. I'm thinking—”

WHATEVER his thoughts regarding Ruth, Monte postponed them to observe another car. He identified its occupants.

“Henry Denwood,” he growled, referring to a dignified, gray-haired man, “and that soft-brained son of his! That's Martin Albot with them.”

Elk nodded. He knew Albot by sight. Somewhat portly, Albot had a rather jolly face; but at present, he was preserving a stern demeanor. Monte supplied another sneer.

“Just Santa Claus without whiskers,” he commented. “That's Albot for you! He's nicey-nice, like the Denwoods. All right, you reform guys”—Monte grimaced at the window—“you'll have plenty to be howling about before tonight is over!”

Elk's big-toothed grin showed agreement.

“That gadget we fixed on the speed bus,” he confided, “it can't go haywire. It's planted under the right front wheel, geared to the speedometer. It's set to shoot the works when the bus reaches the grandstand. They'll think”—he pointed along the street to where cars were stopping at a decorated grandstand—“that a tire blew out.”

“All of them won't think that,” corrected Monte, with a malicious chuckle. “The bunch that go to the hospital, or the morgue, won't even know what happened. At sixty per, that bus is going to plow a tunnel right through the bottom of the grandstand!”

Watching the outside scene, the conspirators saw that the mayor and his party were already at the spot of honor, high in the center of the grandstand. Kesselbrock's chin whiskers were wagging, as he poured his speech into the microphone provided by Station MBX.

Monte Flade growled impatiently. He was looking forward to the carnage that was to follow the mayor's harangue.

“It's pretty near time for the bus test,” Monte told Elk. “You'd better call that guy down at the garage. What's his name?”

“Cokey.” Elk reached for the telephone. “I'll get him.”

At the other end of Elk's call, a long-faced man with twitchy lips gave chuckles at the question that came across the wire. Cokey wore the grease-stained overalls of a garage mechanic; he was speaking over a telephone in a small stone-walled room.

“Yeah, it's set, all right,” undertoned Cokey. “Did I check it? That's what I'm here for, ain't it?... No, nobody could have spotted us. There's only a couple of guys here that don't belong to the mob... Yeah, we saw to it that they weren't around right then...”

“She's all set to go out, the bus is.” Cokey stretched his neck to peer through the crack of a door. “The driver's in that booth of his. They're opening the garage doors. The company mechanic is waiting outside, to get on board... No, he don't know from nothing. Nobody's wise...”

Cokey clanked the receiver, stepped toward the door into the garage, chuckling to himself his final words:

“Nobody's wise—”

Vaguely, those words echoed, as if the walls had whispered them back. Cokey halted, his wizened face alarmed. He heard the whisper again; this time, it phrased no words. Its mockery seemed a shivering laugh, more than a mere echo. Cokey's voice couldn't have produced it; in fact, the one was a sort that could scarcely have come from any human throat.

Twitchy lips were frozen, as Cokey wheeled to stare at the rear door of the tiny room. He couldn't see the door; it was obscured by blackness: gloom that was alive, in the shape of a cloaked figure. The dim light showed the outline of a slouch hat; beneath its brim were eyes that held an unearthly glow. Below was the muzzle of an automatic, held in a black-gloved hand.

Sight of that figure and the looming .45 was enough for twitchy-lipped Cokey. He knew what they represented: a being that he had never expected to see in Middledale; an avenger whose very name brought terror to skulking evildoers.

As the whispered laugh faded from the hidden lips that uttered it, Cokey gulped the name of the dread intruder:

“The Shadow!”

CHAPTER IV. DEATH BOUND

TIME was short, but The Shadow intended to learn much from the few moments that he could spare with Cokey. Attracted to Middledale by news of mysterious accidents, the master crime-hunter had suspected trouble with the coming bus test. Because of the secrecy concerning the garage where the bus was kept, he had not reached the place he wanted until just before crime's zero hour.

Quailing as The Shadow advanced, Cokey sagged against the door, the gun muzzle nearly pressing squarely between his eyes. He began to gulp words, so frantically that they were incoherent.

The Shadow's faculty for making rats squeal was working too well. His voice, sinister and sibilant, interrupted Cokey's jargon. A few seconds more, the crook would have been blurting his story in a manner that could be understood. But those seconds were denied.

Somebody yanked the door from the other side; with the tug came an excited voice:

“Hey, Cokey, she's startin' out—”

Cokey was tumbling with the opening door. Doubling like a rubber ball, the crook rolled across the cement floor of the garage. His bounce changing to a wriggle, Cokey tried to shout The Shadow's name again. It wasn't needed.

The men who had yanked the door open, as well as two others close behind him, were all members of the crooked faction that had placed men here as garage workers. They didn't have to be told who The Shadow was. Snarling, they reached for handy guns, hoping to battle crimeland's greatest foe.

The Shadow flung himself among them. His gun hand slugged and slashed, while his free arm warded off half-aimed revolvers. The garage doors were open; the bus was ready to start. At that moment, The Shadow's

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real task was to prevent its departure.

With Cokey scrambling for cover, and three crooks sprawling around him, The Shadow seemed certain of his mission. Then, from a distant wall, came the bark of a revolver. Its first shot, whistling wide, told The Shadow that he had to deal with snipers.

Wheeling, he answered the fire. There was a yell, as the sniper toppled. Another revolver blasted; The Shadow picked its owner from the seat of a truck, giving another crook good reason to regret marksmanship that was hasty, instead of accurate.

Cokey and his original pals were in it, shooting as they ducked for cover. Veering across the garage floor, The Shadow harried them with his return fire.

He had drawn a second automatic; his course was elusive along that gloomy floor. Away from lights, against the background of parked cars, the black-cloaked fighter was distinguishable only by the stabs of his gun. He fired always while on the move; thus he was gone when crooks jabbed replies.

By accepting battle challenge, The Shadow had accomplished his main purpose. The bus driver had heard the shots and didn't intend to start until he knew what they were all about. The company mechanic had poked his head in from the street and was gingerly trying to learn the cause of all the uproar. Given a few shots more, The Shadow would have all rats to cover, with the bus remaining where it was.

His plans, however, were due for an unexpected pitfall.

WHEELING past a car parked near the front wall, The Shadow chose a short route beside a workbench, in order to reach the bus. As he swung into the light, two men pounced to meet him, swinging monkey wrenches.

They were the honest garage men that Cokey had mentioned. Huddled away from danger, they had been mystified by the fire. Not knowing that their fellow workers were crooks, they naturally took The Shadow to be a foe. It was lucky that wrenches were their only weapons, for their attack was a surprise one and they showed themselves both savage and sincere.

Though he warded off their blows, The Shadow had to tangle with the pair. They made a reeling trio beside the workbench. Cokey and other crook hopped from cover, all with one desire: to get The Shadow.

At that instant, a big bell clanged.

Cokey knew what it meant. It was a last call for the bus to start. Waving his arms at the company mechanic, Cokey hoarsed:

“Get aboard! Get going! We'll fix the guy that's makin' all the trouble!”

Again, an honest man took the wrong course. The mechanic jumped into the bus and pounded at the door of the driver's booth, to tell him to get started. Cokey sped to meet the milling group that his pals had already joined.

Men reeled apart between the parked cars closest to the door. As they separated groggily, two of them stared bewildered. They were the pair with the monkey wrenches. Somewhere in that tussle, they had lost their grip on the human whirlwind in black. Pulling from their clutch, The Shadow had left them to the arriving attackers.

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Snarling crooks turned with their guns. They couldn't risk shooting the honest pair, who were to be their alibi. Cokey gave a yell. As he did, a gun spoke from somewhere. Timed with The Shadow's shot the ringleader of the crooked crew jolted clear of his feet and spanked the floor with a solid slap.

Sprawled, Cokey tried to point; then sagged. Mobbies saw his finger thrust toward the little room. The bus was gliding out to the street, its door closing as the driver pressed a button. Not having further worry on that score, crooks boldly decided to pursue The Shadow.

Shooting as they drove, they went through the little room and out to a rear alley, that they splattered with bullets then sprayed with flashlights.

Neither bullets nor light produced a sign of The Shadow. He had vanished like a fading curl of night mist.

THERE was an explanation to that mystery. Cokey could have given it, had he remained alive to do so. He had known where the shot came from; in his dying moment, he had tried to point the direction but had failed.

Cokey had tried to motion toward the bus.

The Shadow had fired from beside the bus door. With the big vehicle's forward glide, he had swept after it, swinging on board just as the driver pressed the button. Inside the door when it slid shut, The Shadow had reached a definite objective, only to encounter new trouble.

Against the passing street lights, cloaked head and shoulders formed a visible silhouette that brought the skittish mechanic into action, thrusting blindly, the fellow gripped The Shadow's throat, intending to settle the unwanted passenger that he supposed must be a trouble-maker.

The Shadow adopted the only course that was possible under the circumstances. Dropping his gun, he used choking tactics of his own. It was a question who could hold out the longer, but The Shadow was confident that he would win, even though his adversary had a head start.

Strange sounds began to quiver in The Shadow's ears, like the rising roar of a crowd. His eyes saw nothing but the blur of lights. Fingers, though, were loosening their hold upon his tortured neck. As they slipped; he eased his own clutch. He heard gasps from the floor as the mechanic slumped there.

The roar didn't end. It increased. His gaze clearing, The Shadow saw why.

The bus had neared the starting line, from which it was to begin at five-mile-an-hour speed and pick up to sixty. The roaring was the combined welcome from the citizens of Middledale, who packed both sidewalks along the main street!

Springing to the door of the driver's booth, The Shadow rapped there just as the bus began to increase its speed. Thinking that it was the mechanic, the driver slid the door open, turning his head in an annoyed stare. He saw The Shadow, for the street lights were brilliant. He heard a quick-whispered warning, but he misinterpreted it.

Yanking the throttle lever to its full extent, the bus driver gripped the wheel with one hand, doubled his free fist and swung it with a terrific side punch that he thought would bring results—which it did, when his knuckles met the door edge.

His whole arm numbed the driver sagged. Sweeping up from the space where he had dropped, The Shadow took the only course in the emergency. He drove his own fist against the driver's jaw and bowled him down

into the narrow space between the seat and the door on the left.

There was a shrieking note to the tumult of the crowd. The bus had veered slightly in the direction of the grandstand, the driver's error producing the very mistake that crooks wanted, toward a purpose that The Shadow had not yet learned!

His hands clamped to the wheel, The Shadow was straightening the course. The speedometer was registering sixty-five, proof that the bus had already gone beyond the specifications of the test. Groping with one hand, The Shadow sought the throttle lever; his foot was finding the brake pedal.

Mere yards ahead was another white line, crossing the street from the very center of the grandstand. It was the mark that completed the test distance, and the smooth-purring bus was eating up the final yardage in one gigantic gulp.

Everywhere were faces, a sea of them, thousands of eyes upon the approaching juggernaut, that was scheduled to come hurtling through the crowd itself, cutting a swath in that human mash. A fact that The Shadow had not gained time to guess, for he knew only that the bus itself was slated for some disaster when it reached the finish line.

His eyes didn't see the line. His gaze was sweeping the massed sidewalks ahead. Whatever the disaster, it wouldn't stop the bus point-blank. At sixty-five, the massive vehicle had too much momentum for even a brick wall to halt it.

Those moments after the unexpected came were the ones in which The Shadow's skill was to be taxed. He was thinking of them as he thrust down the throttle lever, jabbed his foot against the brake pedal and gave a hard jerk to the wheel.

The bus swerved half across the line. Seemingly in response to The Shadow's action, there was a sharp explosion from the right front wheel. Witnesses, including two who peered from a hotel window, knew that catastrophe had come.

Disaster that no human strength could stay had reached the doomed bus as it hurtled forward at top speed. Destruction was due, with The Shadow at the wheel!

CHAPTER V. THE VANISHED VICTOR

ONLY slow-motion photographs could have shown the contortions that racked the speeding bus immediately after the explosion. Its streamlined shape of blue-gray took a course that resembled the jagged curve of a lightning flash, with a similar blaze of swiftness.

Persons close at hand were threatened by what seemed a metallic thunderbolt hurled by some invisible hand. Looming in gigantic proportions, the bus was a threat of destruction to every startled witness who saw it veer in his direction.

In its rapid zigzag, the bus had a constant shift of faces in its path, but for some reason—almost unaccountable—the direction of its wild swing was to the left, not toward the grandstand on the right.

The reason was the driver.

Instead of merely pulling the bus back to its straight course, The Shadow had jerked it hard to the left just before the explosion ruined the tire. Not knowing what might lie ahead, he had picked an objective a hundred

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feet ahead. His goal was a black gap amid the crowd, where police had roped off an entrance to a parking lot opposite the far end of the grandstand.

Its steering apparatus responsive to a finger touch, the bus wheeled more sharply than The Shadow expected. The blast that wrecked the tire jarred the vehicle the other way, twisting it toward the very space that The Shadow wanted. From then on, however, it was his strength against the pull of the flattened wheel.

On the straightaway, the mechanical force would have won. But The Shadow's grip, though losing, was strong enough to keep the wheel from spinning full about. Throttled off, the motor helped the brakes as the cloaked driver applied them. Swaying as it lost its rocketing momentum, the big bus zigzagged crazily through the wide mouth of the parking lot.

Spectators on both sides were barely clear of the streamlined tail as it wallowed left and right. Jolted by the cement runway, the vehicle finally bounced from The Shadow's control; but by that time, it was within the confines of the parking lot, its speed cut down to twenty miles.

There was a terrific crash as the motorized leviathan plowed parked cars ahead of it. Puny automobiles were piled into the mass of wreckage, the mayor's car among the mass. Those obstacles telescoped as the bus smashed them into the brick wall of a building; their frames, though flimsy in comparison, then became a compact buffer that brought the bus to an absolute halt.

AMID the jar and echoes of the crash, the door on the left of the bus came open. The original driver, jolted from his groggy state, had grabbed the emergency lever. He rolled to the ground, and was recognized because of his uniform. Those who first sighted him were policemen, who had left the ropes to hurry toward the wrecked bus.

The man on the ground came to hands and knees, stabbed his finger excitedly at the open door and shouted:

“Get him... the fellow inside there... he wrecked us—”

The door on the other side was sliding open; to emit the mechanic. His coveralls were a passport, like the bus driver's uniform. Stumbling into the arms of officers, the mechanic wavered in a wobbly fashion, one hand spread around his aching throat. Also pointing toward the bus, he managed to gulp:

“He's in there... the guy that choked me—”

Officers sprang through the doors with drawn guns. Of the half dozen, two had flashlights, which they swept along the interior. Sure that they had the miscreant trapped, the cops bawled for him to surrender. They were answered by a taunt that left them blinking.

It wasn't The Shadow's usual laugh. This was a gibe of different tenor, one that carried a positive sneer. The Shadow was quite willing that the police should think that the wreck had been intended; his laugh, though it disguised his real identity, served to support the testimony of the bus crew.

What puzzled the officers was the fact that they could see no trace of the person who had given them the laugh. The Shadow, or whoever the mocker was, had vanished from their very midst!

The taunt itself seemed with them, which added to the mystery and left them quite bewildered. It wasn't until the mirth had died, that someone saw the answer to the riddle. The top of the bus was convertible, made up of hinged sections that could be raised for the benefit of sight-seeing parties.

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While the two members of the bus crew had been rolling from the opened doors, The Shadow had forced open the front section of the roof and had gone through it!

He had left the hinged contraption partly open, which accounted for the closeness of his laugh. Caught in that sound tunnel, the tone carried into the bus like a whisper into the large end of a megaphone. Convinced by the illusion, the officers had persisted in their search for someone in the bus, thus aiding the getaway of the very man they wanted!

From the battered front of the bus, The Shadow was reaching across piled-up wreckage of other cars, using that veritable junk pile to haul himself to a low roof above the brick wall. The one-story structure was the rear extension of an old building, where darkened windows and gloomy walls, offered an easy route for the acrobatic fighter in black.

So far as the officers were concerned, The Shadow had all the head start that was needed. He had gauged his time for a perfect getaway before they could really begin to pursue him. But there were other adversaries on that field; men equipped for battle, who occupied positions from which they could start it.

They were the sort who could guess The Shadow's real identity, despite the alteration of his laugh: crooks of the same water as those who had battled at the garage. The mobbies controlled by Elk Wenner were not few and isolated; they were planted at every strategic spot in Middledale.

From the moment that the streamlined monster of destruction had come their way, instead of crashing through the grandstand, they had known that something was wrong with their crooked plans.

HEARING The Shadow's laugh, they sensed its real location. Their flashlights burned from skulking spots among parked cars. Almost as quick as the beams that revealed the cloaked figure on the roof, revolvers began a hasty chatter. There were elated yells as The Shadow flattened.

Bullets had not turned that trick.

Wisely seeking to avoid the glare, The Shadow had simply dropped to the roof level. Crooks had merely glimpsed him. The officers in the bus, the citizens of Middledale tugging at the ropes which held them back, had not had time to sight his black-cloaked form.

Concealment, however, was not The Shadow's only motive. He intended to settle the flashlights and did, taking proper care of a few gunmen in the bargain.

From the roof edge his automatic, regained from the bus floor, answered the revolver fire with sharp effect. Lights went flying, sharpshooters reeled. Others took to safer cover, from which they fired blindly, hoping to pick off The Shadow.

But The Shadow was now climbing the higher wall, window to window, floor to floor, keeping his blackened shape against a background of corresponding gloom, until he reached the main roof.

When flashlights flickered along the higher wall, probing shut windows to make sure that no one could have reached them, The Shadow was far from range. Across the roof, he reached another building, located a fire escape and descended to an alleyway that did not connect directly with the parking lot.

Weaving his way through passages and courtyards, The Shadow encountered a brief period of opposition when he came into the glow of a flashlight as it turned a corner, two skulkers from the parking lot were sneaking through this channel, rather than stay around and explain how they happened to be using guns.

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They saw The Shadow, were met by an aimed automatic before they could raise their revolvers. The tone of a sinister laugh came in audible greeting, producing an eerie whisper between the narrowed walls.

The clatter of dropped guns and flashlights and the scurry of fleeing feet were the only answer to The Shadow's challenge.

Following a rear street, The Shadow came to the side entrance of the Middledale Hotel, where a sleepy taxi driver sat at the wheel of his cab. Whisking away his cloak and hat, The Shadow laid those garments across his arm as he opened the cab door. In a quiet voice that would have suited an ordinary passenger, he awakened the driver and gave him a destination.

Supposing that all celebration had ended, the cabby drove along the main street, only to find his course halted by swarming crowds that had torn down ropes and poured all over the thoroughfare. The human blockade thickened near the grandstand; there, The Shadow told the driver to wait.

From his window, The Shadow could see that eager spectators were expecting a successful finish to an intensive man hunt.

Police in the parking lot had clambered upon the wreckage between the bus and the wall. Others had used ladders to scale the sides of the low roof. Some were at the higher windows of the building, which they had reached from inside. A few were on the topmost roof, throwing lights down upon the space below.

Headshakes, gesturing arms told that the hunt had failed. A murmur broke from the crowd. The celebration ended in a disappointment. The missing bus wrecker had not been found.

No one had begun to realize that the hunt was a mistaken one; that every detail, from the careening journey of the bus to the gunfire from the roof, had been part of a lone fighter's battle against hidden crime. That fact merely satisfied The Shadow all the more.

He was content to remain the vanished victor of two fierce frays, since between those fights he had prevented a planned catastrophe that would otherwise had taken many lives.

The cab rolled slowly through the spreading throng. From the lips of its lone passenger came a whisper, heard by himself alone. That tone was The Shadow's actual laugh; a repressed token of his recent triumph, a promise of more deeds to come!

CHAPTER VI. ENTER MR. CRANSTON

BY Monday, the consensus of opinion in Middledale agreed that the bus test had been a success. The high-speed vehicle had surpassed specifications, and the accident beyond the finish line was accepted as a matter of malicious interference. The explosion, classed as a blowout, was blamed on the unknown driver's act of diverting the bus from the course while at top speed.

The city council convened on Monday, and after considerable argument, pro and con, that body passed a bill extending the bus company's franchise to include the line of the new boulevard, when and if constructed. The vote was close and the bill would probably have lost, except for the provisional clause.

Since the boulevard's construction was still to be a question, the council members were actually playing safe. Nevertheless, the result was considered satisfactory in reform circles.

During the council session, a resolution was also adopted, requesting the police chief to report on the subject

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of illegal firearms in Middledale. There had been too many unscheduled fireworks on Saturday night, to suit the city fathers.

It chanced, however, that Elk Wenner had already instructed his many mobbies to park their shooting irons until further notice, and had told those who might be recognized as trouble-makers, to stay strictly under cover.

Monday was a busy day for Ruth Geldon. Seated at her desk in the reception room outside the mayor's office, she had been receiving visitors steadily all day long. She was really astonished when, at four o'clock, she found that the scene was clear.

Settling back in her chair, Ruth sighed; with that expression of relief, she saw the door open, to admit another visitor. One look at the visitor intrigued her.

He was a tall man, well-dressed, leisurely of stride. His calmness of manner was evident, as he leaned on his cane and faced Ruth's desk. The girl gazed into clear, steady eyes that peered from a countenance distinctly masklike. She was impressed by immobile features that were handsome, yet hawkish, with thin lips forming a straight-set line.

"My name is Lamont Cranston," announced the visitor, in a singularly level tone. "I should like to speak with Mayor Kesselbrock."

As he spoke, he extended an engraved calling card, and Ruth was attracted by the sight of long, tapering fingers which, she imagined, must possess great strength beneath their suppleness. She remembered the eyes and would have lifted her head again, if another object had not transfixed her gaze.

On the third finger of the visitor's left hand was a gem of a sort that she had never seen. Ruth took it for an opal, and realized that it must be of some special species.

Catching the sun's rays as they glittered through the window, the opal sparkled with a vivid fire. Its colors were changing more surprisingly than flame, from deepest crimson to brilliant purple, with a variety of hues between.

Ruth was holding the card, the hand had returned to the cane. Her gaze lifted slowly, to her amazement, she thought that she caught the opal's living glow from Cranston's eyes. They had a burn, those eyes, that must have been more than her imagination.

Then, eyelids shuttered them; when the eyes reopened, the sparkle had faded, as if this amazing visitor had been able to control it at will.

RUTH didn't inquire Cranston's business. She reached mechanically to the telephone, announced the caller's name to the mayor. Kesselbrock was probably feeling lonely, since his last caller had left ten minutes ago; at any rate, the mayor said for Mr. Cranston to come into the office immediately.

Alone again, Ruth sat motionless. Never before had she sensed the power of such searching eyes. She had been captivated by their hypnotic spell; she felt that while such eyes were upon her, she could be induced to answer any question that their owner might ask, or to obey any command that he suggested.

A voice startled her; it was a tone she knew quite well but hadn't expected to hear so suddenly, right beside the desk. Ruth turned to see Jack Denwood smiling at her. Engrossed in her thoughts, she hadn't heard him enter by the hallway door.

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“Daydreaming, I suppose,” remarked Jack. “I don't blame you, Ruth, with all you have to do here, it must be a relief to let your thoughts slide once in a while. I'm almost sorry”—he shook his head—“that I talked you into taking this job.”

“I'm not,” returned Ruth. “I like a job where I feel that I am worth my salary. I heard about the council vote, Jack”—she glanced toward the outer door, then gripped Jack's arm—“and I'm terribly glad it turned out the way it did!”

“It was closer than we wanted it to be,” said Jack, “but I think we'll be all right when the boulevard question comes up.”

He had placed his hand on Ruth's. Smiling, the girl drew her hand away and reached for the telephone, commenting:

“I'll tell the mayor that you are here. He has a visitor at present, but I know that he will see you shortly.”

Instead of saying for Jack to wait, Mayor Kesselbrock asked Ruth to send him in at once. Obviously, the mayor was anxious to introduce Jack Denwood to Lamont Cranston, a fact that intrigued Ruth immensely.

She waited for a long ten minutes, wondering what the result would be. When the door of the office opened, it was Jack who came out.

Closing the door behind him, he hurried to Ruth's desk. Jack's expression announced good news.

“That chap Cranston!” he exclaimed. “He represents a lot of wealthy New Yorkers! He wants to arrange the purchase of the entire issue of new city bonds!”

“Will there be a bond issue?” asked Ruth. “I thought the city already had a sufficient fund for the boulevard.”

“So it has,” said Jack. “But the council is afraid we may put ourselves in a hole and need a bond issue later. Cranston's proposition will go far to clinch the vote.”

“Is he staying here in Middledale?”

“For a few days, maybe longer. That means we'll turn tonight's party into a little celebration of our own.”

Ruth's eyes showed surprise. She hadn't heard about the party. Jack smiled.

“It's a dinner at our house,” he said. “I came here to invite you and Mayor Kesselbrock. He can't come; he has to go to a banquet, which is what I hoped. But I invited Cranston, and he will be there.”

“But Jack”—Ruth was shaking her head—“you shouldn't have invited me.”

“Why not?”

“I'm not important. I'm only an employee here in the mayor's office.”

“You're his representative. He thinks you ought to be there. Not in an official capacity, you understand, because it's just an ordinary dinner party. But... but—”

Jack hesitated, wondering what to say next. Ruth decided to supply a “but” as a contrary argument of her

own.

“But I haven't a suitable dinner gown.”

“I'll fix that, Ruth—”

“No, you won't! I know what clothes I can afford. I'm buying all of them myself.”

Soberly, Jack nodded.

“Of course,” he agreed. “But you won't have to buy a dinner gown. You have a charge account at the Denwood Store. Get what you want on approval, and send it back tomorrow.”

“I couldn't do that—”

“You did it once—the first night you were in town.”

Ruth hesitated. Jack added another argument, or what he considered to be one.

“Lorna Thexter will be there,” he said, persuasively. “She's very anxious to meet you, Ruth.”

THAT was a bad blunder. Ruth had heard of Lorna, and could guess exactly why the girl in question would like to meet her. Lorna Thexter was the leading lady of Middledale's smart social set, a ravishing blonde whose photograph was a stock picture on the society pages of the local newspapers.

Lorna had money as well as looks, together with the ability of getting whatever she wanted. The trophy that she had lately set her heart on was Jack Denwood, although he was about the only person in town who didn't realize it. In view of her own sentiments toward Jack, Ruth might logically have been jealous of Lorna; but she wasn't.

Ruth had to admit that Lorna held a prior claim. She only hoped that Jack would make the choice he really wanted. Meanwhile, Ruth had hoped that she wouldn't have to meet Lorna. Therefore, she was more undecided than ever about accepting Jack's dinner invitation, when the matter was suddenly settled for her.

Lamont Cranston had stepped from the mayor's office, and Jack turned to introduce him to Ruth. Cranston bowed; again, Ruth's eyes were fixed upon his. Though their gaze was calm, the girl felt that she was under that former spell. This time, the test came! The introduction finished, Cranston spoke:

“I understand that we are to meet at dinner, Miss Geldon.”

“Yes.” Ruth smiled despite herself. “I have just accepted Mr. Denwood's invitation.”

Jack looked back happily, as he followed Cranston from the reception room. He nudged his thumb in the general direction of the Denwood Store, made a downward sweeping motion and pointed back toward Ruth, to signify that she shouldn't forget the new dinner dress.

Then, Ruth was alone again, still pondering upon the automatic answer that she had given Cranston. She wondered if his keen gaze could penetrate her deepest thoughts.

She had sensed a sympathy in Cranston's gaze. But it didn't occur to her that the even-mannered visitor was nourishing a trifling secret of his own. She wouldn't have believed it, had Cranston himself told her that he

was wanted by the Middledale police as the man who had marred the Saturday celebration by wrecking the streamlined bus!

When crooks met The Shadow, whatever his guise, they usually felt uneasy. Ruth Geldon, if she could rightfully be termed a crook, was an exception to that rule.

The girl was looking forward to her next meeting with Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow!

CHAPTER VII. LINKS TO THE PAST

DINNER at the Denwood mansion produced a double surprise for Ruth Geldon. She found herself seated next to Jack Denwood, and the last person to be worried about the fact was Lorna Thexter. There was a reason, however, why the blonde was not jealous. Lorna had been placed beside Lamont Cranston.

It became obvious to Ruth that Lorna was using excellent technique in her schemes to capture Jack. Her present method was to ignore him. This was one occasion upon which she could work that game, considering that her present partner, Lamont Cranston, was a distinguished visitor from New York.

Ruth had to admit that Lorna had real charm. Perhaps she was overtalkative, was too extravagantly gowned; but her conversation was intelligent, and the glitter of her expensive evening dress added a sparkle to the scene.

Lorna was confident that she was impressing Cranston, as Ruth noted from across the table. Cranston's manner, however, was one of habitual calmness, that left persons to interpret it as they chose. Ruth wasn't at all sure that Lorna was making a real dent in his reserve.

Nevertheless, she wished Lorna luck. The better Cranston liked her, the less Lorna would worry about Jack. Ruth was glad of that, for this was an occasion that she had awaited ever since her arrival in Middledale: a chance to meet Jack's friends on their home ground as one of them.

There were about a dozen persons at the dinner table; the only one who could have been termed elderly were Jack's father and Martin Albot. Both were widowers, and they were evidently close friends, probably because of mutual business interests and the fact that each had long been prominent in Middledale.

Henry Denwood had a kindliness that registered strongly, because he made no effort to display it. His normal manner was one of dignity, so pronounced that, publicity, it seemed a part of him. Here in his own home, he was off-guard. Frequently, his face would light with a smile that seemed to come from within him. Ruth noticed it, particularly whenever he glanced toward Jack. The father had a strong love for the son.

In contrast to Henry Denwood, Martin Albot lacked dignity, except as an occasional pose. His manner was one of a self-satisfied business man, but he was jovial enough and apparently liked to see other people happy. Unquestionably, Albot had proven himself valuable to the reform cause.

Another contrast impressed Ruth. From references during the dinner-table conversation, a stranger such as Cranston might easily have drawn the conclusion that Albot was the wealthiest man in Middledale.

Mention was made of his jewelry store, of the newspaper that he controlled, of his interest in the transportation company. There was talk, too, of the Albot Building, an imposing edifice that stood on a corner of the main street. Something was said about the Denwood Store, but no one spoke of the factory, or the Middledale Trust Co., which the Denwoods controlled. The family also owned the Middledale Hotel and half a dozen other buildings, along with plenty of suburban property. It happened, too, that Henry Denwood

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was a larger shareholder in the transportation company than Martin Albot.

As Jack had said to Ruth, Henry Denwood felt that much of his wealth belonged to Middledale, and Ruth couldn't doubt that the Denwoods intended to continue their policy of devoting the major portion of their fortune to civic benefits.

DINNER ended, the company repaired to the large living room, where Ruth eventually found herself talking to Jack's father. During their conversation, she could sense his tone of approval. He seemed to be telling her, without stating it in words, that he relied upon Jack's choice of friends.

Meanwhile, the guests were separating, mostly in pairs. Ruth didn't realize it until Henry Denwood excused himself, on the ground that he had unfinished work to complete in his study.

That was when Ruth found that Jack was waiting for her, to suggest a stroll in the Italian garden, which she had not yet seen.

One person noted their departure; she was Lorna Thexter. The blonde's forehead began to form a frown; then she changed her expression to a smile, instead. Jack and Ruth could have their stroll in the garden. This was the right night to allow them that brief privilege, for Lorna was considering an opportunity of her own.

Imposingly, the blonde strode to the corner where Cranston stood with Albot. Jewelry being one of his many specialties, Albot had noticed a rare gem that Cranston wore and had asked to examine the stone. He was returning it, pronouncing it the finest girasol that he had ever seen, when Lorna arrived.

"Didn't Jack's father find you?" she exclaimed to Albot. "He was looking for you, I believe."

"Where is he at present?" asked Albot. "In the study?"

"I believe so," nodded Lorna. "Yes, I'm sure he went there, Mr. Albot."

Albot headed for the study. A very soft and slender arm took Cranston's, to pilot him through French windows that led to a secluded veranda.

"This is nicer than the garden," assured Lorna. "You can see the moon better from here. It's lovely, isn't it?"

Cranston agreed that the moon was lovely, in a tone that added to Lorna's hopes. She hadn't stated that the veranda also gave them the advantage of being alone. From the quiet rove of Cranston's eyes, she was sure that he had noticed that for himself.

"Sometimes the full moon maddens me!" declared Lorna. "No wonder! My moon wish never fails me!"

"Your moon wish?"

"Yes." Gazing toward the moon, Lorna placed her hands across her eyes. "I wish for a surprise; then wait. Sometimes the moments are long"—she sighed happily—"but the surprise always comes, eventually!"

At that moment, Martin Albot was coming from the study, a bit annoyed by what he considered a practical joke. As he crossed the living room, he saw Cranston stepping in quite silently from the veranda. Before Albot could speak, Cranston was motioning for silence.

"I was the one wanted in the study," he confided. "Miss Thexter is waiting for you on the veranda. Why not

step out there and surprise her?"

Ten seconds later, Lorna dropped her hands with a lovely shudder, as an arm encircled her shoulder. She turned her face, under the tilt of fingers that lifted her chin. Her lips received a kiss that made her eyes pop open, instead of remaining shut, as she had intended.

"Why... why—"

Wrenching away from Albot's embrace, Lorna was too angered to say more, as her clenched fists told. Then, recovering from her confusion, she pretended half-pleased embarrassment.

"Why, you surprised me, Mr. Albot!"

"That's what Cranston said you wanted," chortled Albot. "I met him when he was going into the study. A clever chap, Cranston! I hope he stays in town awhile."

"So do I!"

LORNA'S comment was heartfelt, but Albot didn't catch its significance. The blonde was reasoning that the longer Cranston stayed, the more chance she would have to revenge the farce that he had just played.

At present, she could turn this meeting with Albot into an opportunity that Lorna regarded as the settling of another score.

"A lovely dinner, wasn't it?" questioned the blonde, calculating that Albot preferred food to the moon. Then, as the portly man nodded, she continued: "Jack really has the right spirit. Having a millionaire as one guest, he invited a pauper for another."

Albot looked puzzled. He knew that the millionaire was Cranston, but he couldn't understand the reference to a pauper.

"I mean Ruth Geldon," said Lorna. "She's cute, isn't she? But she hasn't a penny! She doesn't even own that gown she's wearing."

"Who does?" queried Albot, quite amazed.

"The Denwood Store," replied Lorna. "The gown is on approval, and it will be back there tomorrow. If Jack hadn't opened that charge-account for her, the girl wouldn't be in the mayor's office."

"Why not?"

"She would have to stay in the apartment, where she hasn't paid the rent. The mayor wouldn't stand for it, if she paraded into his office wearing nothing but a blanket borrowed from the bed in the apartment!"

If the moon had been no larger than it looked, Albot's open mouth could have swallowed it in one gulp.

"I guess she was hitchhiking into town," related Lorna, "and Jack must have given her a lift. Anyway, he called me up and asked me what sort of clothes she'd need. It finally developed that she was wearing men's clothes, and wanted to get rid of them.

"We settled all that, and next thing I knew, she was the new hostess at the mayor's office. Jack said she was

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experienced, so I suppose she is. Of course, I promised to be nice to her and I have. All this is confidential. Mr. Albot. I wouldn't be mentioning it, if you weren't almost one of the family!"

Evidently Lorna meant the Denwood family, and already considered herself a potential member. Albot let that pass, being pleased by what he considered a compliment to himself. His mouth snapped shut, his lips set grimly.

"We've got to watch that girl," he decided, brusquely. "Jack is a young fool, to have recommended her for that job!"

"Why?" asked Lorna, innocently.

"Things have been happening around town," returned Albot. "I mean those accidents, particularly the one to the new bus. We were trying to keep its whereabouts before the test a secret, but somebody learned about it. I'd been inclined to blame old Kesselbrock."

"But he wouldn't have wanted to wreck the bus!"

"Of course not! The trouble is, he talks too much. We've tried to keep the wrong people from seeing him in his office; that's why we were glad when he wanted a hostess. But we counted upon Jack to get a competent woman for the job, not the first fortune-hunting girl that came along!"

Lorna felt that it was time to secure the advance that she had made. She gripped Albot's arm, spoke an earnest, almost tearful plea.

"I wouldn't want the poor girl to lose her job. She may be innocent. We must be charitable, Mr. Albot!"

"Certainly!" agreed Albot, remembering that charity and reform went hand in hand. "We shall use discretion. Be friendly toward Ruth Geldon. Learn more about her. You can do it, Lorna, and thereby render us all a service."

"You may depend upon me, Mr. Albot! And now"—Lorna gave a disdainful glance toward the moon—"suppose we join the others in the garden."

One person wasn't in the garden. Lamont Cranston was knocking at the door of the study, to receive a welcoming response from within. Entering, Cranston accepted the cigar that his host offered him. As they smoked, Henry Denwood asked:

"You have enjoyed meeting the guests tonight, Mr. Cranston?"

"I have." The Shadow wafted a curl of smoke toward the ceiling. "Their conversation has been especially intriguing. I shall stay awhile in Middledale. The people here seem to take an unusual interest in strangers."

Had Henry Denwood also overheard the conversation on the veranda, he would have known all that Cranston's words implied. In this visit to the Denwood mansion The Shadow had begun to solve a most important riddle, that dealt with crime, past and future.

Lorna Thexter was not the only person who intended to learn more about Ruth Geldon. The Shadow was taking that same task as his own.

CHAPTER VIII. THE SHADOW AHEAD

LATE Thursday afternoon, Jack Denwood strode into the mayor's reception room to find Ruth alone there. Mayor Kesselbrock had gone out to lay a cornerstone, which accounted for the absence of visitors. Pleased to find Ruth by herself, Jack came directly to the subject that he had in mind.

"I want you to answer a question, Ruth," he asserted. "Have you ever been to a place called the Orange Grove?"

"Certainly!" replied the girl, coolly. "Several times. The dinners aren't expensive and they have a good floor show."

"Do you know Monte Flade, the fellow who runs the place?"

"I have met him. In fact, he stopped in here, the second or third day after I began my job."

"Did Monte talk to the mayor?"

There was a sharpness to Jack's query. Ruth's eyes showed surprise, before she finally answered:

"No. He merely left a report for the license commission. I attended to the matter."

Jack strolled to the window. He had drawn his brier pipe from his pocket and was thwacking the empty bowl against his left palm.

"I'd rather you wouldn't go to the Orange Grove again, Ruth. People are apt to talk about it."

"I suppose you refer to your friend Lorna," retorted Ruth. "I saw her there last night. What else"—Ruth was curbing her anger with a smile—"did Lorna have to tell you?"

Jack swung about toward the desk. "She saw you driving a yellow roadster yesterday. She's wondering how you managed to get that car."

"Are you?"

"In a way—yes."

"It was a used car," declared Ruth, calmly, "and what is more, I didn't buy it. In case you haven't heard, Jack"—her tone had become icy—"the Denwood Store is not the only place in town that lets customers try things on approval!"

"I'm sorry," said Jack, suddenly. "I didn't come here to criticize you, Ruth. Let's call it quits."

Ruth supplied a willing nod.

"Some of us are driving over to Kingston tonight," remarked Jack, "to see the hockey game. Would you like to go along? Lorna won't be in the party."

"I'd love to go!"

"Grand. I'll call for you at seven thirty."

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Outside the reception room, Jack ran into Mayor Kesselbrock, who was accompanied by Martin Albot. Lacking a car since Saturday night, the mayor had gone to the cornerstone ceremony in a taxi. Albot had been there, and had obligingly brought him back in his limousine.

His honor liked to fuss around and look busy whenever important persons were present, so he went into his office, brought out a big batch of papers, thumbed through them importantly, and finally thumped the bundle on Ruth's desk.

“These are building permits,” he announced. “I want them sorted, Miss Geldon, and arranged in alphabetical order. You can replace them in my desk.”

With that, the mayor departed, again accompanied by Albot, leaving Ruth an extra quarter hour's work that could very well have waited until tomorrow.

SHORTLY after seven o'clock, Jack Denwood stopped outside the door of Ruth's third-floor apartment. About to knock, he paused, hearing Ruth's voice. He thought that Ruth was talking on the telephone. Jack didn't want to eavesdrop, nor did he care to interrupt. As he waited, however, he couldn't help but overhear some of the conversation.

“Yes, just before I left the office...” There was an interval during which Jack couldn't catch Ruth's words. Then: “I'm going out tonight... Yes, very soon. So I won't be there until tomorrow, unless —”

Jack supposed that Ruth was talking to Mayor Kesselbrock, and that by the word “tomorrow” she again referred to the office. It was the word “unless” that made Jack pace away from the door, very much troubled. He had bad news for Ruth, regarding the trip to Kingston.

The girl's conversation had ended. Jack rapped at the door. Ruth admitted him into the little living room, which was lighted only by well-shaded lamps. In the comparative dimness, Jack didn't notice that Ruth was wearing a new and very pretty dress. It was dark-blue, like the clothes she wore at the office.

“I'm glad you didn't go to the trouble of getting all dressed up,” said Jack, abruptly. “The trip is off. There weren't enough tickets.”

There was a draft from the open window, so Ruth had stepped over to close it. She turned about, to study Jack's face. He looked quite uneasy.

“I think you mean that Lorna decided to go,” said Ruth steadily. “Why not tell me the truth, Jack?”

“I've told you the truth!” Jack blurted. “The trip is off, for you and me. You're right, though Lorna changed her mind. She says that the last ticket belongs to her.”

“Which still leaves a ticket for you, Jack.”

“I'm not going to use it, Ruth. The whole bunch can go to blazes!”

“If they do, you'll be with them. You're going along, Jack.”

Jack began new protests, which Ruth promptly silenced. Her final argument convinced him.

“I'm really glad that I can't go,” insisted Ruth. “I worked overtime at the office, and I'm terribly tired. So you run along. I'm going to take a hot shower and go to bed, so that I'll feel like working in the morning.”

“You'd really rather stay here, Ruth?”

“Of course, Jack!”

“And you're actually going to bed?”

“I am.” Ruth's tone had the firmness of a promise. “Immediately!”

Jack left the apartment. It didn't take Ruth long to undress, shower, then jump into bed.

Despite herself, Ruth kept thinking of the trip that she had missed. Comparing her lot with Lorna's, Ruth had come out second best. After all, Lorna was in the party and Ruth wasn't. By this time, Jack had probably told Lorna that Ruth had gone to bed. In that case, Lorna would decide that Ruth was either a very poor liar, or a very big fool.

Neither thought comforted Ruth, particularly when she began to wonder how many other matters Jack might have discussed with Lorna.

When Ruth finally dozed off, it was to be awakened by the clangor of the telephone bell. Answering the summons, she heard an easy-purred voice, that carried a slight raspiness beneath its velvet; that tone belonged to Monte Flade.

“I hoped you'd be home, Miss Geldon,” said Monte. “How about coming over to the Orange Grove and see the new floor show. It's a wow! Besides”—he lowered his voice, persuasively—“I want to talk to you.”

“I—I told you I had a date,” stammered Ruth. “That is... I did have... when you called before—”

“I know all about it,” interposed Monte, in a tone that pretended sympathy. “Lorna Thexter was around here before she left. As soon as she has a couple of drinks, she begins to think about pulling a fast one on somebody. I'd have tipped you off to it, kid, only I thought you'd be glad to shake that hockey party, so you could come over here.”

Ruth was wide awake by that time. She immediately became tactful.

“I'd intended to come to the Grove tomorrow night,” she said. “So I went to bed this evening, instead.”

“And I woke you up?” returned Monte. “I'm sorry! But you've got time to get dressed and be over for the show. It's only ten o'clock. Besides, you'll like the special that the chef is serving.”

The idea of food appealed to Ruth, for she was feeling very hungry. Moreover, Monte was adding another argument. Lorna had promised to come to a party at the Grove tomorrow night, and Monte had agreed to invite Jack Denwood. He might find a way to delay the invitation, if he talked it over with Ruth. If Jack didn't hear about the party, the field would be Ruth's tomorrow evening.

“All right, Mr. Flade,” decided Ruth. “I'll be over there before eleven.”

AGAIN a walking advertisement for the Denwood Store, where all her clothes had come from, Ruth arrived at the Orange Grove, to find a table reserved for her. She was rather pleased that she still owed for her new clothes.

She looked well in them, and by cutting a figure at the Orange Grove, she was paying Jack Denwood

properly for his thoughtlessness in inviting her on a party that she hadn't been able to attend.

Monte sat at the table with her, and they carried on a confidential chat until the waiter arrived with the chef's special supper. Excusing himself, Monte told Ruth that he would be back soon after the floor show started.

Leaving the night club, Monte Flade entered a cab that was parked around the corner and told a thug-faced driver to take him to the Middledale Hotel.

The cab had been posted around the corner because the side street was dark. The sidewalk opposite was quite as gloomy as the spot where Monte had entered the cab.

Timed almost to Monte's departure, a tall blot of blackness detached itself from the wall of the building across the way, momentarily took the semblance of a cloaked human form, then merged again with darkness.

From that lookout spot, the cloaked observer had witnessed Ruth's arrival at the Orange Grove. From the whispered laugh that hidden lips soon gave, it was plain that the being in black had expected Monte's subsequent appearance at the corner and knew exactly where the night-club owner intended to go.

Tonight, The Shadow was not merely on the trail of crime. He was moving ahead of evil, prepared to crush it before its full work could begin!

CHAPTER IX. EXIT THE SHADOW

SOON after Monte Flade reached the hotel room that served as his secret headquarters, Elk Wenner joined him. The big-toothed mob leader began to report the doings of his hoodlums. Since Monday, they had been easing out from under cover, avoiding places like the bus garage and the main-street parking lot.

Those spots didn't matter any longer, so whenever thugs were needed, they would be ready. That news suited Monte Flade.

"I'll need them tonight," the sleek-haired man announced. "But before you get busy on the wire, Elk, come over to the window, so I can show you the lay."

Monte pointed to the twelve-story Albot Building, the tallest structure in Middledale. Its height was more imposing, although less decorative, because of a mammoth water tank that towered up from the roof upon three steel legs. But Monte wasn't pointing up to that enormous tripod. His finger was on a straight level.

In fact, Elk decided that Monte wasn't indicating the Albot Building at all. Another structure intervened, an ancient edifice of brick that looked squatly despite its eight floors. It bore an old-fashioned electric sign, on which it was possible to trace the name "Central House" despite the frequently burned-out bulbs.

"All right," said Elk, with a nod, "I see it—The Central House. Some of the boys are staying there."

"They won't be, after tonight," returned Monte. "Tell a couple of them to tip off the rest and have them clear out of the joint."

"What's the gag, Monte?"

"It's no gag. I've found out who owns the dump. It's just another piece of property that belongs to the Denwoods!"

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Elk showed real surprise. The Denwoods, as he understood it, had a habit of tearing down old buildings whenever they acquired them. He began a puzzled mutter.

“They only bought the place a few weeks ago,” announced Monte. “Nobody is supposed to know it until they've torn it down. That's going to be soon, because the Central House has been condemned under the fire laws.”

“Then why is the joint still open?”

“Because the fire laws allow a reasonable time to vacate. We don't work that way. Whoever gets out of that dump alive, will be lucky, and the less of them, the better! We're giving it the torch tonight!”

Elk's big front teeth dominated his understanding grin. Then, he asked suddenly: “Where'd you get the dope from, Monte?”

“Straight from the mayor's office,” replied Monte. “The Denwoods just took out a building permit covering that property. I had a hunch they owned it, and when I heard about the permit, the thing was clinched.”

“You've been finding out a lot,” grinned Elk, “ever since that cutey landed the job with the mayor.”

“Who told you that, Elk?”

“I just used my noodle, like anybody might. You got wise to the bus set-up right after the Geldon dame blew into town. Tonight ain't the first time she's been over at the Orange Grove.”

Monte's sallow features registered brief annoyance. He purred a warning for Elk to “keep his lip buttoned,” to which the lieutenant voiced prompt agreement. Then, reverting to his original theme, Monte announced:

“The name Denwood will mean mud in this town, when that firetrap goes up in smoke. Call that picked crew of yours, Elk, and get started.”

“Where to?”

“Out to the old Hilltown quarry. When you bust open the shack where they store the explosives, you'll find a lot of stuff besides dynamite. You'll know how to use it, but here are a few important details.”

In his smooth fashion, Monte outlined exactly what Elk's outfit was to do after it returned to Middledale.

TWENTY minutes later, Monte was alone in the hotel room. He gave a smirking glance toward the Central House; then, on a sudden thought, he went from the hotel room to the covered fire tower which he used as a route to cover his visits to the secret headquarters.

Monte had remembered that a fire-tower window offered a view to the rear street, from which Elk's cars were to begin their journey.

Gazing between two buildings, Monte counted three cars, as they passed at intervals. It was chance, perhaps, that caused him to continue to stare in his deliberate fashion a full minute longer. Monte was repaid for that long gaze. He saw a fourth car pass.

Stiffening, Monte shifted his eyes toward a distant cross street. He noted the three cars turn the corner. Well to the rear, the fourth did the same. There was a final test: the bridge that cut across the railroad on the other

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side of the main street. Since it was little used at night, what happened there would tell.

The three-car caravan had barely twisted from sight, before the extra automobile took the same route!

Hurrying back to the hotel room, Monte grabbed the telephone. Though Elk Wenner was the nominal head of the mobbies in Middledale, Monte Flade had been foresighted enough to hold an alternate in reserve. He had purposely kept Elk's substitute out of the picture, to be sure of having him available when needed. But he had kept his emergency lieutenant posted on everything.

In two minutes, Monte was talking to a crook who answered to the name of Squint Bovey, telling him exactly what he was to do.

According to Monte's reasoning, the driver of the extra car must be The Shadow.

And Monte was right. At the wheel of a smooth-running coupe, The Shadow was keeping his own lamps dim, while he traced the red glimmer of tail-lights swinging up a hillside. The red dots crossed a bridge and took a bend. The Shadow pressed down his accelerator.

Crossing the bridge, he heard a roar beneath him. For a few seconds, the coupe's lights were muffled by a cloud of grayish smoke. The Midnight Limited had passed beneath, speeding into Middledale. The Shadow's whispered laugh had a tone of regret.

He had hoped that new crime would not come until the morrow; in fact, until an hour ago, he had regarded its postponement as a certainty. The limited was bringing new strangers into town, men whose services would prove valuable to The Shadow, for they were certain of his trusted agents.

They were too late for tonight's expedition.

Speeding past the bend, The Shadow used the bright lights to pick out a fork in the road. He knew that the crook-manned cars must have taken the road to the left, because it led below the quarry. His own route was to the right, toward a steep grade that led to the quarry's upper edge.

Veering suddenly into an open space beside the road, The Shadow swung his coupe beyond a clump of bushes and left it. With a tiny flashlight licking the rough ground at his feet, he picked his way through solid blackness, until the gleam of the torch tongued suddenly into an absolute void.

The Shadow had reached the lower edge of the quarry, which formed a rough half-moon in front of the steep cliff that loomed somewhere beyond the gap.

Sixty sheer feet lay below him on the right, yet The Shadow stayed close to the brink, so as to keep his bearings. Soon, his course was no longer necessary. Flashlights were beckoning him, from near the road just below the quarry. Extinguishing his own torch, The Shadow covered the short space between.

The mob was at the dynamite shack. The Shadow could hear the prod of levers, jimmying the door. Then came a ripping sound: the front of the building was open. Flashlights crowded close; the gleam of an electric lantern appeared within the shack.

Twisting the lens of his flashlight, The Shadow held it level, while he drew an automatic.

With a peal of shivering mirth, he announced himself.

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THAT strident challenge from the blackness riveted Elk and the mobbies who were gathered with him. They knew The Shadow's tone, they were hearing his mockery, voiced to a pitch that seemed incredible.

Behind him, The Shadow had the invisible cliff as a sounding box to magnify his voice.

The laugh faded. Silence gripped the crooks with the same effective power, for its contrast was impressive. Then The Shadow spoke; his sibilant tone seemed almost at the elbows of the men who heard it, for he was much closer than they supposed.

“Stand as you are!” ordered The Shadow. “One false move will mean a bullet! A single shot”—he inserted a sinister, whispered chuckle— “will bring death to all!”

Crooks understood, too well. The shack was loaded with more than dynamite, as Monte had said. Inflammables intended for the Central House would burst loose in instant fury, should a bullet reach them. The explosives, in their turn, would spread the mangled remains of a dozen victims over every portion of the township.

The fact that The Shadow was also too close to survive such a blast, was a matter that crooks didn't consider.

It wouldn't have helped them, if they had. Legend had it that The Shadow expected some day to perish in battle, but that he had sworn to carry a deluge of enemies with him when he did. This was the type of setting for him to stage a Samson's finish, if he could do nothing else.

The Shadow intended to do something else. He pressed the button of his flashlight, a needlelike beam pointed straight to a mobster. The Shadow ordered the thug to step forward, then halt. The man obeyed. The thin beam picked another man, then a third.

Crooks began to understand. They had dropped their guns. The Shadow was lining them, one by one, into a single file. They would soon be leaving the shack where quick death threatened, but they would soon be marching lockstep, with The Shadow right behind them.

They could foresee, besides, that he would be carrying more than a gun. The shack would provide him with weapons as effective as hand grenades. If the long march back to Middledale began to break, The Shadow could still provide the mass slaughter that these criminals dreaded!

FIFTH to move into line was Elk Wenner. The mob leader started a defiant snarl from between his big teeth. It brought mutters from his crew. They weren't going to risk their lives just because Elk wanted to be funny. The incident told clearly how completely The Shadow had subdued the murderous tribe.

The Shadow was about to stage a triumph as complete and as incredible as any that he had ever performed, when crooks were saved by an intervention as startling as The Shadow's own.

From a spot so high that astonished men first thought that the moon had broken through the clouds, came a sphere of light that spread a brilliant glow over the entire scene. Squint Bovey and a pair of aids had arrived by the road atop the quarry.

They had spied the lights at the threatened shack. Coasting their car toward the cliff edge, they had turned on a spotlight, to see all that lay below!

In that glare The Shadow stood revealed; halfway between the quarry shack and the front edge. He still held Elk's mob under control, but his situation was no longer unique. If they went, The Shadow would go with

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them, but the men on the cliff would probably survive!

No fighter other than The Shadow would have taken the daring course that he attempted. Forgetting the men below him, he wheeled and blasted a bullet straight to the spotlight. The crackle of glass sounded as the glare was extinguished. Then, jabbing shots as he went, The Shadow made for the front edge of the quarry.

The men on the cliff were shooting down, but he ignored them during his zigzag course. The Shadow had no intention of blasting the dynamite shack, and himself along with it. His purpose was twofold: to be free from the fire of the crooks on the cliff; then to scatter those below.

He won the first when he reached the quarry edge. The trio above were afraid to approach their own brink, because they would have to cling there, targets for The Shadow, whenever they showed a flashlight or a gun flash. Thus The Shadow came below the angle of their fire.

Half a dozen bullets could produce his second desire. Only Elk and a few other mobbies had dashed back to the shack to get their revolvers. The rest were dashing toward the road, anxious only to clear this vicinity before The Shadow, too heavily pressed, might abolish the shack and an acre of land with it.

Pumping the needed shots from two automatics, The Shadow heard howls from flattening thugs whose guns were silenced in the darkness. Only two crooks were peppering back: Elk and another.

Starting a quick side–shift to a new position, The Shadow stabbed one shot. Going back with the recoil, he leveled his automatic for another. His lips were raising a triumphant laugh, as his finger pressed the trigger.

The shot spoke in air. The Shadow's mirth took on a trailing hollowness, fading as it had never done before. It came to an abrupt finish; the sound of a smacking splash rose up from unseen depths, carrying dying echoes that seemed to trickle from an enormous mouth.

The Shadow had made his exit from the fray. One misstep in the darkness, taken as he delivered that final shot, had carried him over the edge of the quarry into a blackened, yawning pit fully sixty feet below!

CHAPTER X. DANGER BELOW

ELK WENNER was the first to reach the lower edge of the quarry. By then, a flashlight was playing from the cliff on the far side, where one of Squint's men was clinging to a small tree. The beam from the heights wasn't strong enough to show the quarry depths. Elk supplied a better flashlight of his own.

Returning crooks joined their leader. More beams spread into the pit. There, ripples were being muffled by the scummy surface of a pool that was many feet in depth. Elk sighted something moving along the thick, green ooze. He opened a fire, in which the others joined.

The thing their bullets riddled was The Shadow's hat, but he wasn't underneath it. Flayed by ripping slugs, the headpiece flipped sideways, to float like a capsized boat. Nothing else was visible below the quarry's jagged walls.

“He must have sunk,” decided Elk. “He probably had a couple of extra gats on him. We ain't leaving here, though, until we're sure about it. Keep taking a gander, you guys.”

A thug arrived from one of the cars bringing the very thing Elk wanted— an eight–cell flashlight the length of a baseball bat, guaranteed to cast a beam over a mile. Elk widened the focus and threw the glow on the pool. There was a glitter of slimy green, but even that powerful light couldn't penetrate the stagnant water of

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the quarry. It proved one thing, though: The Shadow wasn't anywhere upon the surface. Elk was satisfied that it was safe to go back to town.

He wigwagged to the trio on the cliff. Shouts passed across the quarry, and Squint decided to leave one of his pals, while he went to Middledale with the other. Elk deputed two of his own men to watch the near side of the quarry, leaving them the eight-cell flashlight.

Three thugs had been crippled in the struggle. The Shadow's final shot had been meant for Elk, but it had missed. Putting the wounded in one car, Elk started it back to town, then paid a visit to the dynamite shack.

There, he and his remaining followers made a hurried selection of the inflammables that they required, and started their journey in the other two cars, to be joined at the fork by Squint and his companion.

They had left no car for the three at the quarry, because Elk intended to return. He was sure that The Shadow must have left a car somewhere about. They could find it later. There would be plenty of time, after things had started in Middledale.

It was several minutes before the sounds of distant motors had faded. Then a stillness, deep as death itself, settled over the old quarry. The only proof of living persons there was the roving light of the high-powered flashlight, as it occasionally swept the scummy surface below. After another half a dozen minutes, that glow disappeared.

“No use wastin' the glim,” growled one of the lower guards to the other. “Elk ain't goin' to be back for an hour, maybe longer.”

“He said to keep looking—”

“For what?” The thug spoke scoffingly. “There's only one way he'll ever find The Shadow. That's to send some guy down in a diver's suit!”

There was a worried blink from above. The crook on the cliff wasn't pleased because the big light was off. He was using his own flashlight, but it gave a very poor view of the jagged depths. To humor him, the man with the big flashlight made another survey of the pool, then extinguished the beam again.

From then on, he followed the policy of scouring the depths at occasional periods. Meanwhile, he and his companion resumed their growled conversation. The man above seemed satisfied. Like the others, he had decided that The Shadow's exit was a permanent one.

OBSERVED from above, the quarry did have the semblance of a water-filled grave. There was a feature, though, about that quarry, which a really discerning person could have noticed.

The walls, at places, were like steps. Odd steps, because some of them were upside down. Certain chunks of blasted stone jutted from the sides. Most of them were near the quarry's rim; perhaps that was why no one had noted a large projection just above the water's surface. That is, no one but The Shadow.

His fall had been a sudden one, but he had managed to straighten it into a dive. After a deep plunge in which he had found no bottom; The Shadow came to the surface.

There, he had struck out for shore, and had found it in the shape of the quarry's jagged wall. The place where The Shadow finally stopped had been a double refuge.

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Not only had it given him a chance to clutch the rough stone and stay there, above the water's surface, it also shielded him from the lights that flashed his way. The overhanging rock cast a darkness that blended with the water's murk, and The Shadow, in his turn, was part of the very gloom beneath the rough-hewn ledge.

In fact, there was less than two feet between the green-scummed surface and the ledge. From high above, that looked like a mere three inches. The Shadow's hiding place was as snug as he could want it, but he had no intention of remaining there any longer than was necessary.

When the big flashlight ended its first patrol, he took note of the time before it appeared again. The second interval of blackness was longer, by his calculation. When the third came, The Shadow was ready.

Swinging sideways from his hidden spot, he began to scale the quarry wall. He was halfway up the rough precipice when the flashlight made another round. The beam was concentrated chiefly on the water. It threw a glare up the quarry wall to some degree, enough to make The Shadow feel uncomfortable. But mobbies weren't looking for him at that higher spot. Clinging motionless, he was safe from observation.

Then came the next stage of his journey, another thirty feet. This time, The Shadow was delayed by a smooth stretch of rock that forced him to a sideward detour. At last, his probing hands clutched stone that had a sandy feel. It was the front brink of the quarry; he had reached it ahead of the big light!

At that moment, The Shadow felt no worry concerning the return of the bright glare. According to form, it would blaze far below him. But the crook who handled the flashlight was slower than before, and his laxity was to bring a near disaster to The Shadow. Another man was wondering about the delayed light. He was the fellow on the high cliff.

To hurry things along, the man higher up supplied a flash of his own. It wasn't strong enough to show the pool, so he turned it toward the front of the quarry. The light was bright enough to outline The Shadow at that close range.

The crook gave a yell. It was meant for the other pair, but the one who profited was The Shadow. Supplying all his reserve strength, he cleared the quarry edge with one big haul, coming to hands and knees as he struck solid ground. He hadn't a gun with him; his much-prized automatics were at the bottom of the quarry. But The Shadow had not lost his fading tactics.

He started a feint in one direction; as the flashlight sped to overtake him, he was on his feet, stumbling in the other direction. The sound of his swishing drive was lost amid the gun barks from the cliff above. The thugs on the lower ground came to their feet, both growling.

"That bird's nuts!" began one, looking toward the flashlight glow, "Say, if he thinks—"

THERE wasn't time to finish that opinion. The little flashlight had changed its direction; it was coming toward the pair at the lower lip of the quarry. It overtook The Shadow, showed him looming in the glare. He was almost upon the two thugs who still believed him dead!

They yanked their guns as The Shadow reached them. The struggle that followed was viewed by a sole witness above, a man who didn't care to shoot unless he saw the others fall. Revolvers were glittering, but they couldn't swing the proper aim under the warding power of The Shadow's flaying arms.

Three figures tangled. The man above was wondering if he ought to fire into the midst of them, taking no thought of friend or foe. Before he could make his decision, a gun poked out of the mass. It pointed upward. No longer in the grip of a crook, it blasted. Aimed straight for the flashlight on the cliff, it found a human

mark.

With a howl, the watching thug was jolted from the tree he clutched. A bullet buried in his chest, he took a dive far longer than The Shadow's, down toward the water in the pit.

Blackness enveloped the fight that followed. The crook who had lost his gun was trying to reclaim it. He succeeded because The Shadow let him, at a greater expense. Releasing his hold as the thug tugged at the revolver, The Shadow supplied an added elbow nudge. It was just the touch required to send another plunger down into the scum he deserved.

The last foeman had twisted away. He pressed the button of a feeble flashlight. The glow was enough to show The Shadow, gunless, scrambling from the quarry's brink. Shoving forward, the crook tried to follow with his flashlight and gun The Shadow's move. He was too slow.

Out of the darkness, the last thug received the stroke of a clublike weapon that bashed him into unconsciousness. The crook flattened, his revolver clanked the stony soil. The Shadow tossed aside the bludgeon that he had picked up in the darkness.

The club was the eight-cell flashlight. As an instrument of illumination, its service was ended. The Shadow needed another one.

Finding the lost revolver that the final gunman had dropped, The Shadow groped his way to the dynamite shack. There, he picked up a flashlight; with it, he soon found another gun.

Neither of his weapons was fully loaded, and extra ammunition was not at hand. To make up the deficit, he helped himself to some explosives that Elk and the departing gang had left in the shack.

Soon, The Shadow was in his car again, speeding toward Middledale. On his head he placed a spare slouch hat he had secreted in the car. He was watching the horizon as he drove, hoping that he would be in time to prevent the crime that mobsters intended. He was across the final bridge, his goal almost reached, when he heard the sudden clang of bells, accompanied by the wild shriek of sirens.

Then the sky ahead was reddened by a flash of flame, that faded, only to reappear again, more vivid in its crimson.

The Shadow's return had been too long delayed.

Crooks had already fired the old hotel.

CHAPTER XI. BLASTED BATTLE

FROM the moment when they had reached the heart of Middledale, Elk Wenner and his crew of firebrands had begun a swift campaign to destroy the old Central House. They worked in precision, almost in unison, for the simple reason that each man was performing his part in evil as rapidly as he could.

The Central House had walls of brick, but its interior was mostly of wood. Conforming with instructions given by Monte, the crooks took simple but effective measures to turn the building into a mammoth furnace. Elk and a few others made for the basement, where they piled up rubbish and ignited it with chemical bombs.

As the cellar blaze broke loose, they made their exit by smashing windows. Flames were spreading as they fled, and the blaze took prompt hold of the wooden stairs that led to the ground floor. The fire was under way

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several minutes before anyone other than the crooks realized it.

In fact, the event that actually produced the alarm was a muffled explosion on the ground floor of the hotel. It was followed by others, that seemed to travel story by story, until a final blast echoed from the roof itself. Traveling floor by floor, sneaking members of Elk's mob had placed charges, set to go off in rotation, while their leader and his fellow incendiaries had been busy in the basement.

In effect, the hotel had been transformed into a mammoth brick-walled chimney. The inflammables in the cellar were the kindling wood, the floors above the logs. With plenty of fuel awaiting the gigantic blaze, the fate of the hotel looked both rapid and certain.

The crooks who had set the blasts were on the roof when the timed explosions puffed. Scrambling over the edge like monkeys, they began a rapid descent of the fire escape at the rear of the hotel. By the time they reached the ground, windows were emitting clouds of reddish smoke; for those billows immediately reflected the rising flames.

Fire engines were clanging to their destination, in prompt answer to the alarm. As they arrived, the firemen saw lashes of flame whip up through the roof, fade away and blaze again, like the flare from a great blow furnace. Those hellish bursts were the same beacons that The Shadow observed when he reached the town's outskirts, a dozen blocks from the Central House.

THERE was a reason for those puffs of flame. The crooks who had blown the floors were also provided with inflammables, which they placed along with the charges. Quick-burning chemicals were igniting, to crack containers of oil. The fire was no longer a basement proposition when the engines arrived to battle it.

From the wallows of smoke came human shrieks; eddying clouds showed faces at the windows. Close to a hundred guests were trapped in their rooms. Most of them had been asleep, for the glaring background showed them in night clothes, waving their arms as they screamed for the firemen to hurry.

A few lucky persons had stumbled down the fire escape that the crooks had traveled before them. Choked by smoke, they were telling the firemen that no one else could be removed unless the blaze was quelled. Grimly, the firemen agreed in part, but not entirely.

Once their lines of hose were in action, they could fight back the conflagration long enough to reach the hotel rooms with fire ladders, and stretch nets into which the imprisoned guests could jump. Through a big megaphone, a fire captain was shouting for everyone to wait, that rescue would come quickly.

Though the hallways were ablaze on every floor, the smoke was being sucked upward, thanks to the shattered roof. The people in the rooms were safe and would be until the water began to play.

After that, the game would be to hold back the flames until the ladders and the nets were ready. The Middledale fire department was well equipped with apparatus; the firemen themselves were competent smoke-eaters. They could win the coming race, so they believed; but they hadn't counted on meeting with an added catastrophe.

One squad of firemen were halted before they could reach their fire plug. The thing that stopped them was an explosion that quivered the cement side-walk. Chunks of metal drove through the air; those fragments were all that remained of a blasted water hydrant. The staggered firemen stared at a geyser of water that jetted from the curb. They couldn't hitch their hose to a wild stream like that.

Another explosion announced the finish of a second fire plug. New blasts were popping from the neighboring

blocks. Elk and his murderous tribe had added that touch by planting explosives at every hydrant within hose reach. The detail was one that Monte Flade had ordered, to assure the destruction of the Central House and all the unfortunates within it.

Despite the new confusion, the fire captain was still shouting for the trapped victims to preserve their calm. Though he knew that most of them were doomed by circumstance, he still hoped that rescues could be accomplished. Firemen were making for the hotel with nets, carrying axes, wearing smoke masks, valiantly risking a trip into the inferno.

They couldn't get past the door of the ground floor. The heat from that level was terrific. Flames were searing out to scorch the ladder men. Other firemen were slumping, to be dragged away before they could stretch the nets. Playing hoses could have stemmed that calamity, but there wasn't a stream of water available for a single fire engine to pump.

DURING those first horrendous moments, a coupe had streaked through the forming lines, its driver peering upward from the window. His way blocked, the driver had swung the car into an alleyway beyond the Albot Building, which stood next to the blazing hotel. Arms doubled in front of him, a black-clad figure had bounded from the coupe, to dash into a doorway.

Reflected flickers showed him cloaked and hatted. One of Elk's mobbies spied the disappearing figure and ran wildly toward a car outside the fire lines. There, Elk and two others were innocently watching the nonplused firemen. Elk blinked when the arriving mobster hoarsed:

“The Shadow! He just got here! He's gone up!”

“In the Central House?” quizzed Elk. “You're nuts! If he's gone up there, he's gone up in smoke!”

“It wasn't the hotel he went into. He's gone into the Albot Building!”

“For what? To keep the fire from spreading there? Not a chance! The Albot Building is fireproof. Anyway, you couldn't have seen The Shadow, because—”

Elk was staring upward as he spoke. He had been about to add that The Shadow was at the bottom of the Hilltown quarry. Something he saw told Elk that he was wrong. In the midst of his speech, he saw The Shadow for him self!

From this angle, Elk had a chance view toward the roof edge of the twelve-story Albot Building. The sky was lighted by the hotel fire, and Elk spied a shape against it. The Shadow had come up through a trapdoor and was actually on the Albot Building roof. Why had he chosen to go atop the steel structure that Middledale classed as a “skyscraper,” was something that Elk couldn't guess.

He had seen The Shadow; that was enough.

“Come along!” snarled Elk. “We'll get the guy this time! He's headed off across the roof, but there's no place he can go, unless he wants to take a jump down into the fire. He can't try any of that black-out stuff when we find him this time!”

A trio of thugs with him, Elk reached the door on the secluded side of the Albot Building. Inside, they came upon a row of deserted elevators. The indicator above one door told that the car was on the top floor. Obviously, The Shadow had used it to get to the roof.

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Prying the next door open in no time, Elk and his companions speedily drove the elevator to the top of the shaft. They saw the short stairs that The Shadow had used. Taking the same route, they emerged on the roof and looked for The Shadow.

At first, their quest seemed blank, although the whole flat area of the roof was visible. Knowing the direction that The Shadow had taken, Elk beckoned his companions along. They headed toward a glow that came four stories upward, from the flaming hotel next door.

Elk pointed to the only possible places of concealment—the three legs of the big water tank that stood like a monstrous spider atop the Albot Building.

Two of those legs were toward the center of the roof, the third at the far edge. They were stout posts of slanted steel, ample enough to half conceal a human figure. The Shadow was not near the closer struts; of that, Elk was sure. Then, very suddenly, Elk saw where The Shadow actually was.

A lurid waver of flame threw revealing flickers against the far post. The Shadow was coming from that spot as though the heat from the roof edge impelled him. He was crouched when Elk first spied him, but he was straightening as he came toward the center of the roof with a long, running stride.

He saw the approaching crooks as he sped between the closer posts. Their guns were drawn, but The Shadow had no weapons in his hands. Hoarsing a command to shoot, Elk expected to see The Shadow dodge away. Instead, he took a tremendous, wide-armed lunge straight toward the massed crooks.

He was flattening as he came, and the swiftness of his dive caused the first shots to spurt high. Elk didn't fire with the others; he was letting his gun tilt lower, to drive a sure bullet home.

In that moment, The Shadow seemed poised in midair, so that Elk could wing him on the fly. It was suicide, that leap, for The Shadow's spread-out arms couldn't reach far enough for his hands to grab at any of the gunners.

Elk pulled his gun trigger. The gun seemed to recoil as he fired it. Flung backward, he let his shot go high in air. Beside him, the other crooks were landing, as if bowled over by the approach of The Shadow's waving arms. No longer did they see The Shadow, for they were dazzled by a blast of flame that roared from the roof edge of the Albot Building, louder than the crackling and rumbling from the burning hotel below.

Yet they heard the laugh of The Shadow as he landed among them, his lunge given an added lurch by the force of the explosion behind him. The Shadow had ended this battle with crooks by blasting it into a chaotic scene, wherein both he and his enemies lay sprawled. His mockery, however, did not apply to that small triumph.

The Shadow's mirth announced a greater victory. The explosion that felled the crooks had blasted their evil hopes of mass murder, along with their desire to slay The Shadow!

CHAPTER XII. REVOKED DISASTER

THE explosion that blasted chunks of the cornice from the roof of the Albot Building was loud enough to be heard on the street, twelve floors below. Hundreds of horrified citizens were watching the fierce blaze that racked the Central House, unable to take their eyes from the hideous scene, until they were attracted by the blast.

Then some looked up. The rest, still staring at the hotel windows, were hoping that the frantic guests could

hold out a few minutes longer. Many were on the window ledges, ready to jump, so scared that they couldn't see whether or not nets were beneath them.

At any moment, there might have been a general plunge toward the sidewalk, in which only a few could have landed in the one net that was actually in place. But that horrible mass suicide was stayed by the eager shouts of persons on the street, the ones who had gazed above the flaming hotel.

Something in the rising shout gave real hope to the clinging victims. As they waited, their windows showing flames in the smoky background, the shout from below became a roaring cheer uttered by a thousand throats.

Everyone was looking upward by that time. They couldn't see The Shadow or the flattened crooks. What they did view, was the effect that The Shadow's blast had produced—on a far greater scale than the overwhelming of a few puny opponents.

The Shadow had planted his dynamite at the base of the outer leg that supported the water tank. The explosion had ripped the supporting steel. Bright flames, erupting from the hotel roof, showed the quivering of the mammoth tank. A thing the size of a cottage was wobbling on its struts atop the Albot Building.

During long, breathless moments the tank wavered, until the shattered leg could not restrain it. The other supports remaining firm, the tank began to tip toward the roof edge. Its conical cap broke away as water began spilling from its brim. That weight once started, nothing could halt it.

Tilting like a gigantic cauldron, the tank poured its deluge down upon the flaming furnace that had recently been a hotel. The roar of that liquid mass was louder than a cataract. Thousands of gallons of water had been loosed in one tremendous flood, exactly as if some giant hand had overturned its brimming cup!

Flames hissed as the Niagara met them. Fire was encountering its unconquerable foe, water, in quantities that proved immense. That tank could have supplied six lines of hose for half an hour. Instead, thanks to The Shadow, it was gushing its entire contents in the space of a single minute.

Furthermore, the flood was pouring into the place where it was most effective, an area that no fire hose could have reached: the very center of the huge conflagration!

Crooks had blasted a path up through the intervening floors, to give the fire a rapid avenue. The Shadow had launched the contents of the water tank down into that same channel. The very factor that had given power to the flames was producing their defeat.

The blaze had spread when it rose; the water did the same when it descended, for it was coming too rapidly to be accommodated solely by the pit.

Pillars of steam poured out through the hotel roof; puffs of the same vapor showed at windows. No longer were ruddy tongues licking the background of hotel rooms. Instead, the brick walls of the Central House began to weep as trickles of water forced their way through the loosened mortar.

Ladders were slapping up against those walls. Firemen were scaling them, bringing up life belts to lower the rescued to the street. People were easing back from the window ledges, some laughing, others crying, as they awaited their turn.

Only a trickle of water was still coming from the canted tank, which lay across the roof edge like some great, amiable creature that had done its master's bidding. But there was plenty of water below.

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The flood had filled the hotel basement. Rivulets were streaming from the windows that Elk's firebrands had shattered. Firemen were wading through those streams, their hip boots splashing as they made for the interior of the hotel.

If any reviving flames appeared, the firemen had chemicals to settle them. Nets were being hauled up and rolled away, because they would not now be needed. The Shadow had supplied the saving torrent before the brick walls had weakened. The ladders were standing steady, while firemen were guiding people down them.

Disaster had been fully revoked, by The Shadow!

NEVER before had such an impending catastrophe been changed to a scene of calm in so short a time space. Happy hysteria reigned among the spectators; the few who reviewed the whole event quite coolly were, in their turn, unable to grasp the circumstances completely.

Their picture began with the toppling of the water tank—an occurrence so tremendous, that it seemed a decree of fate, rather than the work of a human hand.

No one realized that a living rescuer deserved the credit. Crooks on the roof had heard The Shadow's laugh close by them, but it had not carried to the street. In setting off the blast, The Shadow had run tremendous risk; pressed for time, he had set a large charge and lighted it with a very short fuse. His job had been to overturn the water tank, regardless of consequences to himself.

Surviving that peril, The Shadow had run into another, from which he was not yet loose. True, the shock had been more surprising to the mobsters, for they had not expected it; but The Shadow had been jarred by the explosion, along with his opponents.

He found himself groping dizzily on hands and knees, with the mumble of thick voices stirring the air beside him. Thoughts were disjointed, as they flashed to The Shadow's brain. He remembered flickery brightness, only to find it gone. He could recall the thudding of some great object, the sizzle of water meeting fire. Gradually, the towering tank came back into his memory.

His plan had worked—the fire was extinguished. That was why everything was black about him. He remembered where he was—on the roof of the Albot Building. Naturally, it would be dark, since the old hotel no longer blazed. But the voices didn't belong here.

The Shadow's hand reached for an automatic, found a revolver instead. Crazy, he began to think that he was back at the quarry, that the dynamite shack must have blown up. That didn't fit with the picture of the water tank.

As he rubbed his hand across his hatless forehead, he felt the ooze of blood and knew why he was dizzy. His head had taken a hard thump when he sprawled.

He heard another voice; one that was thick, but which did not mutter. Again, The Shadow remembered the events at the quarry; then the links locked in his mind. The voice belonged to Elk Wenner. Yes, Elk had been at the quarry, but he had arrived on the Albot Building roof awhile later. It was Elk's gun that had talked into the air when the blast came.

Pivoting slowly on one arm, The Shadow tried to trace the mob leader. He couldn't, because the roof had a tendency to whirl whenever The Shadow moved his head. Elk's voice was louder; still, The Shadow couldn't place it. What he did recognize, however, was the fact that somewhere across the roof lay a trapdoor that meant a route to the street.

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It was better to find that exit, than risk a fray while in a mental whirl. Along a roof that seemed to tilt and wobble, The Shadow pursued a crawling course toward the outlet that he wanted. He had shoved the revolver away, trusting solely upon stealth and his ability to grope to his destination despite the pitching of the roof.

The trapdoor wasn't where he thought it was. Steadying, The Shadow began to work along the roof edge, keeping a respectable distance in from the brink. A sweep of light swung across the roof, halted a few yards ahead and showed the very goal that The Shadow wanted.

He was on his feet, ready to cover the remaining distance, when he suddenly realized who had supplied the light.

Elk Wenner! The Shadow could hear the mob leader's snarl. Disappointed because he hadn't spied a figure near the trapdoor, Elk flicked the light off. The Shadow started forward again, but his change of method brought a stumble. He was sprawling, short of the trapdoor, when the beam reappeared.

Rolling sideways, The Shadow pulled the revolver and fired quick shots, just as the beam found him. He hadn't a chance to drop Elk with that fire, but the crook didn't know it. Flinging the flashlight away, Elk yelled to his pals. Revolvers began to talk.

Only Elk's aim was good, but his fire was slower than the others. On the move again, stumbling, crawling, The Shadow heard bullets ping the roof beside him. One slug ricocheted, grazing his cheek as it passed. He flattened to the roof, but couldn't find it. He had tumbled through the open trapdoor, instead.

JOUNCING down the steep steps, The Shadow landed in the dim light of the twelfth floor. Pulling himself up against the wall, he saw two open elevators instead of one, and didn't realize why.

Stumbling into one of them, he managed to close the steel doors just as footsteps pounded down the steps from the roof.

Yanking at the control lever, The Shadow finally moved it. Bullets were thudding the doors, but those sounds ended as the car began its downward course. Slumped to the floor, The Shadow felt a slight jar as the elevator stopped automatically at the ground level. He managed to pry the doors open and start out to the street.

Doors opened behind him. Turning as he went from the building, The Shadow jabbed shots with his spare revolver to stem the tide of crooks that he knew must be coming from another elevator. Stumbling from a single step that he had forgotten about, The Shadow rolled across the sidewalk, almost to the curb.

Guns were shooting from close about him, as if reserve mobbies had surrounded him. But those shots weren't coming in The Shadow's direction. They were blazing back into the building, sending Elk and his thugs into the elevators for cover. As hands gripped The Shadow, he recognized the faces of the men who owned them.

They were The Shadow's own men, his secret agents, who had arrived in town at midnight. They had seen the water tank fall and had guessed that their chief must have maneuvered it from the roof.

They helped The Shadow into a car and wheeled away, shooting back at Elk's actual reserves when those extra crooks began to bob into sight along the curbs.

After a quarter hour's ride through the outskirts of Middledale, The Shadow was himself again. He gave instructions to his agents; they swung in toward the side street by the Middledale Hotel. There, The Shadow left his cloak in the car and made a quiet entrance, as Cranston, into the hotel.

In his own room, The Shadow changed to evening clothes. Then he went outside and took a taxicab. He knew that the Orange Grove stayed open until three o'clock; that patrons often arrived there after midnight.

Evidently the big fire at the Central House hadn't disturbed the festivities at Monte Flade's night club, for the place seemed very lively when The Shadow entered.

Monte Flade was bowing a young lady out the door. The Shadow recognized her as Ruth Geldon. From his table, he saw the girl reach the sidewalk and enter a yellow roadster that was parked at the curb.

As the car rolled away, the lips of Lamont Cranston formed a slow, inscrutable smile.

CHAPTER XIII. CRIME'S DEADLINE

BY Monday, Middledale had recuperated from its hysteria. The excitement produced by the near-tragedy at the Central House had been sufficient to crowd out all other matters over the week-end. On Monday, however, even the reminders of the smothered holocaust were somewhat faded.

The big water tank was squatting placidly upon a new steel tripod that had been erected on the Albot Building. Workmen were busy demolishing the ruined Central House, and their efforts were lessening its fire-scarred appearance.

Of course, the fact was out that the Denwoods owned the defunct hotel. That rumor had broken loose at the time of the fire, to be publicly substantiated the next day. As a result, Ruth had not seen Jack since the evening when Lorna had stolen her date.

Both Jack Denwood and his father had been constantly busy explaining things to fire inspectors, building commissioners, insurance investigators, and a host of self-appointed committees that had decided to meddle in the matter.

Their attorneys were busy, too. Every shyster lawyer in Middledale had gone after the persons rescued from the Central House, advising them to sue the Denwoods for damages. The Denwood attorneys had already announced that they would satisfy all reasonable claims and losses, but that did not stop the shysters.

They thrived on situations such as this one, where they could tack on fees for "collecting" damages which would have been paid anyway. They played their legalized racket in the usual style, threatening to sue for huge amounts, and in the next breath offering to settle for fractional payments.

Meanwhile, tinhorn politicians were doing their best to keep the rumors alive. They and their toadies succeeded, in a fashion, thereby partly offsetting The Shadow's triumph. The intrepid fighter had halted a catastrophe that might have totally blackened the Denwood name, but he had been too late to free completely the family from stigma.

The Denwoods had at least been negligent in letting the old hotel stand. They were champions of better-housing projects, and it did not seem consistent with their policy. The fact that Henry Denwood had merely obliged the former owners by letting them operate until new jobs could be found for the employees, was logical enough; but the politicians and their ward heelers were quick to brand it as a mere excuse.

When Jack came into the mayor's office early Monday afternoon, he looked very tired. The mayor had gone out to lunch with Martin Albot, and had not yet returned, hence the reception room was empty except for Ruth. The girl greeted Jack with a sympathetic smile, and he sat down.

“I’m sorry about all the trouble, Jack,” began Ruth. “People are forgetting it, though. Nobody remembers such things very long.”

“Maybe you’re right,” conceded Jack. “I suppose when some new excitement comes along, the old business will be wiped off the books. It’s odd, the way we all forget things—”

The very comment awoke Jack’s recollection of another matter. Lips tightening, he stiffened. Meeting Ruth’s gaze, he demanded:

“Why did you lie to me the other night?”

“I didn’t lie to you, Jack.”

“You said that you were tired, that you were going right to bed. When you were sure I was on my way, you went over to the Orange Grove!”

Ruth could spot Lorna’s work again. The blonde had been at the Orange Grove the next night, and someone must have told her that Ruth was there the evening before. Curbing her anger, Ruth decided to spike the story properly.

“I did go to bed, Jack,” she insisted. “I went right to sleep, too. But I woke up at ten o’clock, and I was hungry. I’d missed dinner, because I’d gotten dressed for the trip to Kingston, although you didn’t even notice it. So I dressed again and went over to the Orange Grove. None of the other good restaurants are open as late as eleven o’clock.”

THERE was an honesty in Ruth’s blue eyes that Jack could not ignore. Realizing how he was suffering from rumors, he accepted the girl’s statement without further question, which relieved Ruth from mentioning that she had been awakened by a call from Monte Flade. In fact, Jack began a profuse apology, but Ruth ended it with a helpful smile.

“Let’s not believe the things we hear about each other,” she suggested, “unless we say them ourselves. That would be better, wouldn’t it, Jack?”

Nodding his agreement, Jack left, his faith in Ruth restored. He had a few calls to make, and it was nearly four o’clock when he arrived home, to find his father in the study.

Two visitors were present: one was Martin Albot, who had come from the mayor’s office; the other was Lamont Cranston, who had evidently returned to town, for he had been absent over the week end.

Jack joined the conference. Grimly, his father handed him a copy of the Sunday Clarion, a weekly scandal sheet published by the politicians who disliked the reform movement. All four pages of the yellow journal were filled with tirades against the Denwoods.

According to the Clarion, Henry Denwood was a grasping money lord who ruled Middledale as a kingdom, with Jack the crown prince. Every move they made was prompted by one motive: greed. Their schemes, it seemed, were clever beyond all measure. They had turned their factory over to the employees because it was losing money and that was the easiest way to dispose of it.

They were using the Denwood Store to squeeze all the money out of Middledale. As soon as other merchants managed to give them real competition, the Denwoods would rid themselves of the department store, too. But despite all their craft, the Denwood empire was in trouble. Otherwise, Jack and his father would not be

needing the insurance money from the fire at the Central House.

By the time Jack had read that far, he was on his feet, clenching his fists angrily. He wanted to go down to the office of the Clarion, find the fly-by-night editor who ran it and run the fellow through his own press. What finally quieted Jack was his father's calmness.

"Don't worry, Jack," said the elder Denwood. "The only truth they printed is that we own land along the line of the new boulevard. All the rest is a build-up to that fact."

"Which everyone knows already," put in Albot. "So how can it hurt? Besides, no one ever reads the Clarion. My paper, the Advance, is the only daily in town."

There was merit in Albot's argument. The Advance had covered the fire story in excellent fashion, stressing the actual occurrence, not the rumors that went with it.

"I own the Advance," chuckled Albot, "and you own Station MBX. We make a great team, Henry!"

He was addressing Jack's father, who nodded. But Jack saw a doubt in his father's expression—one that Cranston seemed to understand. Suppressing news wasn't always a good policy, even when actuated by a decent motive. The lawsuits were a point in question, so Jack mentioned the subject.

"All around town," he asserted, "they're saying that we are being sued for about a half a million dollars, by people who were rescued from the Central House. I stopped to see our attorneys, and they showed me the list of claims. The total of the threatening suits only comes to sixty thousand dollars, and the shysters are willing to settle for about five per cent of that.

"It's about time"—Jack was becoming hot—"that we tell Middledale just how we do stand! Let them know what we are going to do with our property along the new boulevard; how we intend to give half of it to the city for a park, and use the rest for homes, that we will sell at cost!"

THERE was profound silence when Jack had finished. Finally, Henry Denwood shook his gray-haired head. The reply that he made was one of wisdom.

"People believe in deeds, not promises," he said. "Even our deeds, no matter how great, will be belittled. Read the Clarion again, Jack, and see what it says about our policy with the factory. Such slander must remain ignored. To notice it, gives it weight."

"That's right," agreed Albot. "The thing to do is sit tight." He swung his bulky form around in his chair. "Wouldn't you say the same thing, Mr. Cranston?"

"I would," agreed the visitor, calmly, "on the assurance that the boulevard vote will be passed by the city council when it meets."

"Nothing can stop it," asserted Albot. "You'll be here to make your offer on the bond issue, won't you, Cranston?"

The Shadow nodded. Albot chuckled.

"Then all they can ask for," he said, "is immediate funds. Those are available." He turned to the desk. "Tell me, Henry, do you know how much is in that strong box in the vault at your Middledale Trust Co.? The box that's locked, and stamped with the city seal?"

Henry Denwood shook his head.

“Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars,” announced Albot. “The mayor showed me the figures today. That’s what the city took in from the sale of its reservoir rights to the State.”

“I knew about the transaction, Martin. But why—”

“Why did Kesselbrock stick the funds away?” Albot chuckled again. “Because he likes to stage surprises. He collected ahead of time, and he wants to spring the box on the public just like a kid pulling a plum out of a Christmas pie!”

Jack was on his feet again, leaning across the desk toward Albot.

“Get hold of the mayor right away!” he exclaimed. “Tell him to hold that surprise until the council meeting. He’ll be there when the debate starts on the boulevard question. When the question of cash comes up, Kesselbrock can ask to make an announcement—”

“And tell about the cash,” interposed Albot, blandly. “I saw that possibility, Jack, and suggested it to him.”

“He liked it?”

“He was delighted! So delighted, that he almost forgot to finish his lunch. He was going to issue his statement this afternoon; in fact, Miss Geldon had typed it for him before he went out to lunch, but he hadn’t signed it.”

Ruth hadn’t mentioned the matter to Jack, and he was glad. It gave him a new faith in the girl’s discretion; and curbed his last trace of suspicion that Ruth talked to people such as Monte Flade. Then Jack heard his father question:

“Who else knows about that money in the bank vault, Martin?”

“Only the controller’s office,” returned Albot. “It’s the one place where there couldn’t be a leak.”

Henry Denwood nodded agreement. He was thoughtful, though, for he remembered a discussion that he had held with Albot, just before Jack arrived. They had wondered, both of them, how the word had gotten out that the Denwoods owned the Central House.

Albot had been on the point of voicing a theory, when Jack had entered. This new matter of the city’s excess funds seemed so much more important, that Henry Denwood decided not to return to the previous subject.

THE conference ended, Lamont Cranston rode downtown with Martin Albot. He alighted from Albot’s car near the Middledale Trust Co. It was after five o’clock, and since the bank had special evening banking hours, many people were coming from their offices to deposit the day’s receipts.

The Shadow saw a brown-haired girl come from the bank, counting a small bundle of bills. The girl was Ruth Geldon.

She looked up suddenly, as a man stopped and spoke to her. The Shadow saw Ruth smile; the man’s lifted hat revealed the sallow face and sleek hair of Monte Flade. Apparently, Ruth had something important to tell him, for they stepped to a space beside the door and had a rapid conference.

Monte was smiling suavely, nodding slowly, as Lamont Cranston strolled past unnoticed in the crowd. He caught Ruth's smile, too, as the girl left Monte. Her lips phrased words that The Shadow's keen eyes read:

“At dinner—tonight—”

As The Shadow neared the Middledale Hotel, his keen eyes held their gaze. New crime was due, of a sort that he could readily picture. But it wouldn't strike this evening. Tomorrow night would bring the thrust.

Tomorrow was Tuesday. On Wednesday, the city council would meet, to vote on the matter of the boulevard. Twice, crooked thrusts had failed to settle that coming question the way evil schemers wanted it.

Tuesday night would be the deadline for the final stroke. Then would Monte and his followers take advantage of a new opportunity that had suddenly come their way.

Tuesday night was crime's deadline.

The Shadow knew!

CHAPTER XIV. ELK MEETS AN EXPERT

AT six o'clock Tuesday evening, Elk Wenner used the back route to reach the hotel—room headquarters. Meeting Monte Flade at this hour was something very unusual; therefore, Elk knew that something big was due.

Whatever came, he would be ready for it. He wasn't limited to a picked squad any longer. Every hoodlum in Middledale—and there were more of them than police—was toting a gun, ready for any battle that was ordered.

They had served as rumor—mongers, those thugs. Some were taxi drivers, others worked at parking lots. A few had jobs as bellhops in the Middledale Hotel, or served as extra clerks behind cigar counters. The rest were loungers; but they looked prosperous enough and therefore warranted no suspicions on the part of the police.

Nevertheless, Elk knew that Monte wasn't satisfied with the talk that had been spread against the Denwoods. It was fizzling, like the outburst in the Sunday Clarion. When Monte wasn't satisfied with any situation, he usually acted tough about it. Elk expected to see Monte Flade in his best form tonight.

There was a surprise the moment that Monte opened the room door in answer to Elk's knock. There was a visitor in the room, the first that Elk had ever met here, a wizened man who sat crouched like a human skeleton, puffing a cigarette between tight—drawn lips. He had the face of a rat and a gaze as shrewd as one, which made Elk like him on sight.

“Kit Pollion,” introduced Monte. “You've heard of him. Say hello to him, Elk.”

Elk gripped bony fingers, but noticed that their skin had the smooth slide of a snake's scales. He grinned a greeting, because he knew who Kit was. The bulge on the scrawny man's hip didn't mean a gun. Kit was carrying the tools that had made him famous. As a safecracker, he was the slickest worker in the country.

“We fluked the torch job.” announced Monte to Elk, “but we're staging a better one tonight. One that means dough for us, besides having it bounce back on Papa Denwood and Sonny—boy Jack. We're going to crack the Middledale Trust, that bank of theirs!”

“For how much?” queried Elk.

“A couple of hundred grand,” returned Monte, coolly. He purposely underestimated the amount of the mayor’s strong box; but at that, Elk’s eyes gave a pop. “What’s more, it’s a set-up—the way we’re going to handle it.”

“How come?”

“The dough belongs to the city. If it goes, the boulevard deal is off. To make it perfect, it’s got to look like the Denwoods were in back of the robbery, and that”—Monte chuckled—“is what makes it all the easier!”

ELK was totally mystified. Monte began his explanation by nudging a thumb at Kit Pollion.

“This guy knows safes inside and out,” said Monte. “That’s why I sent for him. He told me something I’d been thinking a lot about: that pretty nearly any kind of a vault is a cinch to open from the inside, if a guy knows his stuff.”

Kit’s grin came with Monte’s words. It was evident that Kit Pollion not only knew his stuff, but knew he knew it.

“He’s looked over the lay,” resumed Monte, “while the rush hour was going on, at five o’clock. So here’s the stunt, Elk. When the bank closes its special-night banking hours at nine, Kit will be in the vault with his tools. He’ll have it open in a hurry, but all he’s going to take out is the chestload of city dough.

“After that, he’ll fix the vault again, closing it from the outside so it won’t look as if it had been touched. At ten o’clock, you bring a mob around and blow the side door of the bank. That will bring the coppers.”

The prospect didn’t please Elk. He began to ask why Monte wanted the police around.

“So the job will look like it flivved,” growled Monte. “Don’t you get it yet? All you’ve got to do is beat it with the box, and bring Kit with you. Lug it over here with the seals still on it. Are you dumb?”

Elk gave a snarl to deny the charge.

“I got it!” he declared. “The bulls will figure we didn’t get as far as the vault. So when it turns out that the city dough ain’t there, the Denwoods will be the boys to take the rap. It will look like they tried to fake the job themselves, so as to cover up. Everybody’s going to say they needed the money and took it.”

Monte thwacked Elk on the shoulders, chuckling:

“You got it all right! Think it over awhile. I’ve got to call Squint.”

Thinking it over, Elk was more and more intrigued. He saw how all the slander against the Denwoods was building up to this payoff. Some people did believe that the Denwoods were hard-pressed for ready cash and had hired rogues to fire the Central House, to collect the insurance money.

Besides, there was the matter of the lawsuits, which had been exaggerated into box-car numbers. Shysters had been bellowing about the interests of their clients, hoping to hurry the small compensation that they were actually willing to take. They were making nuisances of themselves, to impress a lot of people.

They had done plenty to help the crooked cause, which didn’t surprise Elk Wenner. His opinion, of course,

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was prejudiced, but Elk had often maintained that if all the lawyers left the country, it would no longer be a fit place for a crook to live.

Monte's phone call was ended. Elk had heard enough of it to learn that Squint was to serve as a decoy, and lead the police in the wrong direction. Monte wasn't taking any chances on losing the huge swag that would be in the mayor's coffer.

Squint was to accomplish something else, however, and Elk listened gleefully while Monte purred the details.

When tonight's job was through, the Denwoods would be worse than mud. They would be sunk!

“That's going to be a laugh on Jacky boy,” snorted Elk. “That classy doll over at the mayor's office has sure given him the run-around! Do you think he'll wise to the double cross?”

“What if he does?” returned Monte. “Every dame in town shows up at The Orange Grove once in a while. Who's going to prove that this Geldon jane spilled any dope to me? She'd be more likely to talk to Jack Denwood. He's her boy friend.”

It was all very, very nice, Elk decided, until he suddenly realized that Monte had left out the most important part. Hopes fading, Elk queried:

“But how are you going to get Kit into the vault, to begin with? That's going to be tough, Monte.”

“It's the easiest part of all,” returned Monte. “Only, we've got to wait until after eight o'clock, because that's when Albot's jewelry store closes.”

“What's Albot's store got to do with the bank?”

“Just this. Suppose a truck showed up there with a shipment of silverware, valued at a couple of thousand bucks, with only the watchman on duty. What would he do about it?”

“Tell 'em to shove it into the store, I guess.”

“With their own vault locked, and everybody else gone home? Not a chance! He'd tell them to take it over to the bank and have them keep it until morning. I know that's what would happen, because I had somebody ask a guy that was fired from the jewelry store. He said that's what they do, in a pinch.”

“But what does the bank say about it?”

“Old fat-face Albot made the arrangement,” chuckled Monte. “He and the Denwoods are like that”—Monte put his thumb between his first two fingers— “and that's Fatty Albot in the middle. So we've got a box waiting, in a truck at the Imperial Garage. There's a lot of cheap silverware in the box, and it's addressed to Albot's store. And there's still room in the box for Kit.”

The rest was obvious to Elk, even before Monte detailed it. Two mobbies were to pose as truckers and stop at the jewelry store, just as a matter of routine, before nine o'clock. From there, they would deliver their precious burden to the bank and see it placed in the vault.

Later, it would be classed as a wrong delivery, but the box would have to contain some silverware, so that Kit could spread it to look like what Monte termed the “real McCoy.” The name of the shipper was also painted on the box, but that merely added teeth to the game.

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The supposed shipper was a New York wholesaler who handled cheap jewelry as a regular line, and fenced better stuff on the side. The fence would play ball, because Monte knew too much about him; besides, he wouldn't be running any risk in simply reclaiming a shipment sent to the wrong town.

It was half past six, time for Monte to be back at the Orange Grove, where he would have an alibi when the robbery took place, as he had on the night of the fire.

“Take Kit out to chow,” remarked Monte, in departure, “and see that he gets to the garage all right. Have some of the crew with you.”

Monte didn't have to add why. He wanted to be sure that The Shadow didn't spoil the coming job.

SHORTLY before eight o'clock, when Elk neared the Imperial Garage, they had the required mob with them. A couple of thugs were already posted there; they were the pair who were to act as truckmen. But while Elk was conferring with them, a sudden yell came from the darkness.

Flashlights glimmered; in their glare Elk saw The Shadow, gliding in from a corner of an alleyway!

Nearer crooks sprang for the cloaked fighter. Elk had ordered silence; they thought they could bag their foe without gunfire. But The Shadow slugged his way from grabbing hands and loomed suddenly toward Elk and the men beside the mob leader. They dived away; it was Elk who opened fire in the darkness.

Shots answered from the front of the alleyway. Knowing The Shadow's skill at gunfire, Elk decided to let his mobbies take the brunt. He yelled for a general drive. It came.

Crouched, Elk expected of the surging crew to sprawl. Instead, he heard the roar of a departing motor. Catching up with his gang, Elk snarled for them to quit firing at a corner which a car had just turned.

Force of numbers, and their closeness, had probably caused The Shadow to speed away. Knowing The Shadow's tactics, Elk was confident that he would return. That would be all the better. When he returned, The Shadow would find nothing but an empty nest.

Nudging the two truckmen, Elk told them to get into the garage and start their truck trip.

Two minutes later, the truck wheeled out. The man beside the driver gave the high sign signifying that he had spoken to Kit Pollion in the box. Across the street, beside a waiting car, Elk Wenner gave a chuckle.

He had sent Kit into the garage before The Shadow appeared. Just before, in fact, and that was lucky. Kit didn't know that The Shadow was in Middledale, and Monte wasn't anxious for him to find out that fact.

The shooting in the neighborhood brought police; but by that time, Elk was on his way, riding with his carload of hoodlums. He hoped the cops would still be around when The Shadow returned. If so, they could do a little shooting on their own. He figured that The Shadow, snooping as usual, must have spied the guards at the garage and wondered what was up.

He wouldn't be pulling anything like that when ten o'clock came. Elk didn't plan to hang around the bank before he staged his fake robbery. He'd send a couple of experts to soup the door and blow it in a hurry.

After the blast came, mobbies would surge from passing cars, keep shooting a few minutes, and scatter when the police came. That would be plenty of cover for Elk to depart with Kit and the swag. Squint, of course, would be the decoy.

This was big-time stuff tonight, a job for real experts. Monte was an expert, the way he had figured it out. Kit was an expert at his end of it; and Elk took pride in considering himself in the same class, as far as his own duties were concerned. He even granted a similar distinction to Squint.

Elk Wenner should have remembered that The Shadow also was an expert, in more ways than one. However clever crooked schemes might be, The Shadow had a habit of outmatching them.

CHAPTER XV. THE SHOWDOWN

HALF past eight.

Ruth Geldon noted the time by her new wrist watch, as she sat at a corner table in the Orange Grove. She motioned in the direction of a passing waiter, calling for her dinner check.

The man kept on his way, but nodded that he would return. During the few minutes that followed, Ruth had time to review some recent facts and their bearing on the future.

First, was a phone call that she had received at her apartment at half past six, instructing her to be at the Orange Grove by seven. Next, a call that she herself had made to Jack Denwood, saying that she would like to see him.

She had found time for it before leaving her apartment, and Jack had promised to stop by between eight thirty and nine.

Of course, Monte Flade had stopped at her table while she was eating dinner, as he invariably did. Their conversation had lasted about ten minutes, but had not attracted too much attention. Monte had gone his way, smiling as usual.

Ruth's next moves were due, and they were to have an important bearing on tonight's affairs, True, Ruth realized that her own part in coming schemes was actually a minor one. Nevertheless, she could regard herself as a needed cogwheel, upon which one factor depended. That factor happened to be Jack Denwood, although he did not know it.

Some surprising things had been arranged for Jack, and Ruth was to see that they went through. Maybe Jack wouldn't like it, but that didn't matter to Ruth. She and Jack had made a bargain to forget the past, and he hadn't kept his half of it. Jack had talked too much to Lorna, and deserved a lesson for it.

In fact, Ruth had begun to feel quite justified in everything that she had done since coming to Middledale, although most of her work had been strictly under cover. Tonight, Jack could rant all he wanted, call her any sort of crook he chose, and Ruth would simply laugh at him.

She intended to have a laugh on Martin Albot, too. She was quite sure that he had conspired with Lorna Thexter, that night of the Denwood dinner. Between them, they had forced Jack to mistrust her, and Ruth had subtly tested Albot this very afternoon. The wrist watch that she was wearing was one that she had bought in his jewelry store while Albot had been there.

Ruth had paid sixty dollars for the watch, and had noted the effect on Albot's broad face. He had tried to cover it with a smug smile, but Ruth had not been fooled. It was apparent that Albot knew what Jack had told to no one but Lorna: that Ruth hadn't brought a thin dime with her when she came to Middledale.

Perhaps Albot could have named one source of Ruth's extra money, had he been present in the Orange Grove

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when the waiter came for the dinner check. The waiter simply laid a tray on the table and bowed. The dinner check was on the tray, inscribed with Monte's O.K., to show that it had been paid.

From beneath the tray, Ruth plucked a little envelope that had the crunch of money and slipped it into her handbag.

She gave Monte a parting smile when she went from the Orange Grove, and he returned it, from his favorite post near the door. Watching, Monte saw Ruth get into the trim yellow roadster, which she drove with a manner of complete ownership.

TAKING a roundabout course toward her apartment, Ruth drove past the Middledale Trust Co. She saw a truck standing in the side alley; two husky men were carrying a heavy chest into the bank, under the watchful eye of a guard.

Ruth had been told exactly what that delivery signified, and as she passed the Middledale Hotel she stretched one arm in a slight gesture, which served as a signal for watching eyes.

Her signal meant that the box had safely started on the final lap into the bank vault. When nine o'clock arrived, an inside worker would begin to bore his way out, to meet crooks coming in at ten. That intervening hour was to pave the way for another huge surprise that would startle the burghers of Middledale.

Instead of driving all the way to the apartment house, Ruth parked her car on a side street a block away and walked the remaining distance. Arriving in her own apartment, she left the door unlatched, while she telephoned Jack's home to learn if he had started. The servant said that Jack had just gone out to the garage. Hanging up the telephone receiver, Ruth glanced at her watch again. Jack would certainly arrive soon after nine o'clock.

Ruth was thinking of the surprise that would come then. She hadn't an idea that she might meanwhile encounter one. Of her own. It was the slight thump of the door, pushing shut, that roused her to sudden alarm. As Ruth turned, a firm contralto voice told her to stand exactly where she was.

Inside the door was Lorna. She was wearing a shimmery gown of black and silver, which hadn't come from the Denwood Store. Despite her plans to become a member of the Denwood family, Lorna bought all her fancy apparel in New York.

But Ruth wasn't particularly interested in Lorna's new gown. The silver trimmings were not all that glittered.

Lorna was holding a cute pearl-handled revolver, with a highly polished barrel. The muzzle was uncomfortably pointed in Ruth's direction. From her manner, it was evident Lorna had indulged in a few drinks, and seemed in a mood to toy with the gun trigger. Ruth's recent coolness began to leave her, and Lorna observed the fact.

"Hello, fine feathers!" jeered Lorna, discounting the fact that Ruth's dinner gown, though a bit colorful, was far less ornate than her own. "I've just found out that fine feathers made jailbirds!"

Ruth didn't answer. She had lifted her arms, under the prompting urge of Lorna's gun, and her fists clenched tightly. But Ruth's display of anger wasn't on Lorna's account. It was inspired by thoughts of Jack Denwood, and Lorna knew it.

"I had dinner with Jack and his father," announced Lorna. "Sorry you weren't invited, but it happened to be an informal family party. I drop in there often, you know."

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Ruth knew that. Jack had mentioned it. He had given Ruth to understand, however, that he and his father were not always pleased when Lorna showed up unannounced.

“We had a heart-to-heart talk, Jack and I,” resumed the blonde. “It was about you. I told Jack that I could really like you, if I felt that you needed friends. He said you did, very much, and he finally stated just why.

“I could have understood it, if you had turned out to be a nobody. But when I learned that you were really somebody”—Lorna's tone was reaching a harsh pitch—“important enough to be wanted by the police, that ended my sympathy!”

Whatever sympathy Ruth had for Lorna, was also banished to the past. She was blaming the blonde, not Jack, for the news getting out. She knew how subtle Lorna could be at times, particularly with men. Lorna had probably used her wiles to the utmost, to get an inkling of Ruth's past.

She had probably promised complete silence and full discretion, swearing that she would be Ruth's friend, no matter what the circumstances. She could have made it seem that her sympathy would be in proportion to Ruth's need for pity. Thus coaxed, Jack had talked.

“I stopped to see Monte Flade,” added Lorna. “I sounded him out about you, and apparently you were smart enough not to tell him who you were, although the two of you have been working hand in glove. But Monte is going to know the truth, like everyone else in town.

“You're going to pick up that telephone”—Lorna gestured with her gun— “and call the chief of police! You're going to tell him that you are Betty Jevers, and ask him to come here and arrest you!

“I'll go along with you to Lancaster Prison to bring back the clothes you're wearing, because they don't belong to you. But I'll stay there long enough”—Lorna's words were biting—“to see how you look in prison uniform! Since I intend to marry Jack Denwood, I intend to learn just how sad and oppressed you appeared when he first met you.”

RELUCTANTLY, Ruth reached for the telephone. She was biting her lips, not because of the humiliation she was to suffer for Lorna's added triumph, but because this intervention was bringing an end to important plans of her own.

Compared with other events scheduled for tonight, the capture of the notorious Betty Jevers would be small news.

All that Ruth wanted was another hour; after that, she wouldn't care who denounced her under another name. But Lorna, even though she had no idea of things that were due, was the sort of rival who would ignore any appeal. Then came a chance inspiration.

“Why not let me drive down to police headquarters?” queried Ruth, rather bitterly. “I have that car you told Jack about, and you have a gun.”

Lorna considered the suggestion, then smiled a wise smile. She saw a catch to the proposition, especially when she observed an eager gleam come to Ruth's eyes. Ruth should have been smart enough, thought Lorna, to keep from betraying that expression.

It happened that Lorna was wrong.

Something else had roused Ruth's interest. The door of the apartment was opening slowly, only a few feet in

back of Lorna. Two crouching men were easing through, motioning for Ruth to hold the blonde's attention. Behind them was a third, their leader, whose ugly grin showed two great front teeth.

“Very well,” said Ruth. “I’ll call the police chief. Tell me just what I am to say.”

“Give him your name,” chuckled Lorna—“the one you are famous for: Betty Jevers—”

Pouncing figures interrupted Lorna. Hands came over her shoulders, twisting the revolver from her fingers, clamping her mouth to prevent the slightest scream. Elk Wenner closed the door behind him, stood watching while his thugs tried to suppress the frantic blonde.

Ruth had to credit Lorna with putting up a lovely fight. The shin kicks that she delivered would have been effective, if she hadn't lost her silver-trimmed slippers early in the fray. Following that setback, Lorna became a blond fury, clawing at eyes and faces, wrenching her husky captors back and forth across the room.

Elk Wenner stepped forward, prepared to tap the butt of a gun to the blond head as soon as it flounced in his direction. Ruth stopped him, intervening with Lorna's gun. Snatching the revolver from the floor, she swung it high against Elk's wrist.

“Don't sock her!” warned Ruth, harshly. “There's a lot she's got to tell me. If she's blabbed my right moniker to anybody else, I'm going to know it!”

Obligingly, Elk returned his revolver to his pocket. He had gotten a real esteem for Ruth upon hearing Lorna call her Betty Jevers. Besides, Lorna had finally collapsed in a corner of the room, and the two thugs were binding her with short lengths of rope.

Thanks to Ruth's intervention, Lorna had survived the fray intact, at the cost of her new evening gown. Together with its built-in slip, the black-and-silver creation had been ripped to shreds, which strewed the floor.

A long, slender shape in silk stockings and scanty lingerie, Lorna could merely glare at her captors, for they had slapped a wide strip of adhesive tape across her lips before binding her wrists and ankles.

“Monte figured the dame was heading here,” confided Elk to Ruth. “He told us to snag her on the way. But he had to get us on the phone first, and that took him some time. Anyway, we got her. Come on you two”—this was to his thugs—“and lug her out to the car!”

“Why not leave her here?” suggested Ruth. “You've got the other job to handle.”

“Monte didn't say to leave her here,” objected Elk. “I guess maybe – well —”

“You mean he thought I couldn't handle her?” inserted Ruth, as Elk hesitated. “That's because I didn't tell him I was Betty Jevers. Come on, scram! Leave it to me to put the heat on this ritzy baby! She'll talk plenty before I'm through with her!”

Ruth was juggling the pearl-handled gun. Elk gave a grin, and motioned to his pals. They tossed Lorna unceremoniously on the daybed, where a good set of box springs bounced her up and down. Then, leaving Ruth in charge of the prisoner, they left the apartment and began to sneak down the rear stairway.

Closing the door, Ruth Geldon gave a pleased laugh and went to the front window of the living room, to watch for the arrival of Jack Denwood.

CHAPTER XVI. THE FINAL HOUR

BY the time Jack Denwood's coupe appeared in front of the apartment house, Ruth Geldon had made up for a few weeks of persecution engineered by Lorna Thexter. From her place beside the window, Ruth gloated over the blonde's present plight, and Lorna had to take the verbal beating.

"You came here for a showdown," Ruth told her, "and you got one! If you think that I prefer crooks as friends, blame yourself for it. You did your best to cut me out of the kind of society I wanted. Tonight, though, I'm going out with Jack Denwood and you can't stop me!"

Lorna tried to rage with her eyes, but the attempt was rather hopeless.

"Here's Jack now," added Ruth, from the window. "Maybe I'll get big-hearted and send him up here to see you. So just be patient, and hope for the best"—Ruth was passing the daybed—"and in the future buy your gowns at Denwood's, they may not be so fancy, but they're durable!"

Kicking aside some silvery fragments that lay in her path, Ruth answered Jack's ring through the phone to the lobby, telling him that she would be right down. She threw a parting smile to Lorna, who could neither speak nor squirm, and closed the apartment door. She met Jack on the front steps.

"I'll have to be getting downtown," he reminded. "I told you about the mayor's banquet, in the hotel. It starts at nine thirty. I'll be able to slide out by eleven, though. Then we can go somewhere together."

"Meanwhile," said Ruth, "I'll ride downtown with you. But turn around the next corner. I want you to see my car."

They pulled up in back of the yellow roadster. Ruth suggested that they leave the coupe and take the other car.

"Then you won't have to leave your car in the parking lot," she said. "I'll come for you at eleven."

Jack couldn't refuse a ride in the roadster, because he had a lot he wanted to say. With Ruth at the wheel of the yellow car, Jack put a question as they pulled from the curb.

"Isn't this the car that Lorna mentioned?"

Ruth nodded.

"Where did you get the money to buy it?"

"I decided I could afford a lot of things," returned Ruth, blandly. "How do you like the new wrist watch I bought this afternoon?"

Jack wasn't interested in the wrist watch. He kept up his persistent questions regarding money. Then:

"I thought you were taking me downtown," he said, suddenly. "What's the idea of circling this block?"

"You're not going to the banquet, Jack."

"I'd like to see you stop me! If you think you can tell me what to do—"

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RUTH interrupted by halting the car and pressing the little revolver against Jack's ribs. She informed him definitely that she had special plans for him. If he didn't choose to listen, she would use force. Jack's answer was a grab at the gun.

The girl did not fire. In fact, she had unloaded the revolver to avoid an accidental shot. She was depending upon co-operation quite as efficient as that at the apartment. It came, when the roadster's rumble seat swung upward.

Over the lowered top of the open roadster lunged two men, who took Jack Denwood as their prey. Hurling their full weight upon him, they sank Jack to the floor of the car. Jack's struggle for Ruth's gun was turned into a conflict much more formidable than any he expected.

Ruth, sliding out through the door on the left, witnessed the finish almost as she reached the sidewalk.

Jack came up groggy, in the hands of the two men who had overpowered him. Like Elk's companions, they were provided with cords and a gag. Propping Jack between them, one watched the prisoner, while the other took the roadster's wheel. They drove away along the darkened street, while Ruth strolled the few blocks to the place where Jack had left his car.

The girl waited there until the two men returned in the roadster, Jack no longer with them. She took her own car, while they entered the coupe. They had Jack's car keys with them, and Ruth followed the coupe toward the center of town. There, she let them go ahead to the parking lot where Jack always left his car.

The coupe was recognized by the parking-lot attendants when it arrived. One of them stepped up to greet Jack Denwood, while two others remained in the background. None of the three was prepared for the surprise that they received.

The pair who came from Jack's coupe promptly covered them with guns and took them prisoners. Ruth, meanwhile, had signaled to other invaders across the street. They entered the parking lot.

When the coupe reappeared, Ruth knew that the surprise attack had succeeded. She waited a few minutes, then drove a few blocks and stopped in front of a limousine that stood in front of a gloomy building called the Civic Club, headquarters for the reform element in Middledale.

Leaving her car, Ruth entered the limousine; the dozing chauffeur didn't lift his head from the wheel.

Soon, a portly man came out from the Civic Club and stepped into the big car, speaking testily to the chauffeur:

“Asleep again, Arthur? I have warned you—”

Martin Albot said no more. He was feeling the pressure of Ruth's revolver against his chest; he also recognized the girl's voice, when she told him that any outcry would be quite as dangerous as an effort to grab the gun.

Albot believed her. He calculated, too, that Arthur might help him. But the chauffeur wasn't Arthur.

The pair who had suppressed Jack had been here also, to take care of Albot's driver. One of them had remained to chauffeur the limousine. He drove back to the parking lot, where his pals were in control.

Prodded by Ruth's gun, Albot stepped from the limousine into the bristle of other weapons. Marched to an

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obscure corner of the lot, he was shoved into a rakish touring car by his captors.

Ruth Geldon had been provided with a picked crew tonight, and the moves had been so scheduled that she didn't even need to give an order. All was accomplished without a sign of The Shadow. Whether or not he was back at the Imperial Garage, or was concerned with Elk Wenner and the main body of crooks, were things apart from the activities of Ruth and the band that helped her.

It all fitted with the girl's belief that if she could manage to break away from Lorna, the sailing would be smooth. Elk and his mobbies had helped her from that dilemma; and from then on, everything had gone like clock-work. The mayor's banquet was to lack two important guests: Jack Denwood and Martin Albot. Each had accepted a different sort of invitation, under competent persuasion.

ONE member of the picked crew took the wheel of the coupe, and Ruth rode as a passenger back to the Civic Club. There, she slipped into her own car and took a detour that avoided the main street.

Passing the Orange Grove, she heard the strident music of a swing band blaring from the opened windows, but she did not bother to stop off and talk to Monte Flade.

Ruth's real job was done. She had merely to return to her apartment and stay there. With two champions of reform put where they belonged, others did not matter. Of all the citizens of Middledale, there were only two who would count heavily in tonight's events: Jack Denwood and Martin Albot.

Their absence would not be noticed at the mayor's banquet; at least, not until ten o'clock, particularly if Timothy Kesselbrock opened the proceedings with one of his long-winded speeches, as was his usual custom.

Jack's father might be concerned about the absentees, but Henry Denwood was a patient man and would therefore suspect nothing; at least, not until it would be too late for him to alter the situation.

A sleepy lull seemed to have settled over Middledale, when Ruth parked in back of her apartment house. Not caring to disturb that calm in any way whatever, she used the rear stairway to reach the third floor, exactly as Elk and his two pals had done.

At the top, she listened to make sure that no sounds came from her own apartment. Then, lured by the quiet of the night, she stepped to a hallway window and gazed toward the city's center.

Between the apartment house and the lighted district lay blackness, indicating the gloomy neighborhood where Ruth had so easily aided in the capture of Jack Denwood and the later seizure of Martin Albot. Many crooks in Middledale disliked such blackness, for it reminded them too much of The Shadow. Ruth Geldon had no such qualms. She did not fear The Shadow.

Instead, Ruth felt confidence that when all was done tonight, no one would ever again connect her with the missing Betty Jevers. She knew that Jack had talked with Lorna, who, in turn, might have called Albot; but there was no possible chance that anything concerning Ruth's past could have traveled farther.

Lingering by the window, Ruth heard the town clock strike ten. The brazen clangs ended her reverie; she turned and crossed the hallway to her own apartment, where she softly opened the door and stepped into the dim-lighted living room.

Closing the door behind her, Ruth locked it. From now on, the apartment would be her little world, cut off from events outside.

The last hour was ended and all was well. Crime was set to go—and take the consequences. Tonight, crooks were taking on a task that they regarded as a mere routine; a crime so cleverly contrived that even The Shadow could not block it.

Fully acquainted with those plans, Ruth Geldon was sure that she had staked her own future on the side that was to win.

CHAPTER XVII. THE BANK RAID

AS the town-hall clock completed its tenth stroke, the quick clatter of footsteps came from the alleyway beside the Middledale Trust Co. The rapid sound was heard by a patrolman who chanced to turn the next corner. Halting the swing of his club; the officer took a look at what was happening on his downtown beat.

The cop saw two scurrying figures fling themselves into the shelter of a parked car. Thinking that they were about to stage a getaway, he reached for his whistle. Before he could blow a signal, the patrolman knew why human rats had run so fast.

A thundering explosion ripped from the side door of the bank. Lighted with the blaze of the quick-set blast, the alleyway showed rocketing chunks of metal and stone. Elk Wenner's experts hadn't spared the soup. They had been told to wreck the door with one charge and had done it, by blowing the surrounding wall as well.

Like an earthquake quiver, the shock traveling along the main street, bringing a tumult of answers in the form of shattering windows. The cop didn't blow his whistle; he lost his hold on the cord when he grabbed for a building wall to regain his unsteady footing. A few seconds later, the officer preferred discretion to valor.

A score of men had bobbed into sight from parked cars, doorways, even from the tops of overhanging doorways. Cars, wheeling in from side streets, were disgorging others. They were a husky-looking tribe, and all had guns. Elk Wenner was leading his cohorts to invade the blasted bank.

The patrolman ran the other way along the street by which he had arrived. At the end of half a block, he was rattling his club along the sidewalk, hoping that every other cop in Middledale would be close enough to hear it. They would all be needed; judging from the size of the attacking crew, the patrolman calculated that even the entire police force would be outnumbered.

There were others who thought the same.

Poking their faces from the doorway of the Middledale Hotel, a block away, startled witnesses saw the size of the attacking throng. All the crooks weren't making for the bank. Some were deploying, to form a cordon.

They were shooting at automobiles, which heeded the warning and swung the nearest corners. Guns began to bark in the direction of the hotel. Dashing back into the lobby, frightened observers howled for the clerk to call the police chief, the county sheriff, and even the fire department. Every law-enforcement agency in Middledale might be needed before this battle was over.

Waiting for fumes to clear from the entrance to the bank, Elk Wenner heard the distant screech of the first patrol-car siren. He gave a pleased snarl to the picked men beside him. For the first time in his crooked career, Elk was glad that the police were beginning to arrive. It fitted exactly with the scheme arranged by Monte Flade.

“C'mon!” ordered Elk. “Open with the glims, and have the heaters ready. But remember: don't plug the watchman. He's a pal of ours!”

THE statement was a lie. Monte had instructed that the watchman was to remain alive, as witness to the fact that the robbery was thwarted; but Elk didn't care to let his mobbies in on the full secret. The thing to do was drive the watchman out of sight while the crooks were meeting up with Kit Pollion. If the watchman didn't take the hint, Elk would have to croak him personally.

But the watchman took the hint. Stumbling toward the ruined door, he was met by the glare of entering flashlights, the whistle of bullets above his head. He scrambled for the stairs that led down to the safe-deposit rooms, paused there to fire a few hasty shots.

He saw masked faces in the glare of lights, for Elk had ordered the raiding crew to wear slitted handkerchiefs over their eyes. Guns poked anew in the watchman's direction, leaving him but one course: a rapid dive to the safety below. How long he could hold that shelter depended entirely upon what the crooks did. As it happened, they didn't go after the watchman at all.

Elk pointed them to the big vault at the rear of the main floor. Thrusting ahead, he was the first to throw a flashlight against the big steel door. The gleam showed the vault tightly locked, as it was supposed to be. Hoarsing a greeting, Elk expected to see Kit leap into the glow.

In answer to that shout came a shuddering challenge—a strange, resonant laugh, perfectly adapted to the surrounding walls. Like the mockery that thugs had heard at the quarry, the challenge was voiced from a veritable sound-box. On this occasion, though, there was no tracing it.

For all the crooks knew, the marble-walled interior of the bank might have delivered that uncanny mirth. Gaping as they flicked their flashlights, the startled raiders were gripped by the incredible. Yet that fact served to build their alarm into complete terror.

The laugh itself symbolized the presence of a being whose methods involved the seemingly impossible.

The Shadow!

LIGHTS sped almost everywhere, bringing no trace of the mysterious foe. Then, out of nowhere, The Shadow suddenly appeared, straight in front of them. He had posted himself at the very spot that he knew they would ignore. He was directly in front of the closed vault.

Crouched low, The Shadow had been beneath the level of the first flashlight beam pointed by Elk. During the wild excitement of the crooks, he had risen in the darkness, guns drawn, to await the return of light.

It was Elk's torch again, swinging back to the original spot, that revealed the cloaked form standing ready. Provided with a slouch hat to replace the one that he had left floating in the quarry, The Shadow was, in every detail, the formidable enemy whose prowess crooks feared.

Had those raiders turned to flee, The Shadow might have merely harried them with pursuing shots. Surrender would have saved them, for, once before, The Shadow had allowed them opportunity to give themselves over as prisoners. But the knowledge that they had others behind them, that they held The Shadow boxed—those factors emboldened the invaders.

Elk's flashlight blinked off. His snarl was the signal for gunfire. It wasn't needed, for mobsters were already tugging gun triggers. So, for that matter, was The Shadow. His staccato gun stabs were knife thrusts in the darkness, burying bullets, instead of blades, into living targets.

Crooks had been aiming everywhere except in the right direction. Their shots were coming as they swung

their gun hands. The Shadow's weapons, already covering the mob, had the jump the instant the muzzles of his big guns spoke. With each shot, a thug took a jolt more violent than the recoil of the .45 that supplied the bullet.

Sprawled figures were slipping on the tiled floor. Rolling men were letting guns clatter from their hands. Others, shooting as they sought cover, were wilder in their aim than they had been at the start. They were shooting for the vault door, as the clang of their bullets told; but The Shadow hadn't remained to intercept their fire. He was lunging forward, into the thick of them.

Revolvers delivered their chattering shots toward the ceiling, as the crooks who fired them sprawled. A pair who closed in at close range lost The Shadow when they tried to trace him from his gunfire.

He had wheeled away; while one crook was shooting into empty darkness, the other was slumping from a slugging stroke of an automatic. Then, slashing a reverse swing in the darkness, The Shadow felled the shooter who was withering thin air.

Guns were beginning an obstinate fire from the shattered doorway that led out to the alley. Elk Wenner and a few lucky mobbies had reached there, having been sensible enough to dive away from the danger zone near the bank vault. They had retreated at the very beginning of the struggle, believing that the rest could handle The Shadow, although at great cost.

It hadn't worked out that way. The Shadow's laugh accompanied new spurts of his gun, a token to the lurkers that he was on his way to settle them. Yelling at the others to keep up their fire, Elk sprang out through the alley. He was giving the pretext that other fighters were needed; that he was on the way to get them. In fact, he intended to do just that; but his major desire was to be clear before The Shadow reached the doorway.

ELK'S foresight was justified by the time he reached the mouth of the alley. Reeling figures had come from the doorway, to flatten on the cobblestones. Silence had replaced gunfire. The Shadow's superior fire had settled the few who covered Elk's departure.

Again The Shadow's sardonic laugh gave challenge from the darkness. This time, his taunt issued from the gloom of the alleyway itself. Elk heard it; looking along the main street, he saw flashing guns, heard the sound of firing! Mobbies were warding off arriving police. There was still time to handle The Shadow.

Beckoning men his way, Elk pointed them to their task. Emboldened by numbers, they began to creep into the alley.

"Sneak up on him," whispered Elk. "That's a blind alley. He can't get out of it, except by hopping back into the bank. We'll box him right, this time!"

Henchmen agreed, because none of them was among the first band that had boxed The Shadow. Moreover, Elk actually put conviction into his tone. He thought The Shadow lucky, and figured that his fortune would soon take an adverse turn.

Elk's chief idea was to put The Shadow on the run, thus lessening his marksmanship and making him liable to some misstep. Elk hadn't forgotten The Shadow's dive into the quarry. It had occurred while crooks were making a counterthrust.

Uppermost in Elk's mind, though, was the mad desire to nullify, in some degree, a hidden stroke that The Shadow had delivered. Mystified at first, Elk had guessed exactly how The Shadow had managed to get into the bank building. It went back to that brief skirmish at the Imperial Garage.

The Shadow hadn't fled from beside the garage. Instead, he had drawn Elk and the two truckers away from the entrance; then, he had ducked into the garage itself. Quick shots, the departure of a waiting car, had been the work of The Shadow's agents.

Elk had heard that The Shadow employed such stooges—as Elk classed them—but they hadn't been reported around Middledale. Hence, Elk had fallen for the bluff.

In the garage, The Shadow must have handled Kit Pollion, to take the safecracker's place in the box that awaited shipment to the bank vault. It was The Shadow, not Kit, who had found himself inside the vault at nine o'clock. There, The Shadow had demonstrated his amazing versatility, by completing the job that had been assigned to Kit.

With one exception. The Shadow had merely opened the vault, but had not brought out the swag. Thus Elk Wenner, apart from his desire to deal with The Shadow, was faced by a real dilemma. Monte Flade wanted a fake robbery; he also wanted the swag. It wouldn't be possible to manage both.

Elk solved that question rapidly. He figured that the cash would be money in the bag. As for a fake robbery, it wouldn't mean anything if the swag still remained in the vault. So there was only one thing to do about it: break in and blow the vault. It wouldn't be difficult to hold off the police meanwhile.

The difficulty was still The Shadow. Rendered impatient by increased sounds of gunfire along the main street, Elk decided to solve the chief problem in a hurry. His creeping crew were well into the alley, close enough to the doorway where The Shadow lurked. Beckoning to others, Elk brought them up as reserves. Then, from the corner of the bank building, right at the alley's mouth, Elk delivered the signal that called for action.

Two quick shots blasted from the muzzle of his upraised gun. Those bullets, fired in the air, were shots that Elk regarded as a forerunner of many that would take The Shadow as a target. Elk's idea, however, was not shared by the opponent whose fate lay at stake.

From the depths of the alley came the answer to crime's newest challenge. It was the battle laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XVIII. MOBSTERS TAKE FLIGHT

WITH one accord, crooks opened fire in the alley, starting their shots as they applied their flashlights. Some swung their guns and flashes toward the shattered doorway; others probed the alley's depths. They knew that The Shadow had not returned into the bank; they were sure that his laugh had come from somewhere outside.

Nevertheless, they were riddling mere space with their bullets! Their slugs thudded against the blank wall at the inner end of the alley, with nothing in between. The Shadow was gone again and they had no guess as to his destination, until his own fire answered theirs.

Big guns ripped from atop the alley wall. While crooks had been creeping in on him, The Shadow had employed his scaling tactics. The wall was of smooth concrete; thugs wouldn't have guessed how The Shadow had managed that twelve-foot climb, if their shots hadn't begun to dent a stack of ash cans against the wall's right corner.

They had learned The Shadow's game too late. He was pouring shots down upon them, and those who survived the hail were unable to find a target large enough to hit. Only the muzzles of The Shadow's guns seemed visible. In some amazing fashion, he seemed to be hanging from the wall with hands alone, his body

on the far side. Yet all the while, he was shooting with a deadly aim!

True, The Shadow's head weaved into sight at moments when he took new aim. A perfect shot could have found him, but none of the bullet-deluged crooks were able to deliver that sort of fire. Beginning with reloaded guns, The Shadow had routed the opposition before his automatics were empty.

From his own vantage spot, Elk Wenner tried long-range fire, without effect. When he finally had the exact aim that he wanted, The Shadow was out of sight, hands as well as head. Elk gave a quick glance along the main street. Battle there was getting hot and heavy, with mobbies taking the worst of it.

The police had closed in warily, taking no chances. Elk had drawn off so many reserves that his outer squads were weakened. They were waiting, too, for him to order a charge and back it up. Things were getting tough all around, and The Shadow was to blame.

That was why he had lingered in the alley: to give the law a chance to gain the upper hand. But The Shadow had dropped his task too soon, according to Elk's present calculation. Despite the loss of the crooks in the alley, Elk had enough men to stage the moves he needed.

Down the street somewhere was Squint Bovey, waiting to pull the decoy game. Squint would start as soon as Elk and others made a dash for their cars. Counting off the men near him, Elk told half to wait. Yelling for the others to follow, he made for the nearest car.

Things happened in a hurry, but all in accordance with schedule. Thugs sprang from lurking spots; forgetting their improvised barricade, they opened fire on the police. Farther down the street, Squint and a group of hoodlums bounded into sight. They were lugging brick-filled suitcases with them, shooting as they went.

Police took after them. Other crooks dropped to doorways to cover the fake getaway. The chase was started in the wrong direction. The way was clear for Elk and his own pals, but not as they had planned it. They didn't have the actual swag. From the way the ruse had worked, though, Elk was confident that they still had time to blow the vault and get the funds they wanted.

Since the robbery was to appear as real, they wouldn't limit themselves to the city's cash. They would take everything they found; as much as they could carry. Such was Elk's design when he brought his men about and headed back to the alley. There, they took waiting men along with them.

Mere contempt caused Elk to fling a flashlight beam toward the top of the wall—the spot that The Shadow had so lately dominated. Thinking that he had tricked the cloaked fighter completely, Elk wanted to show his crew the result.

But the flashlight didn't show the blankness that Elk expected. Again, it outlined a looming silhouette!

THE SHADOW was back again, to halt the delayed thrust. Elk yelled for bullets, and they came from The Shadow's guns. He was pumping his reloaded automatics before crooks could reply. They were breaking, those thugs, like the crew before them, and Elk knew exactly what the result would be if they lingered where they were.

Savagely, the mob leader veered a batch of men into the bank, doing it so speedily that the majority of his crew made the turn while The Shadow was dealing with a few. Swinging into the doorway himself, Elk took advantage of a flashlight's gleam before it slipped from the hand of a wounded thug.

Half around the shattered edge of the wall, Elk took point-blank aim at The Shadow. This was closer range

than he had before. He had his chance to make up for the shot he had been too late to fire.

Against the gray stone, Elk's face showed white, for he had lifted his mask. Most noticeable was the shine of his big teeth; they formed a conspicuous spot in the center of an upright oval.

A final shot boomed from above the wall. It came while Elk was tightening his trigger and it found the face above the gun. Despite his clutch, Elk lost his hold at the rough doorway. His sideways topple became a spin. The convulsive tightening of his right hand pulled the gun trigger; but the muzzle's angle had dropped. The bullet that ricocheted from the cobblestones would have needed a very long bounce to come anywhere near The Shadow.

Uniformed men, appearing at the mouth of the alleyway, heard the singular echoes of a strident laugh, that left them quite amazed. With the street cleared, the police had been attracted here by gunfire—a sequel that Elk had overlooked when his last crew of raiders were exchanging shots with The Shadow.

The officers didn't locate the fading laugh. When they threw their flashlights on the wall, it was entirely blank. They began to stare at sprawled figures on the cobbles, until one policeman spied a man who poked his head from the blasted doorway. Guessing that the remaining mobsters were in the bank, the police charged in to get them.

That fight was brief. With Elk dead, the remnants of his last raiding crew were totally disorganized. They didn't have time to think about blowing the vault. They scattered as the cops arrived, seeking shelter behind tellers' windows, in offices, and under tables.

The watchman, joining the police, promptly pulled a light switch. From then on, it was a roundup. The police settled the few crooks who offered opposition, and the rest surrendered.

MATTERS were not ended, however, on the other side of the wall that marked the limit of the blind alley. In a sense, action was just commencing on that side of the fence.

The riddle of The Shadow's exploits atop the wall was explained by a ladder that stood on the other side. It poked up from the corner of a parking lot, out from between two cars. As soon as The Shadow dropped from the ladder, waiting men took it away. They were his agents, posted on special duty.

Men were dashing in from the rear street. Squint Bovey and his suitcase-lugging pals had gotten here after a race around the block. The Shadow sent his agent to meet them, near a car toward which the crooks ran.

Singularly, there was no encounter when that meeting came. Acting like members of the mob, The Shadow's aids had no trouble staging their bluff in the gloom. An extra agent, in the rear seat of a touring car, hopped out as Squint and his pals entered the machine.

There was a driver crouched behind the wheel. Squint, gun in hand, voiced the order:

“Get going, lug—in a hurry!”

Fumbling, the driver obeyed. To the thugs in the rear seat, Squint added an assurance.

“There's a jellopy waiting down by the depot,” he said. “We'll switch to it when we get there.” Then, as the car started, Squint yelled to The Shadow's agents: “Block off those coppers who are coming in from the right! We don't want too many buggies tailing us!”

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The police were already having trouble with a batch of sniping thugs, when The Shadow's agents reached the rear street. Beginning to fire, the fighters from the parking lot aimed for the crooks, not for the officers. Routed promptly, the hoodlums were gathered in as prisoners, and the way was cleared for the very cars that Squint hadn't wanted on his trail.

They roared after the touring car, a collection of commandeered automobiles, with officers shooting from the running boards. But the fastest vehicle in the chase, one more rapid than a patrol car, was a coupe that wheeled out of the parking lot.

Its driver was a being in black, who handled the car with one hand, while he pumped a gun with the other. The Shadow was forcing Squint's touring car to change its course. Skidding a corner, the touring car came under a street lamp. The glow showed its driver struggling with the wheel, while Squint leaned over to help him.

Whirling around the same corner, The Shadow gained in the chase. He was alongside, on the right, swinging in from an unexpected angle. The crook-manned car had no other course than a quick left turn that took it down the middle of the main street.

There, the roaring chase continued for more than a block. Frantic mobbies in the rear seat were shooting at the coupe, but it was in back of them, angling first from the left, then from the right, sometimes reversing the procedure, to madden them.

At last, just as the touring car reached a corner, the coupe wheeled away from the main street. From his open window The Shadow jabbed low shots that ripped a tire and punctured the gasoline tank.

The touring car took a long jounce that carried it upon the sidewalk in front of the Middledale Hotel. Guns were barking from cars approaching in both directions. The shots were aimed for Squint and three mobbies from the rear seat, as they made a mad dash into the hotel.

People scattered from their path. The fugitives did not pause to fire. They had one objective: the side door of the lobby. It led to the street where taxis waited, and Squint knew that he and his fellow fugitives could commandeer a cab. What Squint had either forgotten, or failed to notice, was the fact that The Shadow had halted his coupe immediately upon reaching that very side street.

From the blackness of the side door came the cloaked challenger himself. His fierce laugh halted the four crooks; sight of his two guns thrusting forward caused them to drop back behind tubbed plants and lounges before they opened fire.

There was a roar of guns. Squint, first of the crooks to fire, sprawled upon the floor. The Shadow, whose gun had beaten Squint to the shot, was also dropping, but not from a bullet. He was gaining the level of the steps that he had used to come up from the side door.

The Shadow was clipping the shooting mobsters as their shots whistled above his head. His guns went silent, when arriving officers piled upon the thuggish marksmen and slugged them to submission. Instead of gunfire came the tone of a departing laugh.

Crooked hoards were settled. Lieutenants like Elk Wenner and Squint Bovey had taken theirs, as well. But The Shadow's work was not yet finished; nor was the law's task done.

Half to the law, half to The Shadow, lay the duty of unmasking the plotters who ruled crime in Middledale.

CHAPTER XIX. THE DOUBLE CROSS

THOUGH the police had stopped persons from entering the Middledale Hotel, the lobby was immediately thronged by a crowd from the banquet hall. The mayor's banquet had been interrupted by reports of battle in the streets; but the diners had managed to keep calm until the shooting broke loose in the lobby.

That brought them all, including Mayor Kesselbrock. Hearing the news of the attempted bank robbery, his honor was very much alarmed, until he learned that the vault had not been reached. That fact brought immediate relief to Henry Denwood, who was standing with the mayor.

Knowing that Albot had told the Denwoods about the city's funds, the mayor mumbled quick congratulations to the banker. In his turn, Henry Denwood sagely suggested that they visit the bank at once and make sure that the money was untouched. Both started for the door to the side street.

The mayor explained his mission to two policemen who had arrived there after The Shadow's departure. The officers were about to pass Kesselbrock through, with Henry Denwood, when a police captain overtook the mayor.

Something important had occurred out front, and the mayor's presence was wanted there at once. Grumbling about the delay, Kesselbrock went to see about it, and Henry Denwood followed.

When they reached the front street, they heard a loud boo from an assembled crowd. The mayor showed annoyed surprise, thinking the jeers were meant for him. He was drawing himself up to start an indignant speech, when he saw that the disapproval was directed toward someone in the wrecked touring car that had served the last crooks in their flight.

Approaching, the mayor was riveted by sight of Martin Albot. Two officers were helping the portly reformer from behind the wheel. Groggily, Albot was trying to mouth excuses, but there wasn't a doubt in anyone's mind that he had been driving the car.

Albot saw the mayor and managed to speak coherently.

"I've been framed!" he sputtered. "Framed, I tell you! They made me drive that car!"

Mayor Kesselbrock believed him, and tried to wave the crowd to silence. The boos continued, louder. Albot's face became an angry purple. He turned to Henry Denwood and repeated:

"They made me drive that car—"

Albot halted. Gray eyes were fixed on him, in a steady stare. There was honesty in those eyes; they showed the sincerity that was real with Henry Denwood. Mildness, however, had faded from that gaze. Henry Denwood was giving Martin Albot a thorough scrutiny that probed the man's inner nature.

"They made you drive the car," repeated Henry Denwood. "Did they make you wear this?"

His hand reached to Albot's neck, plucked a handkerchief that surrounded the man's collar. As Denwood drew the cloth tight, two eye-slits showed in it. Albot stared down and saw the incriminating evidence.

"I've been double-crossed!"

"That is better," assured Henry Denwood. "Only crooks are double-crossers. You have branded yourself,

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Albot! Who was the double-crosser? Did you try to frame him first?"

ALBOT sagged backward under those withering words. His hip thumped the door of the car; noting the thud, Albot let his hand creep downward. He didn't know that his lips were giving away his game. The leer that Albot showed was one that he had always managed to suppress in public.

His sluggishness was gone when Albot whipped a revolver from his pocket and tried to point it at Henry Denwood. Maddened by his plight, Albot was ready to deal murder and take the consequences. But his move went no farther than halfway. The police captain grabbed him; two detectives added their weight and took the gun before he could pull the trigger.

"Empty," announced the captain, cracking the revolver open. "You must have done a lot of shooting, Albot!"

That was the final touch. Albot's face went livid. His game was up; he stood revealed as the man who had managed crime in Middledale, while he pretended to be a champion of reform. But he still failed to see the hand of The Shadow as the power that had brought his fall.

With the mistrust of one crook for another, Albot held to his theory of a double cross. Hoping partly to turn the crowd's anger toward someone else; thinking also that he could at least gain vengeance on the person that he thought had tricked him, Albot blurted facts.

"It was Monte Flade!" he shouted. "He tried to wreck the bus! He started the fire at the Central House! He sent that mob to rob the Middledale Trust!"

Albot's denunciation was loud. The crowd heard it and surged. But the police no longer had to worry about protecting Martin Albot. Handcuffs clamped to his wrists, the real big-shot was safe in the custody of two detectives. The crowd was surging in the other direction. A thousand strong, the citizens of Middledale were heading for the Orange Grove.

Helpless against that mass demonstration, the police could only hope to reach Monte Flade before the crowd reached his night club. The Orange Grove was two blocks distant, which allowed very little time. A patrol car tried to cut its way through the crowd, but it was literally shouldered to the curb. A telephone message was the only hope.

The police captain dashed into the hotel. Henry Denwood spoke to the two detectives, and they nodded their appreciation. He was suggesting that they get Albot to a jail cell before the crowd returned. Albot, in his turn, was begging them to take him out of town, and they were giving it consideration.

Probably the best place for Albot would be the death block in Lancaster Prison. Since prisoners never escaped from there, it would probably be immune from an attacking crowd.

The citizens of Middledale had actually gone berserk, and they were lacking good judgment as they approached the Orange Grove. Their yells were loud enough to drown the blatant music of the swing band. So loud, in fact, that Monte Flade could scarcely hear what the police captain was telling him over the telephone.

Monte caught the drift at last. He purred his thanks, hung up the receiver. The roar of the crowd didn't bother him; in fact, the situation made him smile. Not many crooks could brag that the police department had tipped them off and given them a chance to lam from town. That was actually what the captain's call amounted to, in Monte's case.

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If he slipped the vengeful crowd, he would elude the police, too. Coolly, Monte took his hat and topcoat, picked a large empty suitcase from the closet, and opened a door that disclosed an inside stairway to the courtyard in back of the Orange Grove.

The crowd came in by the front. Waiters tried to stop the rush, but it would have been easier to halt a landslide. The waiters were bowled back, the orchestra deserted its platform and fled, followed by a wild scramble of jitterbugs from the dance floor.

Tables were thrown right and left, on the chance that Monte was hiding under them. While one group was battering its way into Monte's office, another invaded dressing rooms and met with irate resistance on the part of chorus girls, who were putting on their costumes for the floor show. Finally routed, the girls fled in confusion and negligee.

Not finding Monte in any of the costume trunks, the invading citizens went back and broke up the furniture, including the bar and the musical instruments.

Satisfied that they had done their utmost to find Monte Flade, the wreckers scattered about town, some continuing the futile search, others shouting threats toward Martin Albot, the rest deciding they had done enough for the evening.

MEANWHILE, Monte was safely away in the one place where no one thought of looking: the hotel room that formed his secret base. He had walked in boldly by a route that the police had finally left open: the side door of the hotel.

There was a special reason why Monte had chosen to go through the lobby. He had friends there—the crooked bellboys—who had been planted for emergency.

They were the only persons who saw Monte Flade go through—with one exception. The man in question was Henry Denwood. He noticed the floor at which Monte's elevator stopped.

When a knock sounded at Monte's door, the crook thought one of his pals had arrived. Turning from the window where he was watching the scattering crowd, Monte admitted the arrival. He was a bit startled at sight of Middledale's leading citizen, but covered his momentary alarm with a smile.

Inviting Denwood to be seated, Monte asked: “How about a drink?”

Henry Denwood declined. Monte called room service and ordered a drink for himself. Turning from the telephone, he asked:

“Well, who sent you here—old Goat-face?”

“I assume that you mean Mayor Kesselbrock,” returned Henry Denwood. “No. He does not know that you are here. I saw you enter the hotel, and I came to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“I want your confession, in return for my consideration in not informing people where you are. I am willing to take your word that you will surrender yourself to the police in the morning, if I allow you to stay here until things are quiet.”

“That's fair enough,” conceded Monte, smoothly. “All right, I'll spill the whole story.”

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Taking articles from bureau drawers while he talked, Monte began to toss them into the suitcase he had brought from the night club. There wasn't a flaw in his story. It tallied with everything that had occurred in Middledale.

Martin Albot was the criminal big-shot. Imbued with a desire to rule Middledale, stirred by envy of the Denwood family, Albot had planned a cunning campaign to reach his objective. Posing as a champion of reform, he had joined the Denwood camp to cover his real activities.

He had invited Monte to Middledale to become a partner in the enterprise. Through proxies, arranged by Monte, Albot had bought up nearly all the property in the district known as "The Neck." It was Albot, rather than the small-fry politicians, who would profit, to the tune of millions, if the boulevard route could be diverted.

Monte supplied the proof of that statement by flourishing some title deeds which he had taken in preference to cash, in return for services rendered. He added, very frankly, that he had been promised gambling concessions, with Middledale a wide-open town, after Albot became the city's political boss.

"The man we had to beat," Monte told Henry Denwood, coolly, "was you! That son of yours didn't count much. We just figured him as your echo. Albot had an interest in the transportation company, but that wasn't any reason for him to call off the bus smash. On the contrary, he thought it a smart stunt—to take a crack at himself, along with you. He had a lot more at stake than a bus franchise.

"When that job fluked, Albot passed the word to set fire to the Central House, so I had the boys arrange it. That didn't work out as strong as we wanted it, so we went after the bank tonight. It looks like we missed again— so what?

"I've made plenty out of this town"—Monte chuckled, as he tossed a bundle of bills into his suitcase—"so I'm satisfied! Those wild hyenas that wrecked the Orange Grove weren't hurting me. Albot really owned the joint."

THERE was a knock at the door. Monte suggested that Denwood answer it, so that the bellboy wouldn't know that the gambler was in the room. In keeping with his promise to protect Monte from mob violence, Denwood obliged.

Two bellboys, not one, stood outside the door. Monte gave a triumphant snarl. With a quick shove, he propelled Denwood into their arms. Grabbing his suitcase with one hand, he drew a .38 with the other. Retreating toward the fire-tower exit, he stopped halfway and aimed the revolver.

"I'm going to give it!" informed Monte. "Hold Denwood, while I let him have it. Cover yourselves, when you tell your story to the coppers. There'll be a grand apiece for each of you, when we meet up again."

Against the blackness of the fire tower, Monte Flade did not realize that the background itself was creeping in on him. Nor did he sense that the gloom had come to life, until a gloved hand clamped his fist, thrusting a long finger beneath the guard of his gun trigger to prevent the coming shot.

Another hand was busy bending Monte's free arm behind him. In the murderer's very ear whispered a sibilant tone that froze him. It was a laugh, that whispery tone:

The sinister laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XX. ABOLISHED CRIME

FLINGING himself about, Monte Flade made a furious effort to wrest from The Shadow's clutch. Gambler that he was, Monte should have known that he hadn't a chance in a thousand of getting free; but despite the odds against him, the crook attempted it and came clear.

For some reason, The Shadow's grip loosened, but not until Monte's gun had hit the floor. In getting away, Monte didn't manage it as he wanted. Though letting the mobster go, The Shadow supplied a fling of his arms that sent Monte hard against the wall a dozen feet away.

Gunshots told why The Shadow had shifted tactics. The thuggish bellhops, encouraged by Monte's attempted flight, had come from their coma. For a few seconds, they had left Henry Denwood standing free, hoping that they could deny any part in crime. Sight of The Shadow looming in from nowhere was enough to stall an average pair of cutthroats, but they were quick to attempt ratty work when they thought they had a chance again.

Monte had given them that chance. Whipping out blackjacks, the type of weapons their tight-fitting uniforms could best conceal, the two tried to slug their gray-haired prisoner. Wisely enough, Denwood had started for the elevators; the thugs required half a dozen steps to overtake him. That interim was sufficient for The Shadow to insert needed rescue.

An automatic talked as it whipped from beneath his cloak. One uniformed crook took a bullet in the shoulder; the other sprang past Denwood, to avoid The Shadow's aim.

It was a singular scene—The Shadow waiting, sizing up his prey. His whispered tone was carrying along the hall, calmly telling Denwood what to do, and the gray-haired man was responding with the same calm. He was to twist about, the moment that the thug closed in on him, to give The Shadow an easy shot at the fellow's bright uniform.

The crook heard the details. He knew he would be a simple target for The Shadow. That was why he crouched close to the elevator doors, dodging nimbly, to stay in line with Denwood. He didn't see The Shadow's advance along the hall. View of that steady glide was blocked by Denwood's intervening form.

Only Monte Flade saw it. With The Shadow past him, the gambler began a crawl for his dropped revolver. His hand had the weapon, just as The Shadow poked his own gun past Denwood and covered the bellhop.

A gunshot was scheduled to break the hush that lay over that scene. Just who would fire it, seemed a question. The Shadow's success, Monte's escape, Denwood's life, as well as the fate of a cowering hoodlum, were the factors in the balance.

Tonight, however, was time of many surprises. Another came.

Clanging loudly, the door of an elevator slapped open. Out sprang a trio of policemen. They flattened the bellhop, as he wheeled with his blackjack. Bowling Henry Denwood to safety, The Shadow whirled to settle Monte Flade. A big gun seemed to reach out ahead of a gloved fist, to gush sudden flame.

Monte took two jolts, not one, while his own gun was still coming up. The roar of The Shadow's fire had a prolonged effect, for it was accompanied by the burst of another gun, from the fire tower. All during Monte's creep, the crook had been covered by a steady marksman previously posted by The Shadow!

Monte wasn't through yet, not even with two slugs in him. He still thought he could clear a path, as he reeled

toward the elevators. The Shadow did not have to shoot to stop him. The three policemen supplied a volley at close range.

They did not count Monte as a crippled foe; they classed him as a maddened murderer. Point-blank, the crook was riddled with bullets that crumpled him at the feet of the firing squad.

FROM the fire tower came a low, strange laugh. It symbolized that crime was through; but to Henry Denwood, it carried an added significance. He knew that somehow The Shadow must have summoned the police to this floor; that they would probably find evidence here.

Descending the fire tower, The Shadow was getting a report from his companion, an agent named Burbank. The Shadow added congratulations, as Burbank left him to join other agents, waiting in their car. Regularly, Burbank played a passive part in The Shadow's campaigns. He was the contact man who kept in communication with the active agents.

Tonight, Burbank had remained patiently in a room over Monte's lair, until The Shadow joined him. Starting down to rescue Henry Denwood, The Shadow assigned Burbank an unusual duty, which the contact man bandied in his customary methodical style. It was Burbank who had supplied that pinch shot from the fire tower, timed exactly to The Shadow's own thrust at Monte.

It was Burbank who had called the police. In giving the tip-off, he had told them to search a corner of Monte's room. There, they found a hidden microphone, a wire leading up behind a curtain and through a window to the room above. In that room, they discovered a box of phonograph records.

Not only had The Shadow listened in on Monte's conferences; he had recorded them! The police, in their overzeal to finish Monte, had not disposed of a material witness. Monte Flade, dead, would still speak—better, perhaps, than if alive!

THIRTY minutes later, Ruth Geldon was listening to a broadcast from Station MBX, in which a local news commentator was summing up the story of crime's defeat. Ruth looked toward a bound prisoner in the corner. The understanding eyes that met hers belonged to Jack Denwood.

“We had to bring you here,” said Ruth, as she cut Jack's bonds. “Monte had arranged for you to be the driver of the wrecked car. We put Albot in it, instead.”

“The chaps that helped you,” asked Jack, as the gag came from his mouth, “they were working for The Shadow?”

Ruth nodded.

“I heard from The Shadow,” she stated, “soon after the dinner party at your home. He suspected that Martin Albot was a crook.”

“Because of the bus accident?”

“Yes. But that was not sufficient proof. The Shadow said that Albot would send along other information, if he was sure that someone could be blamed for it. I was the person most likely to be picked.”

Jack saw the link to Monte Flade. While Ruth was at the day bed, untying Lorna Thexter, he asked:

“Monte paid you for information?”

“No,” replied Ruth. “He merely pretended to be my friend. He loaned me money, so Lorna couldn't claim that I was obligated to you. The fact that I was telling Monte nothing proved that Albot was the only person who could be telling him.

“Then you were being framed?”

“Exactly!” smiled Ruth. “And if everything had gone as crooks wanted it, I would have been blamed for crime along with you. But things couldn't go wrong— not with The Shadow.”

Lorna's bonds were loose. Ruth pinched the adhesive tape and whipped it so quickly from Lorna's lips, that the blonde scarcely felt it go. Lorna's expression was a changed one, quite different from any that Ruth had ever seen before.

“I guess I rate pretty low,” declared Lorna. “You're a swell scout, Ruth, and you did a good job! I was fool enough to be helping Albot without knowing it. Just because of my own meanness, I nearly queered everything.”

“Things broke our way,” returned Ruth, with a smile that included Lorna. “When you called me Betty Jevers, the crooks were sure I belonged with them; so they helped me out.”

“And you helped me out”—Lorna gave a shudder—“by telling them to leave me here. I didn't deserve so much consideration!”

“You had a tough time of it,” assured Ruth. “I had to leave you tied up though, until after everything was settled.”

The voice of Monte Flade was coming over the air, repeating the recorded confession that the crook had given to Henry Denwood. As it finished, the announcer stated that he had just received a call from the jail. Martin Albot, hearing the broadcast in his cell, was ready to prepare his own confession. It would be read to the radio audience later.

“If you will lend me one of your very nice dresses,” Lorna said to Ruth in a humble tone, “I'll take myself home. I hope that you and Jack will forget the mean things that I did. I have already forgotten that you were—”

Lorna halted. Instead of adding a name, she simply corrected:

“— that you were ever anyone else.”

“That's swell of you, Lorna!” said Ruth. “But the fact is, I never was Betty Jevers, and I didn't escape from prison!”

JACK'S arm was around Ruth's shoulders before she made the statement. Sure that her past made no difference to him, she was willing to reveal a secret that she had kept ever since their first meeting. Amazement left Jack's face, as Ruth explained.

She owned the cabin near his lodge. The “old maid” that Jack had seen there was Ruth's aunt, who had lived in the cabin while Ruth was in Europe. The girl had driven down to the cabin the day Jack met her. There, she ran into an adventure Jack hadn't heard about.

“Betty Jevers was around there,” explained Ruth. “She found a gun that I carry when I drive long distances

alone. She stopped me when I was coming from the cabin and told me to hand over my money, my jewels, and my clothes. So I did.”

“Then she made you wear her prison uniform?”

“Not exactly. As soon as I had disrobed, she locked me in a closet. I didn't know that she had unlocked the door, until I heard her drive away. I came out, knowing she had gone, and found her prison clothes waiting for me. It was a choice of wearing them, or nothing at all. So I put them on and started out to look for something better. Remembering your lodge, I went there.”

Jack remembered the next scene very well. He could still picture Ruth's hair against the sunlight, which had given it a slightly auburn tinge, not ordinarily noticeable. He could understand his mistake; but there was something that puzzled him.

“Why didn't you tell me who you were?” he asked. “Of course, you said your real name was Ruth Geldon, but you let me think that you were Betty Jevers.”

“Why not?” laughed Ruth. “You wanted to help me, so I let you. It was fun, getting a job in Middledale; so much nicer than going to Lancaster Prison, to prove I hadn't escaped from there. When I found out that you really needed me here, I stayed.”

There were other things to mention. Ruth's roadster was one. It was the car that Betty had taken; it had been recovered and returned to Ruth's home town. She had written her parents, meanwhile, telling them that she had taken a job in Middledale. They had sent the car there, along with money. Ruth's family, it developed, was quite wealthy.

Lorna had left, wearing the borrowed dress, when Ruth told Jack of certain meetings with The Shadow. One had been on the night when Jack called at seven. What he had taken for a telephone conversation, had been an actual chat. The Shadow had made an exit along the cornice outside the apartment window before Jack entered.

“It really seems,” said Ruth, very solemnly, “that The Shadow can be anywhere; at times, almost everywhere!”

An interruption sounded from the radio. The announcer stated that the broadcast would be resumed from the banquet room of the Middledale Hotel. Evidently, the mayor's banquet was to begin again, for word had come that the program was to be transferred.

Silence followed, so solid that Ruth began to wonder. Jack, too, was puzzled about the banquet. He was sure, from a previous announcement, that it had been called off for the evening.

“Evidently there's been a mistake,” said Jack. “There can't be any one in the banquet room—”

A voice from the air proved that Jack was wrong. It uttered no words, that voice. It began as a sibilant whisper, crept upward to a shivery pitch, then rose strident, with a burst of triumphant mockery. Reaching a crescendo, the mirth faded into a trail of jubilation that seemed to draw long, lingering echoes from the ether.

Nestled in Jack's arms, Ruth looked into his eyes. He saw her smile; understanding, he returned it. Though The Shadow's tone told all the world that crime had been conquered, two listeners felt that the mirth was meant for them.

A farewell from The Shadow!

THE END