

THE CRIME ORACLE

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. CRIME AFTER DARK

The northbound elevated train rattled to a screechy stop. The gate of the last car swung open. A sallow, squint-eyed passenger stepped to the rough planking of the old station platform. Starting toward the exit, he paused to light a cigarette, while the train jolted away on its journey.

The squint-eyed man turned about. His gaze steadied after he had blinked. His lips formed a satisfied smile, as he looked toward the south end of the deserted platform. It was early evening; the platform was dimly lighted, for it was above the level of the avenue lights. The squint-eyed man was barely able to discern a huddled figure by the rail of the platform's lower end.

The squint-eyed man approached. As he neared the huddled figure, he noted that the fellow was half crouched across the rail, looking down toward the street.

Calmly, he clapped a hand upon the hunched shoulders. The huddled man snapped about with a snarl.

The mellow glow of a platform light revealed a pasty, tight-lipped face. Cunning eyes gleamed; then dried lips twisted in a grin. The huddled man had recognized the arrival. He whispered a hoarse greeting:

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"H'lo, Squint!"

"Hello, Chip!" The squint-eyed man puffed at his cigarette. Then: "You've spotted Koker's crew?"

"Yeah." "Chip" retained his grin. "Lamp 'em yourself, Squint. They're parked in a sedan down in front of that eatin' joint –"

"Casey's?"

"Yeah. That's what the sign says."

"All right, then. Let's hop along, before another train shows up. Koker and his outfit can stay where they are."

"Squint" led the way, with Chip following like an obedient dog. They walked to the exit and descended the steps. This course brought them to the side street, a dozen yards from the corner. But instead of turning back toward the avenue, Squint moved along the side street. Chip followed, puzzled. Squint explained.

"Koker don't know the lay," informed Squint. "He's not in on it at all. I just told him to be on the avenue, in case I wanted him."

"Was that on the dope sheet, Squint?"

"No. Just an idea of my own."

"But if The Head didn't tell you –"

"I'm following the orders that came from The Head. Listen again, Chip; Koker isn't wise to the racket. So what does it matter, him being here?"

They had reached the depressed entrance to a side-street tea room. Shuttered windows told that the place was no longer in business. A weather-beaten sign proclaimed the name: "THE YELLOW PARROT," with a picture of the bird in question. Squint drew Chip down to the closed doorway. He began to work at the lock with a skeleton key.

OF the many characters in Manhattan's underworld, Squint Proddock and Chip Mulley were unique. Each was a specialist in his own direction; each was wise enough to admit his own limitations.

Squint Proddock was an ex-racketeer who had feigned retirement in order to turn to other crime. His shifty, blinking eyes had given him his nickname; they also rendered him easy to identify, which was the chief reason for Squint's carefulness when he crossed the path of the law.

Chip Mulley also carried a descriptive title. Originally, his pals had dubbed him "Chipmunk," a title that befitted his dryish, small-lipped face. His nickname had been shortened to Chip; and he was known as a competent subordinate who served various big-shots. Chip Mulley was an able hand at gaining needed information. He was a competent go-between, who kept what he knew to himself. It was not surprising that Squint had found Chip useful.

The door of the Yellow Parrot had opened under Squint's manipulation with the skeleton key. The two men edged into the tea room and closed the door behind them. Squint clicked a flashlight and passed it to Chip to hold. Under the glare, Squint produced an envelope. From it, he took a typewritten sheet and studied a list that looked like a schedule.

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"Enter Yellow Parrot," read Squint. "'Time: 7:15.' Right to the dot, Chip!"

Squint had brought a watch into the light. Chip whispered a comment, wisely:

"That's the ticket, Squint! The Head knows his stuff. This ain't the first dope sheet I've lamped. I'm tellin' you, it's a set-up when you follow one of them time-tables!"

"Come along, then." Holding the paper in his left hand, Squint took the flashlight with his right. "The next stop is the second closet on the left, in the back hallway."

They reached their objective. Squint focused the light upon the door and ordered Chip to open it. The squirrel-faced hoodlum obeyed. Squint raised the schedule into the light, then growled:

"Unscrew the coat hooks on that cross-board. Then yank the board away. Make it snappy!"

Chip complied. After he had removed the hooks, the strip of wood came away. Chip issued an exclamation when he saw the top edge of a low door. The other edges were obscured by a baseboard and upright corner strips.

"Shove it upward."

Again Chip followed Squint's order. The barrier slid easily. Squint's flashlight showed a narrow, darkened passage. Squint added an order:

"Move ahead. We're going through."

The passage ran a dozen feet; then turned to the right. The two crooks followed it until they reached a stairway. There, they ascended. They came to another barrier, which was held in place by screws. Squint brought out a screw driver and handed it to Chip.

"Get busy," he ordered. "This is to be off by 7:25. You've got six minutes, Chip."

Four minutes were all that Chip required. Squint helped his aid to shift the blockade aside. They advanced into a musty, windowless storeroom. Squint's flashlight showed heavy crates and packing cases, with cobwebs everywhere. There was a door beyond.

"It won't be locked," informed Squint. He blinked the flashlight for a final consultation of the dope sheet. "We'll listen there, until we hear the buzzer. That comes next. I'll do the rest – but stick with me, in case of trouble."

They moved to the door and waited there in darkness. Squint's hand was on the knob. They were ahead of schedule; so the wait became prolonged. Then came the sound that the pair expected: a sharp, repeated buzz from the other side of the storeroom door.

Squint waited five full seconds; then turned the knob and pressed the door inward.

Chip saw a small, lighted office; at the right, a desk placed in front of a window that opened into an air shaft. There was a door at the left of the room; straight across, a paneled wall that had a ledge and window like a bank teller's wicket. There were no bars, however; the wicket was a solid wooden panel, which prevented view beyond.

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There was a man at the desk, a stoop-shouldered, gray-haired fellow who had been going over an account book. He was wearing a green eye shade, with rimless spectacles beneath. He had heard the summons of the buzzer. Looking past Squint's shoulder, Chip saw the gray-haired man reach out and press a switch that was attached to the desk.

That done, the gray-haired man arose. He turned toward the wicket. Hence his direction was away from the two crooks who were watching him. It was obvious that the gray-haired man had admitted a visitor from a front door on the avenue. He was going to open the wicket and meet the arrival. But he never accomplished that mission.

The gray-haired man had stopped long enough to stoop and turn the combination of a small safe directly beneath the wicket ledge. Chip had not noticed the safe until that moment, for it was obscured in the blackness beneath the ledge. As the door of the safe swung open, Squint stalked forward. Chip saw a blackjack wriggling in the hands of his companion.

The gray-haired man heard Squint's approach. He started upward, too late. Squint snapped his wrist in artful fashion. The blackjack thudded the gray-haired man behind the ear. Chip, bounding forward, saw the victim succumb. Squint snarled a warning for quiet.

"The white box," he whispered. "A tin one – in the safe! Snag it, Chip! No noise!"

Chip found the box. He turned around to see Squint bending over the motionless body of the gray-haired man. Withered fingers of the victim's left hand were clutching a small key that the man had drawn from his pocket. Squint tugged the key from the victim's clutch. It came easily, for the hand had relaxed.

"Out again," whispered Squint, nodding as he saw the white box that Chip exhibited. "Speedy – but no noise!"

THEY sneaked to the door of the storeroom. As they reached it, they heard a pounding at the wicket. Some visitor had entered from the front. He was wondering why the wicket was not open.

Squint closed the door from the storeroom side. He polished the knob with a handkerchief. He and Chip reached the stairway. Together, they shoved the barrier in place. Chip made quick work of replacing the screws. They hurried down the stairs to the Yellow Parrot.

There, while Squint whispered hoarsely for speed, Chip put back the strip of wood and screwed in the coat hooks. They made for the outer door.

"Wait!" Squint's whisper stopped Chip. The flashlight glimmered downward. Again, Squint nudged it into Chip's hand; then used the key to open the white tin box.

A gasp from Chip; a pleased chuckle from Squint. The interior of the tin box was filled with packets of crisp bank notes.

"Fifty grand!" chortled Squint. "Easy pickings, eh, Chip? Come along. Let's scam. But take it easy when we get outside."

They made their exit to the street. Squint polished the doorknobs on both sides; but did not bother to lock the barrier. Tucking the tin box under his coat, he urged Chip toward the nearest street lamp.

"We won't need Koker," whispered Squint. "The Head was right, Chip. It worked just like he expected it."

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"What're you stoppin' here for, Squint?"

Chip's rejoinder was an uneasy one. They were just within the range of the street lamp.

"Instructions," responded Squint. "The last on the list. A signal. It means all jake."

He made a sidewise gesture with his left hand. Then, nudging Chip, Squint started eastward at a swift walk. Chip kept close beside him. They neared the next corner. Squint chuckled.

"A few blocks up," he said to Chip. "We'll take the crosstown subway. This was a pipe, Chip!"

CHIP nodded, as he looked back over his left shoulder. He saw a car which had been parked in darkness. It was moving forward slowly, going back along the route which they had come, for this was a westward street.

"The Head! He had that bus posted there!"

Such was Chip's whispered comment. He had guessed the reason for Squint's signal. Koker's crew, on the avenue, had been Squint's own idea. But a superman of crime, the hidden master of this night's doing, had also taken due precaution. Some watcher from the dark had spotted Squint's tip.

Crime after dark had been accomplished with ease and precision. The perpetrators were departing with their swag – fifty thousand dollars. All through the prearranged plan of an evil chief whom Chip Mulley had dubbed "The Head."

Even Squint Proddock, though he termed himself a big-shot, had been no more than an instrument in the machinations of a master schemer!

CHAPTER II. TRAPS REVERSED

JUST after Squint and Chip had made their departure by the side street, a stir took place upon the front avenue near Casey's beanery. It began when an excited man came out from a doorway near the corner. Tall, heavy of build, this man was attired in gray hat and overcoat. He was carrying a suitcase – an empty one, from the ease with which he handled it.

The man in gray spied a patrolman near the corner. He hurried up and spoke to the officer.

"Something – something has happened!" stammered the man. "I'm afraid that there has been foul play!"

"Whereabouts?" demanded the patrolman.

"In there." The man pointed to the doorway from which he had come. "That's where the trouble may be."

The patrolman eyed the sign above the door. It bore the name:

J. G. SAUTELLE

WHOLESALE CLOTHING AGENCY

"You're Mr. Sautelle?"

The gray-clad man shook his head in response to the officer's query.

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"No," he stated. "My name is Jennings, Luber Jennings, from Cleveland. Mr. Sautelle was to be in his office. When I rang, he pressed the switch to let me enter. But when I reached the office, I couldn't rouse him."

"We'll take a look."

They went to the door. It was latched. Jennings explained, nervously: "It swung shut when I came out. I tried to stop it but I was too late."

The patrolman looked dubious. But as he eyed Jennings more closely, he saw that the man's attire and bearing marked him as respectable. The panels of the door were thin. The officer considered smashing one to reach the knob from the inside. Jennings urged him to follow such a course.

FROM down the street, men were watching. They were stationed in a parked sedan; the car that Chip had spotted from the "L" platform. Beside the driver was a pasty-faced man who showed an ugly scowl. He was Koker Hosch.

"Lamp the harness bull, Koker –"

"I'm watching him," growled Koker, interrupting the man at the wheel. "But it ain't the copper that counts most. It's that mug in the gray coat. He came out of that clothing joint."

Two men in back leaned forward to hear their chief's comments.

"I'm covering for a pal tonight," commented Koker. He referred to Squint Proddock, although he did not mention the racketeer by name. "He's staging something hereabouts and I've got a hunch that it was in that joint."

"Maybe the bird in the gray coat butted in –"

"That's just what it looks like. Get that typewriter ready."

"You're going to rub him out?"

"Yeah!" Koker's tone was savage. "Him and the harness bull, too! He may have spilled the works to that dumb copper. Come on – shove ahead, Pete!"

The chauffeur started the sedan forward. From the back seat, the barrel of a machine gun nudged into the light. Murder was in the making. Neither Jennings nor the patrolman saw the death car that was looming toward them.

Across the avenue, a taxicab was rolling southward. Its driver had spied the sedan. So had a passenger in the cab. A hissed whisper reached the driver's ears. It was a command. The taxi slowed, almost to a stop.

A door opened. A blackish shape sprang from the rear of the cab and landed beside an "L" pillar. The door slammed shut. The taxi sped forward as if impelled by the jar. The driver was following instructions to get clear of the neighborhood.

The black being from the cab had timed his drop to a break in traffic. He sprang across the car tracks that ran beneath the elevated pillars. He reached the opposite posts. His figure seemed to vanish as it stopped there. Only a keen observer could have caught a passing glimpse of that cloaked shape.

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The sedan was abreast the pillar where the cloaked form had halted. Twenty feet more would bring it to the doorway where the patrolman had begun to bang at the panel, while Jennings stood beside him. Blue uniform and gray coat – both were conspicuous in the glow of street lamps.

"Give it!"

The growl came from Koker. In the back seat, the man on the right was guiding the machine gun, while the one on the left was pressing a ready finger to the trigger. Another instant would mean double death.

Something thudded the running board, on the left of the sedan. A blackened figure had swooped from the darkness beneath the elevated. Landing upon the moving car, the rescuer was just in time. A black-gloved hand sledged through the opened window. The muzzle of a .45 automatic drove down upon the machine gunner's head.

Koker Hosch heard the crack. With a snarl, he twisted about. A revolver glittered in his fist. His lips mouthed an oath; then spat a startled cry of recognition:

"The Shadow!"

LIGHTS from across the street formed a background against which Koker saw his silhouetted foe. A cloaked shape of blackness, with eyes that burned from beneath the brim of a slouch hat. The Shadow – master fighter whom all gangdom feared! He was the unexpected adversary who had knocked off Koker's machine gunner.

Viciously, Koker fired. Though the range was but a few feet, his shot went wide – for the simple reason Koker had aimed for the top half of the window, just behind the driver's head. That was where he had seen The Shadow's eyes. But The Shadow had rolled backward, outward. Only his left hand clutched the lower edge of the rear window.

"Get him, Skibo!"

Koker howled the command as Pete, the driver, jammed the brakes. The order was to the man in the rear seat – the one beside the stunned machine gunner. Skibo lurched to the window at the left. He swung a vicious blow for the hand upon the window edge.

The hand came up as Skibo's arm descended. Like a mechanical clamp, it caught the ruffian's wrist. Skibo's head and shoulders shot through the window. The rowdy jammed there. Shifting his hold to the crook's neck, The Shadow jabbed his right hand in through the window, to take aim at Koker.

With the move came a sinister laugh. It was a burst of fierce hilarity that spoke of doom for crooks. The laugh of The Shadow, dreaded by all who belonged to the underworld!

Pete heard it. Wildly, the driver jolted the sedan forward. Skibo, though helpless, gave a frantic twist. The Shadow's gun spoke; his bullet sizzed above Koker's ear, thanks to Skibo's disturbance of the aim. The Shadow shifted outward; then suddenly dropped his hold and went rolling to the street.

In his haste, Pete had let the sedan swing from the curb. He was yanking the wheel to the right, to avoid an elevated pillar. Pete had not designed the maneuver; purely through accident, it balked The Shadow. The left running board was about to graze the pillar. The Shadow had dropped away just in time to save himself from a smash against the steel post.

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THE patrolman had heard the shots. He had yanked a revolver; from the doorway, he was opening fire at the departing car. Skibo had rolled back into the rear seat. Koker, seeing no sign of The Shadow, had swung about to exchange bullets with the bluecoat.

The officer ducked into the doorway; but Jennings, out to the middle of the sidewalk, was rooted where he stood. The sedan was making a left turn at the corner; Koker, leaning across, had gained a bead on Jennings. But before Koker could press the trigger, a black shape hurtled up from the curb.

It was The Shadow. Gripping Jennings, he sent the man staggering against the patrolman in the doorway. Falling away as Koker fired, the cloaked battler stabbed quick shots toward the escaping sedan.

An elevated pillar stopped a bullet that was designed for the sedan's gas tank. The Shadow dispatched a second slug, this time with sure result. It pinged a rear tire just as the car was making its get-away, westward on the side street. The sedan lurched, but kept on.

Then began an amazing sequence. Traffic had deployed along the avenue, automobiles and trolleys stopping in alarm at the gunfire. Halted near The Shadow was a taxi. It was not the cab in which he had come here; but it was one that would suit his purpose, for it was pointed northward and nothing blocked its path.

The taxi was of the convertible type; its top was down, for the weather was mild. That was another advantage for The Shadow. Leaping from the sidewalk, he whipped open the door and boarded the cab. The staring driver saw his unexpected passenger; then shivered as he heard the commanding voice:

"Start ahead! Swing left at the corner!"

Mechanically, the taxi man obeyed. As the cab moved forward, another car crossed its path. This was a roadster, that shot in from the right and turned left on the avenue. It was the same car that Chip had seen when he and Squint had ducked eastward on the side street.

As the taxi hurtled forward up the avenue, the roadster passed it, going down the other side of the broad thoroughfare. There were many intervening pillars; and The Shadow, settling in the cab, had not spied the roadster at the moment of its crossing. But those in the roadster saw The Shadow.

He was rising upon the rear seat of the taxi, ready when the driver swung left. From high above, he would be able to deliver bullets above the driver's head, once he might spy the crippled sedan upon the side street.

Instantly, the roadster changed its course. Its driver yanked the wheel. The trim car made a turn in the middle of the street, skidding between elevated pillars. It was a complete U turn, before the roadster reached the blockade of stalled cars on the avenue. The roadster was on the trail of The Shadow!

First tokens of this new entrant came just before the taxi made the left turn at the corner. Shots rang out from behind. The Shadow was a black shape towering up from the topless cab. He darted a quick glance down the avenue. Two guns were belching from the very front of the pursuing roadster. Its windshield was down; the man beside the driver was handling two weapons. The Shadow was the target!

The cab was negotiating the left turn, directly under the elevated station. For the moment, The Shadow was protected from the fire in back. But a hoarse cry from the scared driver told that danger lay ahead.

"They're waiting for us!" It was true. From the crossing, the taxi man could see the sedan. It had halted on the side street, fifty yards west of the corner. Halted, the car had swung across the street to block the thoroughfare. The side street was a trap.

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It was too late to avoid the turn. The cab, moreover, needed distance, to get away from the pursuing roadster. The Shadow was trapped between two fires. With a competent driver, he could have counted upon mobility in battle. But his chance hackie was frantic. Fear alone impelled the driver to follow a last command:

"Straight down the side street!"

The hissed order came as the cab was directly in the center of the crossing. The driver stepped on the gas. The cab leaped forward. Then a machine gun began to rattle from the blockading sedan.

At the same instant, the pursuing roadster whizzed into view from the pillars at the avenue. The taxi driver saw the spurts of the machine gun. He glimpsed the lights of the roadster in his mirror. Wildly, he swung the cab to the curb and dived for the sidewalk.

The Shadow was no longer in view. Apparently, he had dropped to the floor of the cab. Koker, Pete and Skibo came piling forward, relying upon revolvers instead of the machine gun. They let the cab driver scurry away. They were out to get The Shadow.

They reached the cab and leaped upon the running board just as the roadster arrived and swung up beside the taxi. Glaring eyes looked from the roadster, as fists brandished guns. But the pursuing marksman and his chauffeur were treated to the same astonishing sight as Koker Hosch and the latter's pals.

The rear of the taxicab was empty!

Weirdly, The Shadow had eluded the trap. Somehow, he had made a complete evanishment. He had rescued Jennings and the patrolman from their dilemma; then had been forced into one of his own. But he was out of it; and those who had sought him independently were baffled!

SIRENS whined from the avenue. A snarl came from Koker. A fierce growl was given in the roadster by the marksman who sat beside the driver. Police cars were arriving. Crooks had failed to get The Shadow; it was their turn to be trapped.

The roadster hurtled forward. Its occupants had opportunity for a getaway and they took it. The speedy car careened to the sidewalk and squeezed past the deserted sedan. The motor roared as the two-man car sped westward. It had a chance to reach the next avenue before police arrived there.

Koker and his pals were left in a jam. A patrol car came whining from the blocked avenue behind them. They turned to fight it out. Pete and Skibo opened fire. The police car halted; they sprang toward it, only to be felled by prompt bullets. Koker saw a chance for flight. He leaped to the wheel of the abandoned taxi.

Copying the example of the roadster, Koker jolted the cab past his abandoned sedan; then whizzed away to the west. The police car took up the chase. Pete and Skibo lay sprawled upon the street for others to pick up. More police arrived. Excitement followed, for nearly half an hour.

IT was after the street had cleared that a singular happening occurred at the crossing where the side street ran beneath the elevated station. The superstructure there was low; a traffic light hung from the heavy girders that supported a foot passage beneath the elevated tracks.

A taxi happened to cross the avenue. Like the one that The Shadow had commandeered, this cab was open-topped. It had no passengers; nevertheless, the driver was careful enough to slacken speed as he hit the jolty car tracks of the avenue.

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To the hackie's surprise, the rear springs gave a sudden thump. It worried him; but he kept on slowly and decided that the cab was all right. Two blocks further on, he received another surprise. He was about to turn left from the westbound street when a quiet voice spoke from the back of the cab.

"Take me to Times Square."

Looking about, the taxi driver saw that he had a passenger. They were near bright lights; in their glow he could see a tall, calm-faced personage riding in the car. The passenger was attired in evening clothes; he was smoking a thin cigar. His countenance was hawklike; his eyes carried a gleam.

When and how this stranger had boarded the cab, the hackie could not guess. He removed his hat and scratched his head; then reached over and pulled the metal flag to start the meter ticking.

A soft laugh came from the fixed lips of the mysterious passenger. The driver had not noticed folded garments of black that lay upon the seat beside the hawk-faced rider.

Only The Shadow knew the mystery of his own disappearance. Half an hour ago, he had ridden into a trap. He had seen it while his commandeered cab was making that left swing beneath the low structure of the elevated platform. The Shadow had given an order to his former taxi driver. Then he had sprung up from his standing position in the rear seat. He had caught the nearest girder beneath the elevated. He had swung to safety, a blackened, unseen shape, just before the roadster had whizzed leftward beneath him.

Thus had The Shadow changed the trap. He had known that the taxi driver would duck for safety. He had left criminals to the law. The police themselves were to blame for the escape of the roadster and the taxi flight of Koker.

Safely ensconced above the crossing, The Shadow had retained his perch until after excitement had died. Then he had waited for another open-topped cab. One had come along. He had taken it. He was riding serenely toward Times Square. To his credit he could charge the rescue of two doomed men: Luber Jennings and the patrolman who covered the beat along the avenue.

Yet The Shadow's laugh lacked mirth, and with good reason. Men of crime had escaped him tonight. Because of that, The Shadow could foresee new trouble. Not from Koker Hosch; The Shadow knew him to be nothing more than the leader of the cover-up crew.

The Shadow's concern involved the marksman who had ridden in the speedy roadster. That enemy, arrived so timely, was one who impressed him. The Shadow could see the menace of a super foe – one who had been behind tonight's doings. More must be learned; for later, there would be new and bitter conflict.

The Shadow was right. Tonight's adventure had been but the preface to events that were due. Chance had brought The Shadow into a game that would become the strangest epoch in all his warfare against crime.

CHAPTER III. CRIME'S NEW TRAIL

It was dusk the next day. Two men were seated on opposite sides of an office desk. One was bald-headed, bespectacled Wainwright Barth. Barth was acting police commissioner in the absence from New York of Commissioner Ralph Weston. The other man was stocky, swarthy-faced.

He was Joe Cardona, crack ace detective of the New York force. Joe, at present, was an acting police inspector.

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The air in the room held that electric quality that comes when two strong-willed men hold forth in argument. Barth had been raking Joe over the coals about the stick-up of Sautelle's wholesale clothing firm and the street fight that followed. Cardona was restraining himself while the acting commissioner was pounding his fist and enumerating the crimes that had preceded the wholesale clothier's.

Barth roared out, "Two weeks ago a gold shipment, consigned to a bank, was landed from the steamship Arabia, and robbed from under the very noses of the guards on the dock! And not a clue to the theft!

"Three nights ago another crime was perpetrated! Securities valued at one hundred thousand dollars were stolen from the offices of Mullat Co. by a man who posed as the Chicago partner of the firm – Herbert Threed! There hasn't been even a suspect arrested!

"And now this Sautelle stick-up, and the gun fray following! What have you found out, Cardona?"

Joe was uneasy. He wished Commissioner Weston were back, for Cardona understood Weston better than he did Barth. But he looked at Barth and said:

"We found out that Koker Hosch and a crew of gorillas were the ones who were in the sedan. Koker escaped, but one of his men, dying in the street, blabbed that Koker was to cover the stick-up at Sautelle's."

Barth leaned forward on his desk, his chin perched upon his hands.

"About the gun fray," he remarked. "Who began it? Who prevented the murder of Jennings and the patrolman?"

Cardona hesitated; then replied:

"The Shadow."

A glower from Barth. He drove a fist to the desk top.

"The Shadow!" he snorted. "More folderol, Cardona! Always The Shadow! When no other explanation seems plausible, you invariably resort to that one! Fiddlesticks! I can no longer tolerate such absurd conclusions!

"I've made up my mind that these crimes are linked," he decided, "and I still insist they cannot be termed as perfect ones. One link must be located; it may carry us along the chain. Find Koker Hosch, Cardona. Use your own measures. Spare no effort! A round-up of all criminals, if necessary. For the next forty-eight hours, you shall have carte blanche."

"You mean full leeway?"

"That expresses it quite aptly."

JOE CARDONA wore a pleased smile when he left the acting commissioner's office. For once, he had arrived somewhere with Wainwright Barth. There was still a slim chance that Koker Hosch was in Manhattan. If not, other clues might come within the stipulated time limit. A round-up, however, was not in Cardona's plan. He preferred to utilize stool pigeons rather than the dragnet. Tipsters with information usually proved more efficient than a mass movement of the law. The latter gave crooks a chance to take to cover.

Koker Hosch! That name would be whispered in the bad lands; and soon listeners would be on hand to hear it. Stoolies might gain other tips as well. Cardona was inclined to Barth's theory, that these crimes were not

perfect. The fact that they were linked was a discovery that Joe put to his own credit.

THERE was one place on the East Side that Joe Cardona would have liked to visit in person. That was the Hotel Spartan, a dingy-fronted hangout where crooks of known repute were wont to congregate. A visit there would have been a give-away, however. As bad a move for stoolies as for Cardona himself.

The windows of the Spartan's lobby opened upon a sidewalk beneath an elevated railway. Boastful rowdies – those who had covered themselves too well for the law to pluck – were among the strollers who went in and out of the Hotel Spartan. Frequently, their conversation continued after they had reached the sidewalk.

This evening, two such men were speaking. Their words were plain as they sauntered to the street. A wizened-faced man was lounging outside the doorway. He caught a snatch of the conversation.

"Well – if Koker Hosch is on the lam –"

"It makes Hunk Lomus likely, don't it?"

"An' you say Hunk's goin' out somewhere?"

"That's what was piped to me –"

The speakers had passed. The wizened-faced man waited a few minutes; then lighted a cigarette and shuffled across beneath the elevated. His wise lips showed a grin. This unnoticed listener was a well-known figure in the bad lands. Thugs called him "Hawkeye," for he had the peculiar ability of seeing much that went on about him.

Last night, Hawkeye had learned that Koker Hosch was going on a cover-up job. He had gained that information as last minute news; and Hawkeye had passed the word along to a hidden chief: The Shadow. Tonight, Hawkeye had been hoping for another hit. He had gained one.

There were dozens of characters like Koker Hosch, still in Manhattan – small-time leaders who could summon a crew if needed. The question was which one to trail. Hawkeye had heard mention of "Hunk" Lomus. That was all Hawkeye needed. He was on his way to report.

Long before Joe Cardona's stoolies would be about their tasks, this chance tip would be known to The Shadow!

CHAPTER IV. DESPITE THE SHADOW

A bluish light was glowing upon the polished surface of a table. Beneath the glare, two hands were sliding earphones toward the wall. Upon one finger of the left hand glimmered a resplendent fire opal. This jewel was The Shadow's girasol.

The bluish light clicked off. Solid darkness pervaded the room. A cloak swished; lips formed a quivering laugh. Then silence held within the blackened sanctum. The Shadow had received final reports from his agents. He was leaving his secret abode.

Instructions had gone across the private wire from the sanctum. Word to Burbank, The Shadow's contact man. Detailed orders to be passed to roving aids. Crime was due tonight. Again, The Shadow had learned of a cover-up squad. This time, he had been able to form broader plans.

THE CRIME ORACLE

NEAR Seventy-second Street, a huddled watcher was looking toward a lighted corner. It was Hawkeye, covering an appointed spot. A taxi was cruising about the block. It was the same vehicle that The Shadow had used at last night's outset. It was manned by another aid: Moe Shrevnitz.

Parked elsewhere was a trim coupe, wherein a man sat low behind the wheel. This was Harry Vincent, most capable of The Shadow's agents. He was in readiness for any signal. Harry was watching Hawkeye. He strained as he saw a blot of blackness pause by the doorway where the wizened-faced spotter crouched.

At the same instant, Hawkeye heard a whisper. Tensely, he listened. He knew that The Shadow had arrived.

"Instructions!" intoned the low voice. "Wait for Marsland. He will come by subway. Board the cab. Instructions to be given Shrevnitz: Follow the coupe and obey signals."

Hawkeye nodded, as blackness moved away. A blurred form took the momentary shape of a cloaked figure, then faded into new darkness.

In his coupe, Harry Vincent heard the door open. A blackened form settled beside him. The door closed. Harry caught the gleam of burning eyes. The Shadow had joined him.

Many details had been learned regarding Hunk Lomus, even though that rowdy had not been spied. Hawkeye had spotted members of Hunk's crew and had heard mention of two meeting places; first, a rendezvous at a Tenth Avenue garage; later, a coming contact with a second car at this corner near Seventy-second Street.

Time had not been mentioned. The Shadow had ordered Cliff Marsland, another aid, to cover the garage. Cliff had reported the arrival of four hoodlums and their plans for prompt departure. The Shadow had calculated that nine o'clock would be the meeting hour of the two cars. Hunk Lomus would have two crews upon the job. The Shadow, to combat him, would be present with a quartet of agents.

Tonight, The Shadow was banking upon Hunk Lomus to lead him unwittingly to a scene of coming crime. Koker Hosch had served that turn last night; but belated news had cost The Shadow opportunity. He had gained no time for a preliminary survey of the neighborhood. This time, matters would be different. The Shadow would reach the goal as soon as Hunk's double crew.

Yet, at this very moment, events were brewing elsewhere. Chance was destined to play The Shadow false.

TEN blocks distant from the corner where The Shadow waited, two men were crouched in the gloom of a passageway behind an old brownstone house.

One of the pair was Chip Mulley. Hoarsely, the round-shouldered crook was arguing matters with a bulky companion who was almost twice his size.

"Listen, Moose," Chip was saying. "It ain't my business to tell you how to work this lay. But you've got the dope sheet, an' it don't say nothin' about no stall."

"I'm waiting," growled "Moose." "Hunk Lomus is showing up to cover. He's taking the front – like Koker did for Squint."

"Yeah? An' look at the jam that Koker got himself in."

"What of it? Squint didn't lose nothing, did he?"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"He might've. Koker wasn't needed. Havin' him there was Squint's idea. The Head didn't say to have Koker on the job. It ain't good business, this waitin' for Hunk an' his mob."

"Gimme a reason why not."

"That's easy. Supposin' Hunk Lomus spills somethin' – like sayin' he's a pal of Moose Sudling –"

"Hunk won't squawk on me."

"Well, supposin' then that The Shadow has got a lead on Hunk –"

"Lay off that stuff about The Shadow!"

"Gripes you, huh?"

Moose Sudling grunted an affirmative. A pause. Then a flashlight shone, guarded, upon a sheet of paper in Moose's hand.

"Goin' to start?" queried Chip.

"Yeah," decided Moose. "Sounds like you had the right idea, Chip. We'll let Hunk cover afterward. First thing on the list is this guy Percy Rydler, who lives in the old house. You saw him leave?"

"Yeah. An hour ago. They had to load him in a taxi, out of a wheel chair. Sick-looking gazebo."

"Then we're ready. Come along."

THE two moved through the passage, Moose lumbering in advance. They came to a basement door. Moose's flashlight shone upon a formidable lock.

The big man produced a long key. He opened the heavy door with ease.

"A cinch!" whispered Moose. "The Head said it would work sure! How he got the key, I don't know. Ease the door shut, Chip."

Chip obeyed. Moose led the way to a flight of stairs. They ascended and stopped by a closed door. He ran the flashlight along the right edge; then jabbed a knife blade into the crack. A spring clicked. Moose reached farther down and repeated the operation. He moved to the left of the door and found two other springs.

"What's that for?" queried Chip.

"Some goofy automatic bolts," chuckled Moose. "They close from the other side. The Head gave me the dope on how to fix them. We don't need a key, now that's done."

Moose opened the door. He and Chip stepped into a darkened kitchen. Moose found a flight of stairs. The two ascended. They reached a hallway where a single light was burning. Moose whispered: "The rear room! That's where we'll find the old caretaker!"

Moose moved forward and entered. Chip was a few paces behind. As he crossed the sill, he heard a sharp cry from the other side. Then a hoarse snarl; followed by the noise of a sudden scuffle.

THE CRIME ORACLE

In the center of the rear room, two men were struggling. One was Moose Sudling, big and brawny, almost as large as the doorway through which he had entered from the hall. The other fighter was a wiry, white-haired man who clutched a gun. Frantically, he was striking at Moose's head; while the huge ruffian, bobbing, was clutching the old man's throat.

The struggle ended before Chip could join. The old man gurgled helplessly as his last wild stroke missed his adversary's skull. Moose drove the victim up against the wall. With one vicious heave, he battered the white head against the solid surface.

The old man sagged. Moose twisted the scrawny neck and gave another bashing stroke. He released his clutch and let the victim sprawl. Methodically, he pulled a paper from his pocket and consulted new instructions.

"Into the next room."

Moose led the way into the middle room. The flashlight shone upon a portrait that adorned the wall. Moose raised his left hand and pressed the gilt frame upward. A click sounded; the picture swung out upon a hinge. Behind it was a wall safe.

"Wait'll I read the combination."

Another glance at the dope sheet. Then Moose manipulated the knob. He opened the safe, found a long jewel box and brought it beneath his light. The top of the box popped open. Chip gulped at sight of glimmering gems. Diamonds, imbedded in velvet, were sparkling from their many facets.

"There's ice for you!" croaked Moose, approvingly. "The real McCoy! Like The Head said they'd be! You know what these'll bring, Chip?"

"Fifty grand?"

Awed, Chip was thinking about last night's haul. Moose laughed gruffly.

"More like a hundred," he affirmed. "And you can leave it to The Head to get rid of them."

Moose closed the safe and turned the dial. Clumsily, he wiped away finger prints. He swung the picture shut and mopped the lower frame. Followed by Chip, the big man moved back to the rear room. There he stopped to look at the white-haired figure on the floor.

"Looks like you croaked him, Moose," Chip said.

"Yeah." Again Moose mumbled. He fished out the paper from his pocket. "That means we gotta scam."

"The Head says so?"

"Yeah – here in the dope sheet. The Head didn't want me to croak this mug."

With disregard for silence, the pair made their way to the back stairs. They descended to the kitchen; then down to the basement. Moose made final consultation of the dope sheet; then extinguished his light altogether.

"Leave the door open," he whispered, as they moved out into the rear passage. "Take it slow after we get to the next street."

Passing between silent buildings, they gained the rear thoroughfare. Like Squint the night before, Moose led Chip toward a street lamp. There the big thug stopped and moved one hand up and down. That done, he urged Chip toward the next corner.

Looking over his shoulder as they turned, Chip spied the outline of a parked roadster. Some one in that car had seen Moose's signal. The up-and-down motion must have meant that something was wrong. Moose Sudling had gained the swag; but he had left a murdered victim behind him.

The Head – mysterious chief of crime – had prepared for such a happening. That was why the waiting roadster stood on duty. Measures would be taken to make up for Moose Sudling's blunder.

Again, burglary had been accomplished; this time it had produced murder. Moose Sudling's early action had offset The Shadow's measures to be present before crime began.

Double crime had been completed despite The Shadow's knowledge that evil had been due tonight.

CHAPTER V. FIGURES IN THE GLOOM

AT the time when Moose Sudling and Chip Mulley were making their departure by the rear street, an automobile was halting in front of the brownstone house that they had left. The car bore a Massachusetts license. It had two young men as occupants.

"This is the house," remarked man the beside the driver. "Are you sure you don't want to stop over, Jerry? It's a long ride up to Boston."

"I'll have to travel on, Hal," returned the driver. "Business appointments tomorrow. But I'm wondering if you'll find any one home here. The house is dark. Maybe you'd better let me drive you to a hotel."

"Don't worry about me," laughed Hal. "I have a key to the place. My brother is always glad to have me stop off at the house. Percy is probably asleep. That's why the house is dark."

"But it's only nine o'clock –"

"And Percy sometimes goes to bed as early as eight. He's been sick, you know."

Hal Rydler stepped from the car. A street light showed his face to be a friendly one, smiling and well-featured. A crop of light-brown hair projected from beneath his side-tilted hat. Hal shook hands with Jerry. The Massachusetts car drew away.

Humming to himself, Hal ascended the brownstone steps. This visit was not an unusual one. Often before, Hal had dropped in to see his brother Percy. In fact, it was the frequency of his visits and the odd hours of arrival that had caused Percy to give him a duplicate pass-key.

Today, in Baltimore, Hal had run into a friend, Jerry Lester, who was driving up to Boston. Hal had agreed to accompany Jerry as far as New York. Another chance to see how Percy was; for Hal was concerned about his sickly elder brother. Hal had left Baltimore before the afternoon mail delivery. Hence he had failed to receive a letter sent by Percy, stating that he was leaving for a steamship cruise.

THE CRIME ORACLE

USING his key, Hal unlocked the front door and stepped into the lower hallway. All was silent in the old house. Hal closed the front door quietly. He decided that Percy must be asleep; it would be unwise to awaken him. The best plan would be a silent ascent to the guest room on the third floor.

Hal started up by the front stairway. He reached a landing; there he paused. A flashlight was blinking from beyond a door that stood ajar. It was the door to the middle room on this floor. Hal noted a light from another doorway, which opened into the rear room. That glow was steady.

Something was wrong in the house. Hal's first worry concerned Percy. His brother occupied the front room. A semi-invalid, he would be unable to protect himself against thugs or burglars. As the flashlight blinked out, Hal decided to investigate.

Just as he was about to enter the middle room, he heard a sound that stopped him. The noise was a peculiar thump; it was repeated. Hal realized that he was listening to clumping footsteps. Some one had gone from the middle room to the back; that person was returning. Tensely, Hal waited.

Clump – clump – clump –

A figure suddenly blocked the opposite doorway; then shouldered into the middle room and paused. Against the light from the rear room, Hal could see the prowler. An instinctive dread seized him. He was staring at a distorted, evil shape that seemed hardly human.

The man in the middle room was short and chunky. His form was almost like a square. Thick, bulky arms and legs; a body that bulged like a barrel; hands encased in large, big-fingered gloves; and above the wide, straight shoulders a face that was hideous.

Sight of that visage made Hal Rydler remain where he was. One look had the same effect as if the young man had heard a rattlesnake's warning. The venom that showed in the prowler's glare seemed beyond human expression. Hal was watching the face of a living fiend.

The face was large, long-jowled and darkish. The nose was wide, with nostrils that spread with every breath. The eyes were glaring balls that bulged from their sockets. They were topped with bushy brows; above them loomed a high, broad forehead that was furrowed with V-like wrinkles. Jet-black hair, shaggy and unkempt, completed the living picture.

Clump – clump –

The monster was advancing, firm despite his clumsiness. Hal could hear fierce breathing that came from lips which formed a twisted leer. He saw the lips move as if mumbling. As they grinned grotesquely, white teeth shone like fangs. Horror held the watcher. Hal felt his knees quake, despite his efforts to fight down fear.

HAD this monstrous prowler kept on to the front doorway, Hal Rydler would have been paralyzed, unable to offer battle. However, the chunky figure changed its course. Away from the outlined light, the glaring man became no more than a square, wide shape that clumped with mechanical tread. He had turned toward the wall.

A flashlight glimmered from one gloved hand. Staring toward the focused glow, Hal saw the hinged picture on the wall. He watched the man's other hand press the panel. The picture swung out. The same hand turned the dial of the wall safe. Thanks to the light, Hal could see every subsequent move.

THE CRIME ORACLE

The gloating creature took nothing from the safe. He simply used his free hand to polish the interior, using his gloved fingers as a mop. The hand closed the safe, but did not lock it. The fingers simply swabbed the dial. Then the hand closed the picture and carefully wiped the frame.

The monstrous figure stamped toward the rear room. Hal noted that the man did not turn sharply. Instead, he clumped in circling fashion and thus arrived at the doorway. Again, the light was partially blocked. Gauging, Hal observed that the shoulders were almost as wide as the doorway itself.

A full three feet; yet the clumping man was less than five in height. Allowing for his large head, the rest of his shape – arms, body and legs – were almost an actual square, that fitted Hal's first impression. That was something to remember.

For Hal was sure that his brother's safe had been robbed; not by this monster, but by some one who had preceded him. The square-built fiend might furnish a clue, if captured. But Hal doubted his own ability to overpower so formidable a foe.

That bulky body had given an impression of super strength. Hal feared, moreover, that the fiend was armed. It was not until the creature had marched mechanically from view that Hal gained the nerve needed for action. Despite the fact that he could not forget the venomous glare of the inhuman face, Hal steeled himself and started across the middle room.

The clumsy footsteps had faded when Hal reached the lighted door. The man had gone through the back room to the hall. The thumping tread told that he was descending the back stairs. Hal gave a leap, intending to overtake the monster. He knew that the fiend had not guessed that he was in the house. He saw opportunity in pursuit and a surprise attack. But as he reached the center of the rear room, Hal stopped short, quivering.

A body was lying upon the floor, face downward. White hair was clotted with blood.

"Jemley!" gasped Hal. "Jemley – dead!"

Hal knew old Jemley, the caretaker whom Percy hired to look after the house whenever he was absent. Jemley here was proof that Percy was away. But relief over his brother's safety was lost with Hal's discovery that Jemley had been slain.

"Jemley – murdered!"

WHAT to do?

The question gripped Hal as he let Jemley's head and shoulders settle to the floor. Justice was what Hal wanted – against that fiend and all who might have served him. The house was stilled; yet it seemed charged with the evil menace of the bestial figure that had just departed. Perhaps lurkers had remained here!

From downstairs, a clock was chiming nine. It was after that hour, Hal realized; for the old grandfather's clock was always a few minutes slow. Much had happened in the short while that Hal had been here. Much might happen yet, if he invoked the law. There was still a chance that the police could capture that square-shaped fiend, particularly since the monster had not known of Hal's presence and might, therefore, feared no pursuers.

The telephone was in the front room; but Hal's worry about possible lurkers restrained him from using it. He wanted to get out of the house at once; to take the front street to a lighted avenue. There he could find a patrolman and spread the news of Jemley's death.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Rising, Hal crept from the death room and descended the front stairs. He opened the front door cautiously, closed it behind him and sprang down the brownstone steps. Excitedly, he started for the nearest corner, making long strides to increase his pace. Hal feared no danger; for he was sure that the clumpy fiend had gone out by the back door. Hence he did not try to render himself inconspicuous.

A touring car was rolling slowly from the avenue. Hal saw its dimmed headlights approaching; but gave no thought to them until the car suddenly shifted its direction. The lights brightened. Hal Rydler was caught in the brilliant glare. The flood of illumination awoke his thoughts of danger. With a sharp cry, the young man dived toward a wall, seeking the dark cover of some house steps.

Guns barked. spurts of flame stabbed from the interior of the car. Bullets ricocheted from sidewalk and steps. The car lurched forward, to drive down upon its diving victim. New death was in the making. Hunk Lomus had arrived with part of his cover-up squad. Thugs were leaping from opened doors. Their plan was to blot out a helpless man in rapid style.

Then came another roar. A second car wheeled into view – a coupe with a searchlight that clicked on as the new machine approached. A fierce, weird laugh resounded with the echoes of the wild barrage that thugs had delivered. The boom of automatics followed.

Another combatant had arrived. One who had come to deal with men of crime. Again The Shadow was prepared to save a helpless man from doom!

CHAPTER VI. THE LONE CLUE

The Shadow had delivered a timely stroke. He had chosen the right moment to open fire. Had he started battle with the sound of the first barrage, Hunk Lomus and his men would have stayed within the shelter of their car. As it was, all of them had leaped to the street, with the exception of Hunk himself. Those on the street were targets. Hunk had the touring car to handle.

The Shadow had swung from the opened door of the coupe. His first cannonade began while he was riding closer. But as he neared the snarling thugs, he dropped to the sidewalk. Directly beneath a glowing lamp, he formed a silhouetted figure after the coupe rolled onward.

The Shadow had clipped the killer who was nearest to Hal Rydler. The other three had wheeled. Their revolvers spoke as they saw The Shadow. Already, he was weaving from the light; for his purpose was accomplished. He had drawn the fire from the intended victim. As The Shadow faded, his big guns blasted anew. He, too, had located targets. His were standing ones.

Rooted thugs went sprawling, as they fired vainly. The Shadow's bullets found their marks. The slugs that came in his direction were spattering all about. Only Hunk Lomus had a chance to fire unmolested. He was past the steps where Hal Rydler crouched. Leaning back, Hunk loosed two shots.

Both were wide, for they were hurried and the touring car was moving. The bullets flattened against a brownstone wall. Hunk might have found his target with a third shot; but he was interrupted. Harry Vincent was on the job to take care of that.

Cutting sharply, Harry jammed the coupe against the touring car. Hunk yanked the wheel to avoid a smash. The front of the touring car jolted upward. The car tilted; then regained its balance on the sidewalk and rammed to a stop against a house wall. Harry had forced Hunk off the street.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Hunk still gripped his revolver, though he had grabbed the wheel with both hands. Savagely, he swung to aim for the driver of the coupe. Harry's car was at the left of Hunk's; and Harry had not drawn his own gun. But he was set for what was coming.

As Hunk aimed, Harry kicked the left door open and rolled out to the street. He hit the asphalt with his shoulder, came up with his left hand on the running board and drew an automatic with his right.

Hunk had started fire. His bullets were high. Harry thrust his gun upward and returned the shots. Entrenched below the step of his own car, he had the advantage. Though he fired blindly, he scored a hit. A howl came from Hunk. Harry bobbed up beside the wheel of the coupe.

These events came as The Shadow finished fire. With them, a new glare bathed the street. Another car was roaring from the corner. Revolver muzzles were bristling from its sides. Hunk's second crew was charging into battle. Hoodlums began a long-range fire.

FORGETTING Hunk Lomus, Harry Vincent turned. There, in the glare, he saw The Shadow, squarely in the middle of the street. About the cloaked fighter lay the thugs whom he had downed. Crippled crooks were crawling toward the curb. But The Shadow was faced with new enemies; and he had no time to head for shelter.

Harry aimed, to join The Shadow in what seemed hopeless resistance. The Shadow's automatics were already booming. Harry aimed squarely for the lights ahead, just as The Shadow performed a sudden shift to the right. Then the oncoming car skidded. Its right wheels jounced the curb. The car careened; then swung half about as it came to a stop.

The Shadow had aimed for the side of the windshield. He had guessed that the car would be equipped with shatter-proof glass, so he had picked the edge of the opened front window. He had winged the driver. The fellow had lost control; but had managed to apply the foot-brake. The Shadow's hope had been to wreck the car; though he had not accomplished it, he had broken the attack.

The jouncing thugs had lost all chance at aim. One crook, unlimbering a machine gun, had half fallen from an open door. Others were grabbing him; but they acted too late. The Shadow delivered a final shot. The machine gunner took a headlong dive to the gutter and his weapon clattered with him.

New brakes screeched. A taxi had wheeled up behind the thug-manned car. Two fighters sprang from it: Cliff and Hawkeye. They fired from the darkness of the street. Crooks leaped out to battle when they found themselves trapped. The Shadow and his agents had the edge. Hoodlums withered.

A man sprang suddenly from a spot across the street. It was Hal Rydler. He had seen Harry beside the coupe. He knew that this fighter must be a friend. Harry beckoned Hal forward. He saw the rescued man stop short; then give a cry. The reason dawned instantly. Harry spun about.

He had forgotten Hunk Lomus. Though wounded, the rogue was still capable of action. He had crawled from the wheel of his own car. He had shifted into Harry's coupe. Gun in hand, Hunk had seen Hal coming. He was aiming to down the victim before Harry knew it.

Harry made a grab for Hunk's right arm. As he nailed the wrist above the aiming hand, a shot roared from the center of the street. Hunk's arm sagged in Harry's grip. The trigger finger pulled; the muzzle, dropping, blasted a useless bullet to the asphalt. Hunk rolled out of the coupe.

THE CRIME ORACLE

The Shadow, like Harry, had heard Hal's cry. Swinging about, the cloaked fighter had picked off Hunk while Harry was trying to stop the mob-leader's shot.

Hal stumbled up to where Harry stood. A moment later, a machine wheeled forward. Moe Shrevnitz had swung up with his cab.

SIRENS were sounding, as a sequel to the cessation of gunfire. Shrill whistles could be heard from the avenue. Police were converging. It was time to leave the field to the law.

Harry heard The Shadow's voice hiss an order. The cloaked chief had arrived beside him. Nodding, Harry shoved Hal Rydler into the taxi. Moe had opened the door in readiness. As Harry slammed it, the cab rocketed forward.

Cliff and Hawkeye arrived. They heard The Shadow's next order. They sprang aboard with Harry. The coupe followed the path that Moe had taken. The cab had already turned the corner when the coupe started. The Shadow, silent, remained by Hunk's touring car and watched the coupe whizz from sight.

Sirens were closer. Their location was elusive; for they were coming from various directions. Listening, The Shadow stepped close to the dark side of the touring car. He had spied a man rising from a spot across the street. It was one of Hunk's wounded underlings.

This hoodlum was still capable of battle; but The Shadow could easily have dropped him, for the man had not seen the waiting figure in the darkness beside the car. Instead, The Shadow stood silent. He watched the thug come to the spot where Hunk Lomus lay, a dozen feet away.

"Hunk!" The thug exclaimed the name hoarsely. He crouched beside Lomus. "Did De Shadow get you? Like he did de odders?"

The Shadow heard a snarl from Hunk's lips.

"Dis is Louie," persisted the stooping thug. "You can hear me, can't you, Hunk? Listen: de bulls is comin'; I gotta scam! Anyt'ing you want me to do?"

Hunk's head had raised feebly. He uttered a name that Louie repeated; but The Shadow did not hear it. A police car had entered the street. The wail of a siren had drowned the spoken words. Then came Louie's hurried question.

"But if dere ain't no way to find him, Hunk?"

Again Hunk spoke, gasping. His head dropped. The Shadow saw Louis nod.

"I get it, Hunk. Sure – I'll get aholt of Chip Mulley. I'll tell him you wanted me to pipe de word to –"

Louie stopped before he again spoke the name that Hunk had previously uttered. The police car was bearing down upon him. For the first time, he realized its closeness. Louie snarled and came to his feet. His left arm, wounded, was hanging limp; but he raised his right and aimed with a revolver.

The police car had veered, to avoid a sprawled body. Its light had swung away from The Shadow. The cloaked watcher raised an automatic, ready to drop Louie before the thug could fire. The Shadow's action proved unnecessary. Revolvers tongued flame from the patrol car. Louie sprawled across Hunk's body.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Hunk Lomus had given his last gasp. Louie was coughing out his life as two officers sprang to the street.

The Shadow edged past the touring car. Rounding the back, he quickly gained a passage between two darkened houses. He had reserved that outlet for a last-minute exit. It was time for prompt departure. Running bluecoats were coming down the street. Other police were arriving in a second patrol car.

THOUGH The Shadow had lingered, he had experienced less trouble in departure than had his agents. Moe's cab and Harry's coupe had been forced to run the gantlet of arriving police cars. Moe had swung into a side street, to continue slowly; while Harry had sped along an avenue, to finally draw away from the police zone.

Moe had chosen canny flight because of his passenger. As he wheeled along the side street, he kept looking in the mirror. He saw Hal Rydler deep in the rear seat, relaxing after the excitement. Moe grinned. He knew that his passenger thought this cab was a chance one. Soon, Moe would circuit to the corner back near Seventy-second Street. The Shadow would be there.

But as Moe swung out to an avenue, he saw an approaching patrol car. He knew at once that he would be questioned, if he stopped. Moe stepped on the gas and roared down another street. He heard shots behind him; but they were no more annoying than a flock of mosquitoes. Moe was a smart driver. He expected to leave the police car far behind.

Zippering through another side street, Moe suddenly jammed the brakes. Straight ahead, he saw a blockade. The street was under construction. Moe turned about. Regardless of the curb, he backed the cab clear up on the sidewalk and thumped a house wall. Then he jolted forward, reached a corner and whirled right, just as the patrol car's headlights gleamed from a block away.

More twists and turns. Moe paid no attention to the mirror. He was dodging out of the region where too many questions might be asked. He grinned, as he arrived close to the corner where he expected The Shadow to be. Moe applied the brakes. He looked in the mirror and his grin ended.

His passenger had left the cab.

Recalling circumstances, Moe remembered how and where the man must have departed: at the blockade, when Moe had backed the car upon the sidewalk. That was where the rescued man had decided to decamp.

A voice spoke from beside the cab:

"Report!"

Moe winced as he heard The Shadow's fierce whisper. Disgruntled, he told his story. He had not even talked to the rescued man. He did not know the fellow's name; nor where he wanted to go.

When Moe had concluded, The Shadow spoke again from the darkness:

"Off duty!"

Moe drove away, sluggish and dejected. The Shadow remained, his tall form barely discernible in the dull light of the street. A mirthless whisper came from his hidden lips. The Shadow had wanted to talk with Hal Rydler; to learn the man's name and all that he could furnish in the way of clues. That chance was gone. Again, The Shadow had lost an opportunity to gain a lead to the actual crime which an outside crew had covered.

Yet The Shadow had found one lone clue; and he was banking on it. He had heard the mention of a name: Chip Mulley. Before long, The Shadow would find the owner of that name. Then would his trail begin.

CHAPTER VII. CHIP MEETS A PAL

Twenty-four hours had passed. The bad lands were agog. Late news of crime had created a huge stir in the underworld. The grapevine was alive with rumors. So many tales had passed along the invisible telegraph that crooks were leery of every new one.

Boiled down, the facts were simple. A job had been done at the home of Percy Rydler. Diamonds, valued at one hundred thousand dollars, were missing. Burglars had found a way in; they had opened a safe to take the gems; they had left a dead man on the premises – a caretaker named Jemley.

It was murder. More serious than other recent robberies. Yet the law was as baffled as before. Percy Rydler had gone on a cruise ship. Contacted by radio, he had sent back word that doubled the bewilderment. He could not imagine how the crooks had learned of the gems, or had gained the combination.

There had been a battle after the burglary. That news, particularly, concerned the underworld. Hunk Lomus, like Koker Hosch, had found trouble. But Hunk had not escaped in Koker's fashion. Hunk had taken the bump. The underworld knew who had spelled Hunk's finish.

The Shadow!

The dreaded name was whispered everywhere. Gangland feared the menace of its greatest scourge. Some smooth supercrook was staging cunning crimes; The Shadow had as yet been unable to forestall that mastermind of evil. But in the meantime, The Shadow was roving wide, picking off lesser rogues in an endeavor to reach the big-shot.

That was why the small-fry worried. Any of them might be next.

Who was The Shadow's adversary?

That was the question that puzzled scumland. It produced vague theories throughout the underworld. Four major crimes had been accomplished by a hidden perpetrator: the gold snatched from the steamship Arabia; the securities stolen from Mullat Co.; the money grabbed from Sautelle's secluded office, and, finally, last night's theft of Percy Rydler's diamonds.

A crime master had amassed a harvest, without leaving a single clue. Unquestionably, he had gained his spoils through the aid of competent workers. Every crime bore the earmarks of an underworld job. But who were the men that this supercrook had employed?

None could give the answer. Koker Hosch and Hunk Lomus were classed as mere outside workers. One had fled; the other was dead. But neither had been in the know.

Nevertheless, rumor mongers of the underworld could foresee a shift in tactics on the part of the unknown big shot. The Shadow had entered the game with a vengeance. No supercrook, no matter how confident, could afford to disregard the menace of the cloaked fighter who could bob up from nowhere.

Among the gathering places in the bad lands, "Red Mike's" formed a most notorious hangout. Red Mike's was located close to the Hudson River, in the district known as "Hell's Kitchen." The dive was on a second floor, above a dirty restaurant; it was named after the proprietor, a rowdy called "Red Mike."

THE CRIME ORACLE

The police had their eye on Red Mike's; thus no recognized underworld members hung out there.

On this particular night, the dive was filled with small fry only. Red Mike, himself, was on the job, keeping an eye upon all who entered. If stoolies were present, they were welcome. Rumors – and unlikely ones – were all that they would hear at Red Mike's.

Off from the main part of the dive was a smaller room that formed a passage to the side exit. This room was reserved for the select few whom Red Mike trusted. A solitary rowdy was in the room tonight. He was crouched at a table, nursing a bottle of grog and keeping wary watch toward the half-opened door that led into the main room. The lone hoodlum was Chip Mulley.

NO rumors had involved Chip. He had chosen the side room on the pretext that there were too many bums in the main joint. Red Mike had accepted the explanation. Chip, nervous at first, had become quite at home in the little room. He could hear the buzz from beyond the door. Pushing aside a bottle and glass, he arose from the table and strolled toward the main room.

Just as he reached the threshold, Chip heard a sound behind him. He wheeled about. His face showed startlement; then regained its half grin. Chip recognized the tall, stoop-shouldered arrival who had entered from the side passage. He waved a greeting and came back to the table.

"H'lo, Beak!" expressed Chip. "Squat an' help yourself to a slug outta the bottle!"

The arrival nodded. He sat down, poured himself a drink and raised the glass. He stopped to look at Chip; then clamped down the glass without drinking. Chip's face showed puzzlement.

"The drink can wait," decided Beak, gruffly. "There's something I want to talk about, Chip. That's why I came up here."

Chip eyed Beak warily. The pair had been pals long ago; they had remained friends when they split. Chip Mulley and Beak Thungle had found different lines of crime.

Like Chip, Beak had an appropriate nickname. His face, otherwise flat, was distinguished by an overlarge nose. His eyes were deep-set; he kept them half closed as he looked toward Chip. The latter remembered that habit of Beak's.

"What's it about?"

Chip's query was hoarse. Beak gestured with his right hand, up and down, to quiet his old pal's nerves.

"Just something that was spilled to me," he informed. "By a bimbo that we both used to know."

"When, Beak?"

"A coupla days ago."

Chip remembered something.

"Say, Beak," he remarked, "I t'ought you was laid up. Heard you was crippled in that fight with the bulls, down at the Black Ship –"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"I was," interposed Beak, harshly, "I was flat on my back in my room at the Hotel Spartan when this bird came to see me."

"Who was it?"

Beak eyed Chip carefully. Then he spoke:

"Hunk Lomus."

Chip's pursed lips twitched at mention of the dead mob leader. Beak gave a hoarse guffaw; then leaned forward and whispered hoarsely.

"Don't let it give you the jitters," he confided. "I ain't been piping what Hunk told me. Keep your shirt on, Chip."

Chip quelled his nervousness.

"What Hunk said was this," resumed Beak. "He was going out on a cover-up job; but he wouldn't tell me who for. I didn't want to ask him, anyway, because I knowed it was confidential. Hunk figured there was other jobs coming, savvy?"

"That's why he wanted me to be ready. The last thing he says – all of a sudden like – was that if I heard from you, it would be O.K. Said you was working with the same guy that he was. Then Hunk goes and gets croaked."

Beak guffawed sourly, in remembrance of Hunk. Chip watched his old pal finger the glass. Beak became silent, as if expecting Chip to speak. Chip's nervousness returned during the pause. Suddenly, he began to pour out words.

"YOU'RE a pal, Beak," piped Chip. "That's why I can talk to you, seein' as how Hunk told you some of it. I ain't had nobody to talk to, since last night. It's made me jittery, Hunk being croaked!"

Beak Thungle nodded, in rough sympathy.

"It's screwy!" continued Chip. "The whole thing – right from the beginning. Hunk didn't know the real lay; he was just on the outside. There ain't many guys that would believe this goofy business, Beak. That's why it's got me talkin' to myself. But you know I ain't off my nut – you'll listen –"

Beak nodded again, as Chip paused. Chip licked his lips, picked up the glass that Beak had discarded. He gulped a drink; then resumed.

"It began with Pinky Garson," he whispered. "You know Pinky. Him an' me was pals. Pinky's took it on the lam; he's got his outta the racket. So it don't matter if I mention him. Anyway, first Pinky comes to me. Says he wants me to take a trip with him."

"Where to?"

"I don't know. I went with Pinky; but it was night an' he drove all over the map. Anyway, we come into the cellar of some house, outside of New York, an' Pinky takes me upstairs. We go into a room; an' that's where I sees The Head."

THE CRIME ORACLE

"The Head?"

Chip nodded.

"Whatta ya mean?" queried Beak. "Is that some fancy moniker they tacked on a guy? Calling him The Head because he's a big-shot?"

Chip shook his head. He tightened his grip on the glass.

"It wasn't no guy we saw. It was a head, Beak! A livin' head, sittin' in a square box, with the front open! On top of a table –"

Beak's eyes narrowed. Chip paused; then continued:

"It's straight, Beak! It sounds screwy; but it's real! It was a head that I saw. Only I wasn't there to see it. The Head wanted to see me. That's why Pinky took me."

Beak's eyes turned toward the half-emptied bottle. He was gauging how much Chip had drunk.

"I ain't been hittin' the bottle, Beak," protested Chip. "I ain't had the rams. I ain't cracked, neither. Listen; Pinky Garson was takin' on a job an' The Head had told him what to do. He needed a guy to help him."

"Yeah?" Beak laughed, gruffly. "So The Head talked, did it?"

Chip nodded.

"That's what it did," he expressed in an awed tone. "It tells Pinky all about a bird named Herbert Threed, that was to have some stocks passed to him, in an office. Pinky brings me back to New York. We go to the buildin' an' we grab the elevator man. It was night – only one guy on the job."

"I run the elevator, while Pinky passes himself as Threed. We gets the swag an' beats it. Pinky was headin' out of New York anyway. So he kept on goin'. Tells me I'll hear from The Head – through somebody else."

"Who was that?"

"It was Squint Proddock."

"What job did he pull? That one at Sautelle's?"

Chip nodded. He was feeling steadier through this chat with an old pal. He explained further.

"SQUINT had Koker Hosch there," said Chip. "To cover up, see? Because Squint was goin' to send Koker along to see The Head. But Koker gets in a jam; he takes it on the lam. So Squint had to pick another guy."

"Who'd he pick?"

"Moose Sudling. An' Moose uses me, like Pinky an' Squint had done. Moose an' me stages the job last night at Rydler's. It was Moose who croaked the old guy."

"And Moose had Hunk Lomus on the outside?"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Yeah. The same as Squint had Koker. Hunk was supposed to be the next in line. But he got bumped. There ain't no tellin' who'll be next. Squint will have to name another guy."

"Why, Squint? It ought to be Moose's turn."

"Moose is out. He's on the lam because he croaked that caretaker at Rydler's. It goes back to Squint. He's still in town. Where, I don't know. But, listen, Beak. Any job that The Head stages is a pip. It's his brain runs it, all the way through."

"He needs somebody to swing the job, though. Like Pinky, or Squint –"

"Or Moose. Sure. But they don't have to use the bean. The Head gives 'em all the dope. They put it down on paper. Where to be an' when. What to do. It runs like a clock! Every job is a set-up –"

Beak Thungle was looking past Chip Mulley, toward the half-opened door to the main dive. Beak could see men seated at tables beyond the doorway. Buzzing chatter and raucous guffaws were coming from the smoke-filled hangout. Beak gripped Chip's arm in interruption.

"Listen, Chip," said Beak, in a low tone, "This ain't no spot to do too much talking. This is great stuff you've spilled! I want to hear more of it. Somewhere else, though."

"Sure. That's a good idea."

"I'm going out by the side way. You stay here. Finish a couple of drinks; then go out through the main room. I'll be in there, but don't say nothing to me. Maybe a hello, if I holler to you – but go on out, right after. Head over toward the Black Ship. I'll come along later."

Chip nodded. Beak arose and strolled out by the side door. Chip gulped the remainder of his drink. He made another reach for the bottle. Just then, the door from the main room swung wide. A tall, stoop-shouldered rowdy came stumbling inward. He guffawed a greeting:

"Hello, Chip! How're you, pal? Red Mike says you were in here –"

Chip Mulley gazed, rigid. The man who had entered from the main room was the very one who had left, only a minute before, by the side door! He was staring at the face of Beak Thungle!

"Whassa matter, Chip?" Beak plopped at the table. Chip saw that he had been drinking heavily. "Say – you look like you was seein' things! Whatta ya been doin' – talkin' to The Shadow?"

Beak guffawed as if his remark had been an apt jest. He reached for Chip's bottle, raised it and took a long swig. He sprawled half across the table and chortled again, in maudlin manner.

"Thassa good one!" croaked Beak. "Chip Mulley been talking to The Shadow! Thass another good one for the grapevine! Like the rest of the hokum they've been piping!"

Chip heard no more. He had risen; he was stumbling toward the door to the main room. He reached his objective; quivering, he faltered to a table, amid groups of riotous hoodlums. Terror had seized the chipmunk-faced crook. He had encountered two Beak Thungles: one false, the other actual.

He knew why the first had gone so suddenly, with suggestion for a later conference. The first Beak had been looking out into the main room. He had seen the second Beak enter. The first Beak Thungle was the

pretender; and he was the one whom Chip had spilled the secret news.

But the second Beak Thungle had unwittingly supplied the answer. His drunken jest had hit the truth. His face distorted with fear, Chip Mulley realized the true identity of the person who had played Beak's role.

Chip Mulley knew that he had talked with The Shadow!

CHAPTER VIII. TWO APPOINTMENTS

The underworld was not the only portion of New York that buzzed with news of crime. At the very hour when Chip Mulley had guessed his own mistake, persons elsewhere were discussing the robbery of last night. Two, in particular, were finding such conversation important.

One was Hal Rydler. His companion was a woman a few years older than himself, although her artful make-up gave her a younger appearance. The woman was Adele Rayhew; until a few months ago, she had been engaged to Hal's brother Percy. This evening, Hal had called Adele and invited her to dinner.

They were finishing their meal, in the roof garden of a swanky New York hotel. Their corner table was a secluded one; near-by diners had departed. Adele decided that she could speak in confidence to Hal.

"Nice of you to take me to dinner, Hal," remarked the girl. "I was afraid you would be prejudiced because I broke my engagement to your brother. Percy was very much upset about it. But, really, Hal, it could not be helped –"

Hal made no comment. He had a reason for his silence; and his meeting with Adele Rayhew was part of it.

"I could help Percy," the girl was saying. "Really, Hal, I could. But I'm sailing for Europe day after tomorrow, and all the packing that must be done tomorrow –"

"Wait a moment." Hal had found the opportunity he wanted. "You say that you could help Percy. I suppose you mean that you might find a way to recover the stolen diamonds. Am I right?"

Adele nodded, slowly.

"I know why you say that," continued Hal. "About six months ago, some jewels of your own were stolen. You regained them, didn't you?"

Again a nod. Adele's face was troubled.

"As I recall it," persisted Hal, "you hired a private detective. He visited a servant who had once been in your employ. The ex-servant had the gems. He handed them over."

Adele made no reply. Her silence indicated, however, that Hal's account was a correct one.

"That was an inside job," remarked Hal. "This robbery was not. Why do you still think that Percy's diamonds might be reclaimed?"

Adele started to speak; then bit her lips. She looked across the table and saw a steady expression in Hal's eyes. Adele's gaze dropped. When she spoke, her voice trembled.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"It – it was a very odd circumstance," she said – "the one that enabled me to recover my gems. Months ago, I heard of something spooky – something so ridiculous that I laughed at it. I couldn't bring myself to believe in spirits. But when I heard that this was something scientific, I went to it. A friend took me there."

"A spirit seance?"

"No. An oracle."

"An oracle? What do you mean?"

"An old professor owns the Oracle, Hal. His name is Professor Caglio. He lives near the town of Littenden, in New Jersey. In the strangest sort of a house."

"Littenden," mused Hal. "I know where it is. Only twenty miles from Newark. Yet it is wild country thereabouts."

"PROFESSOR CAGLIO has a house with no windows," explained Adele. "In it is a weird room, with many strange mechanical figures. One of them is the Oracle. It is a head that talks."

"A living head?"

"It seems to be alive. But the professor says it is purely a mechanical creation, endowed with human wisdom. He calls The Head by an odd name that begins with Z. I think I can remember it – yes, the name of The Head is Zovex."

Hal laughed.

"What does The Head do?" he queried. "Sing songs and tell fortunes? You can't cross its palm with silver. What do you do – hand money to Professor Caglio?"

"You must be serious, Hal," implored Adele.

"Of course! Tell me more about Zovex."

"I asked questions of the Oracle. It answered them, very wisely. The Oracle told me where my stolen jewels could be found. My gems were worth almost four thousand dollars, Hal. The detective that I hired did just as I told him. He went to Logan's home – Logan was the servant whom I had discharged – and threatened him with arrest. Logan gave back the jewels."

"And how much did you have to pay Zovex? Or the owner of the Oracle, Professor Caglio?"

"Not a cent. Professor Caglio does not need money, Hal. He is a scientist. He has invented a great many worthwhile things –"

"Including the talking head." Hal chuckled. "Well, Adele, the next step is to visit Professor Caglio and see what Zovex has to say about Percy's diamonds. Maybe The Head will make another lucky stab."

"It is not luck, Hal. Really, the Oracle is uncanny! But I am afraid that it will speak no longer."

"Why not?"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"I was the last person to consult it. All the others – my friends – had left New York. The Oracle advised all of them. It told me that my trip to Europe would be wise. In fact, I should have left two weeks ago, according to the Oracle's statement."

"I see. If you went out to Caglio's tomorrow, he might not like it? That is, The Head might be angry?"

Adele nodded.

"Zovex gives no new advice to those who do not follow the old," she said, as though repeating words that The Head itself had once uttered. "So I can not very well visit the Oracle until after I return from Europe."

"But you can send some one to see Zovex?"

"I believe so. I was taken there by friends. I suppose I would have the privilege of recommending another visitor."

"That settles it. When we go down to the hotel lobby, Adele, you can write a letter of introduction. One that I can take out to Professor Caglio."

"But the note will show that I remained in New York –"

"Not at all. You can date it more than two weeks ago."

"Then Caglio will wonder why you did not come earlier –"

"Why should he? I shall tell him that I live in Baltimore, and that this was my first trip to New York since I received the letter. Moreover, I shall explain that it is the first time that I have needed advice from Zovex."

ONE hour later, Hal Rydler arrived at his hotel, after taking Adele Rayhew to her apartment. In his pocket, he carried a note that the girl had written. That note would serve as his passport to visit Professor Caglio. It was too late to make the trip tonight. Hal planned it for the morrow.

Incredible though the girl's story had been, Hal had been impressed. He had remembered the mystery of the gems which Adele had recovered. This was the first time that he had ever heard the explanation. Adele had added some further details regarding Professor Caglio's strange abode. Her statements had whetted his interests more than before.

It would be a long-shot gamble, perhaps; but the visit seemed worth-while. It appealed to Hal's love of adventure; and this curious talk of an Oracle seemed to fit with strange circumstances that Hal had already experienced. He had not forgotten that heavy, clumping prowler whom he had observed at the scene of the murder in his brother's house.

NOT long after Hal Rydler had strolled to his hotel, another man began a journey along a New York street. This was Chip Mulley, departing from Red Mike's. The crouchy crook had lingered long at the dive. He had made one trip into the side room, in an effort to talk with Beak Thungle. He had found his old pal in a drunken stupor; failing to rouse Beak, Chip had decided to depart alone.

Every corner made Chip shudder. Furtively, the scared crook kept staring at spots of blackness, expecting one to come to life. He had talked with The Shadow! He could picture that dread avenger no longer posing as Beak Thungle. The Shadow – a figure of blackness!

THE CRIME ORACLE

Past one corner, Chip faltered. He saw thick gloom that looked almost like a living shape. Hurriedly, he staggered onward and dived from view beyond a corner. A moment later, the blackness moved. Chip's fear had at last been justified. It was The Shadow!

Chip's affrighted gait had been a giveaway. The Shadow knew that the furtive crook had seen the real Beak Thungle too soon. The Shadow had a remedy. He moved to a spot where a cab was parked. He whispered instructions from the darkness beside the taxi. The cab rolled away. It took the corner that Chip had turned.

The cab passed the hurrying crook and turned another corner. There, a man dropped out. As Chip neared a corner, the man came into view. Chip saw him and stopped. Sight of a square, well-chiseled face gave him a feeling of assurance.

"Cliff Marsland!"

The square-jawed man heard Chip's greeting. He recognized the nervous crook. That was not surprising. Both were known in the underworld.

"Hello, Chip!" returned Cliff. "Where are you heading? Over toward the Black Ship?"

"Yeah." Chip stopped suddenly. "No – I'm only goin' part way there, Cliff. Say – if you're goin' along –"

"What's the matter, Chip? You look jittery. Guess you're like a lot of others I've run into tonight. Been hearing too much chatter about The Shadow."

Chip quivered as he sidled along the street at Cliff's side.

"He's one mug I'd like to meet!" continued Cliff harshly. "The Shadow! I'm gunning for that phony!"

Chip's eyes widened. He remembered that Cliff Marsland had formerly bragged of being on The Shadow's trail. Others had boasted of such a mission; they had not long survived. When Chip came to consider it, he realized that Cliff was the only man who had frequently repeated such a claim.

"You think I'm kidding?" queried Cliff, as he looked at the shuffler beside him. "If you do, take another think. It isn't healthy to kid about The Shadow. Plenty of wise guys have found that out when they stopped bullets from those smoke-wagons that The Shadow handles.

"But I've got the Indian sign on The Shadow. I clipped him a couple of times, in a fight. I'm one bimbo that he doesn't like to tackle. I'm ready to take a shot at him any time! But how can anybody find him? I'm likely to croak of old age before he shows up again where I am.

"I've tried to find guys that The Shadow is after. I've found them – yes – but The Shadow has always met up with them ahead of me. They've been lying cold, full of lead when I've come across them. The trouble is, most guys are afraid to talk when they think The Shadow is tailing them. I don't blame them; but if they'd talk to the right guy, they might live longer. And I'm the right guy!"

They had reached a street that led to the Black Ship. Cliff turned to head in that direction. Chip clutched him by the arm.

"Stick with me, Cliff!" he pleaded, hoarsely. "I got somethin' to spill to you – about The Shadow!"

"You have?" queried Cliff, eagerly. "Spill it!"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"I can't pipe it here, Cliff. Listen; I've got a hide-out down the line. Let's slide in there."

They followed a side street and reached an alley. Chip darted a worried glance behind him; then took to the alley, with Cliff beside him. Chip unlocked the battered door of a dingy-fronted building. He and Cliff entered. The door closed.

A soft laugh whispered from darkness near the corner. A cloaked form moved away. The Shadow had followed. He had seen results. His role of Beak Thungle was through. He had deputed Cliff Marsland to keep further contact with Chip Mulley.

Through that move, The Shadow could hope to find a trail. Soon, perhaps, he would reach that mysterious adversary whom Chip had termed "The Head." The Shadow was seeking to solve the riddle of the master brain that guided evil.

In his present course, however, The Shadow had dropped Hal Rydler as a factor. He believed that the rescued man was by this time far from danger. The Shadow had missed a possibility. He did not know that Hal had already gained the vital news and was planning a visit to The Head.

The future held a menace that The Shadow had not foreseen.

IT was one night later.

Cliff Marsland, solid and noncommittal, was slouched in a battered, broken-down chair. Chip Mulley, pale and nervous, was perched upon a stool across the room.

The two had been in Chip's hide-out for nearly, twenty-four hours.

"Nine o'clock," growled Cliff, suddenly. "What's the idea? You tell me you're gonna hear from Squint Proddock, and we ain't heard a word all day. I think you're stallin'!"

"It ain't no stall, Cliff," protested Chip, with a whine. "Honest it ain't! I'm due to hear from Squint any time. That's what I got the phone here for." Cliff eyed the telephone, resting on a soap box in a corner. It looked out of place in this dirty, ratty hide-out of Chip's.

Cliff was anxious for Squint's phone call for another reason other than Chip's. Chip wanted to tell Squint of the masquerade of The Shadow as Beak Thungle. Cliff wanted to make contact with Squint and get a line on The Head's hide-out. He had talked Chip into putting in a good word for him with Squint; and hoped to get in his gang.

Using the pretext of getting cigarettes, Cliff had slipped out of the room a few times in the twenty-four hours he had been there and contacted The Shadow and informed him of progress.

THERE came the dull ringing of the telephone bell. Chip jumped to the soap box.

"Hello..." Chip had raised the receiver. "Hello, Squint. This is Chip... Yeah. Been here since last night. Cliff Marsland is with me... He's a right guy and I put him in the know."

"Let me talk to Squint."

Cliff took the telephone from Chip's hands.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Hello, Squint! This is Cliff Marsland... I pulled Chip out of a jam last night. Chip met the Shadow. He thought The Shadow was Beak Thungle. Chip talked too much. Told him about The Head."

An oath reached Cliff's ears.

"Now I got an idea, Squint. I'm one guy that can handle The Shadow. But I can't find him. Chip says The Head knows everything. Maybe he'll have a way to spot him. Chip says you'll fix it for me to meet The Head. What about it?"

There was a pause. Squint knew Cliff's reputation as a guy who wanted to get The Shadow and wasn't afraid. Then Squint spoke.

"It sounds jake, Cliff," was the word. "I'm in Jersey City now. You beat it right away and meet me at Duke's Tavern, outside of Newark. Tell Chip to scram."

"O.K., Squint. I'll get goin' right away!"

Cliff hung up the receiver, told Chip what Squint had said. The Shadow's agent picked up his hat, waved a farewell to Chip and left the hide-out.

A few moments after Cliff's departure, the barrier to the room opened. There was a figure on the threshold. Flickering gaslight revealed a cloaked form. The glow of the jet was reflected by burning eyes that stared from beneath the brim of a slouch hat.

Chip swung around.

"The – The Shadow!"

Through Chip's bewildered brain ran sudden thought, suspicion. Marsland must be working with The Shadow! The Shadow's entry immediately following Marsland's departure, plus Cliff's desire to meet up with The Head, could leave no other conjecture!

Quivering, Chip backed toward a corner, gaze hard on an automatic that had slipped from under The Shadow's cloak. Chip's eyes showed a plea for mercy that would have befitted a trapped rat.

A sinister laugh came mirthless. Echoes repeated The Shadow's whispered mockery. Backing to the door, the cloaked visitant thrust his automatic beneath his blackened garb. Like a living shroud, he blended with the gloom of the hall.

Chip stared. The Shadow had gone!

A SUDDEN gleam showed on Chip's face. He was free. He had learned facts. Cliff Marsland was working for The Shadow! That news could be piped to those who would pay for it!

Not in New York; but elsewhere. By contacting the right crooks, Chip could start a man hunt for The Shadow. Cliff Marsland would be the one through whom The Shadow could be traced. Shakily, but with nerve returning, Chip began to pack his few belongings. He stopped suddenly as he heard footsteps at the opened door.

Chip snarled as he wheeled about. His hand halted on the way to the pocket of his tattered jacket. Two men were at the doorway. Both were holding leveled guns. Coat lapels went back. Chip saw the gleam of badges.

"G-men!"

Chip raised his hands as he gasped the recognition. The Federal agents stepped across the threshold. One tall and long-faced; the other, stockier, was dark and mustached.

"Is this the fellow, Vic?" questioned the long-faced G-man.

His companion nodded.

"It's Chip Mulley," he affirmed. "I know that face of his, Terry. It's lucky I was here in New York when that tip came in tonight."

"Vic Marquette!" gulped Chip. "I heard of you –"

"But didn't know I spotted you, eh? I nearly nabbed you once, Mulley, when you were passing phony money for the counterfeiting gang in St. Louis."

"I wasn't shovin' the queer!"

"Come along. We're taking you West. That's where they want you – in St. Louis. Frisk him, Terry. Then clamp the bracelets. We're taking the next train."

Ten minutes later, Chip Mulley was riding in a taxi, sulkily seated between the Federal men. He had reason to be morose. Chip knew that St. Louis would be but the stopping point on the way to a Federal penitentiary.

Another thought rankled him, also. His opportunity to make trouble for The Shadow was finished. Chip would have no chance to pass his news to big-shots. And from these conclusions Chip Mulley gained another.

Chip knew who had dispatched the tip-off to the G-men, that they might trap him in his hide-out. The word had come from one who seemingly knew everything – including the fact that Chip had been wanted for his connection with a counterfeiting band.

The tip-off had been given by The Shadow.

CHAPTER IX. THE SPEAKING HEAD

While Chip Mulley was taking a ride that made him picture prison walls, another man was finishing a journey in New Jersey. Singularly, this chap was viewing a building that looked very much like a prison. Hal Rydler had reached the abode of Professor Caglio, near the town of Littenden.

It was a moonlight night. Hal had borrowed a coupe that belonged to his brother Percy – a car that was always at his disposal. Thanks to the brightness of the night, he had easily found the road to Littenden. He had located Caglio's residence; and again the moonlight was serving him. He could see the house quite plainly.

Adele Rayhew had described the house as a strange one. Hal saw good reason for the definition. Seen from the driveway which Hal had entered, the house appeared as a two-story structure, built of wide stone walls that formed a perfect square. It loomed like a vast gray mausoleum, and the formation of the walls held Hal bewildered.

THE CRIME ORACLE

There was not one window or doorway in the building!

Hal had come from a side road, following a driveway that curved through a wood. Thus he had gained a changing view of Caglio's house. He had seen both sides, as well as the front. Convinced that none of these three walls held an entrance, he decided that the back must be the only mode of access.

A driveway continued around the house. As Hal followed this route, he looked upward, to note that the flat roof was topped by a parapet that followed all along. The drive sloped downward as it neared the back of the house. Taking the final turn, Hal came to the rear and viewed the fourth wall. Like the others, it was blank stone.

The slope, however, had produced a space that showed a portion of the cellar wall. This was of concrete, an extension of the building's foundation. The drive turned sharply toward the house. As he reached the terminus, Hal saw a sliding door, large enough for a car to enter. The door was set in the foundation. It was made of steel, almost matching the grayish–white of the concrete.

Some one must have observed the coupe's arrival, for the sliding door opened sidewise. Hal saw the interior of a large garage. He drove boldly through the doorway and brought his car to a stop upon a lighted space that was set with stone posts. He peered from the window in time to see the sliding door close behind him.

There was only one other car in the basement garage. It was a long, powerful roadster that stood in a corner. There was space enough, however, for a dozen automobiles.

A man stepped from behind a pillar and approached the coupe. Hal noted that he was slender, but of wiry appearance. The man was poker–faced. His eyes peered sharply from beneath the visor of a chauffeur's cap.

"Whom do you want to see?"

The demand was rasped. Apparently, the man had expected some other visitor and was puzzled when he spied Hal's face.

"I want to talk to Professor Caglio," replied Hal, quietly. "I am a friend of Miss Rayhew. I have a letter of introduction that she gave me."

"Wait where you are."

The chauffeur went to the inner wall and picked up a telephone. Hal watched him as he held brief conversation. The chauffeur turned and beckoned. Hal stepped from the coupe and advanced.

"I'll take care of your car," the chauffeur told him. "The prof says that you can come upstairs."

HE opened a door and showed an automatic elevator. Hal entered. The chauffeur followed. They rode up to the main floor and stepped out into a hallway. Hal noted a mellow, indirect light – a contrast to the glare of the downstairs garage.

They were at the very front of the house. The elevator had brought them up to the spot where a front entry should have been. The hall was long and wide. It ran the full depth of the building. On the right, Hal saw an opened door that led into a large, comfortably furnished living room, with a huge fireplace. At the left he saw another doorway, that revealed a dining room of similar proportions.

THE CRIME ORACLE

The walls of the living room were solid. It had no windows; nor did it have a connecting door to any other room. The fireplace was at the front; at the back of the room was a large, broad mirror, set in a huge gilt frame.

The dining room was likewise windowless; but it had a door in the back wall. One that obviously led into a pantry, and probably on through to a kitchen beyond.

Hal had time for these observations while the chauffeur was closing the door of the elevator. Then the man joined him. They walked along the hall.

Just past the living room, Hal made new observations. There were two more doors upon the right, both to smaller rooms. There was one on the left; probably a way into the kitchen. The hallway turned left when it reached the back of the house. Hal decided that it must lead to a stairway at the rear of the kitchen.

But he had no opportunity to learn further details. The chauffeur had stopped at the middle door on the right. He had removed his cap, displayed a half-bald head. He was rapping at the door.

The portal opened. Hal stared into a small study. Then he eyed the man who had opened the door. He knew that it must be Professor Caglio. The man himself was as curious as the house.

Hal saw a tall, gawky figure, with long, disjointed arms that hung from bent shoulders. He eyed a withered, tight-skinned face, small-featured and with eyes that peered like sharp beads of light. Above, a crop of wild, shaggy white hair. Tight lips spread to show stumpy teeth.

"Good evening!" Caglio's voice was a cackle. "I give you welcome! May I ask your name, my friend?"

Caglio was jabbing a withered hand toward Hal. The visitor clasped the professor's claw. The chauffeur had stepped aside.

"Your name?"

"Rydler. Hal Rydler."

Hal saw the professor give a sudden start. Then lips croaked a pleased chuckle. Hal had already classed the professor as eccentric. He saw no significance in the white-haired man's odd action.

"Ah, yes," nodded Caglio. "A friend of Miss Rayhew. Step right in, Mr. Rydler."

Hal complied. Caglio, moving aside, spoke to the chauffeur:

"You may go, Havelock."

The chauffeur went toward the front of the house. Professor Caglio closed the door. He motioned Hal to a chair beside a large desk. Hal handed him Adele's note. Caglio seated himself and began to read the message.

This allowed Hal time to look about him. The study was a small room; but it resembled the others that Hal had seen. Like the hall, all had one dominant feature of decoration: The walls were of paneled oak. One wide panel; then a narrow one. The same order was repeated. The panels went half way up the wall; above was a row of shorter panels; but they corresponded in width to those beneath.

THE CRIME ORACLE

The light was pleasant throughout the study. The air, too, was fresh, which surprised Hal, since the house was windowless. He noted that the professor used a desk lamp in order to read the letter. That was natural, since the room itself was not over-bright.

Professor Caglio looked up suddenly, to cackle a question.

"You have come to consult the Oracle?"

"Yes," replied Hal. "I wanted to ask Zovex about –"

Caglio raised a withered hand.

"You must speak to Zovex," he croaked. "Not to me. Come!"

He led the way from the study. They went toward the rear of the house and stopped at the last door on the right. The professor turned the knob. They entered another lighted room, paneled like the study, and of corresponding size.

HAL blinked in utter amazement, when he saw the contents of the room. Professor Caglio indulged in a stump-toothed smile, pleased at the visitor's surprise.

The room was like a miniature museum; every exhibit was an oddity. To his left, Hal saw a waxwork figure that was seated upon a large, oblong chest. The figure was almost life-size. It was attired like a Turk. In front of the figure was a chessboard, with the pieces set in position for a game.

To Hal's right was a smaller figure that looked like an oversize doll. It was seated upon a four-legged bench. Its dress was adorned with ruffles. The figure's lap supported a small writing board, to which its left hand was clamped. Its right hand held a pen, and the head was tilted forward so that its lifeless eyes looked straight toward the board.

Cages were hanging from the ceiling. These contained imitation birds of varied plumage. Near the far end of the room was a square-topped mahogany table, supported by a blocky pedestal that served as a leg. Beyond the table, Hal saw a small safe in the wall; above it, a shelf with a row of cubical boxes.

Some of the boxes had open fronts. Inside them, Hal saw waxwork heads. Two had the faces of women; a third held the visage of a wise-faced Hindu. Hal wondered if this could be Zovex.

"One moment, Mr. Rydler!" Professor Caglio cackled the exclamation. "Before we proceed with the consultation, let me explain the purpose of this room. It is my laboratory; where I experiment with various forms of automata."

"Automata?" queried Hal. "You mean mechanical figures?"

Professor Caglio nodded.

"Yes." He pointed to the doll-like figure at the right. "Here we have a replica of the Jacquet-Droz automaton. It was invented in the eighteenth century. I shall have it operate."

He opened the back of the doll. Hal saw that the figure was filled with clockwork. The professor adjusted several levers, wound the clockwork and set it in motion. A slight ticking sounded, even after he had closed the back of the doll.

THE CRIME ORACLE

There was a pad of paper on the square table at the back of the room. Caglio tore away a sheet and brought it to the doll. He placed the paper beneath the figure's right hand. He opened the top of a small inkwell that was set in the board. Hal watched, while the ticking continued.

The figure's tiny hand began to move. It advanced, jerkily dipped the pen into the inkstand. The hand quivered with an eccentric motion, shaking off drops of ink that splattered into the inkstand. Approaching the paper, the hand began to write, forming quaint letters in slow, painful fashion.

Hal blinked. The figure was inscribing his own name: "Rydler." With the finish of the sixth letter, the hand raised. With a slight click, the doll's face looked upward, like that of a child, expecting approval.

"Remarkable!" exclaimed Hal.

PROFESSOR CAGLIO smiled. He turned to the chess player and opened a door that was cut in the cloth front of the figure's chest. He showed a mass of mechanism. Closing the door, Caglio opened another that was set in the right side of the oblong box. He revealed another display of clockwork.

Closing that door, he opened the left side of the oblong box and pointed to another collection of machinery. He wound the clockwork, closed the last door and pointed to a chair.

"Seat yourself," said Caglio to Hal. "Test your skill against that of the Turk. I presume that you play chess?"

Hal nodded. He took the chair opposite the chess player. Hal had the white pieces. He began with the Ruy Lopez opening. He made one move. The automaton swung its right hand forward. Its fingers plucked up a pawn and moved the piece.

The game progressed swiftly; for Hal was more interested in seeing the figure operate than he was in the game itself. When the chess player captured pieces, it dropped them beside the board. Suddenly, Professor Caglio clucked triumphantly.

"Check!" he exclaimed. "Check and mate! The automaton has won!"

Hal rose from his chair. He shook his head.

"Incredible!" he remarked. "How can a mechanical device be arranged to counter all the possible moves of a chess game?"

"You saw the intricate machinery, explained the professor. "Thousands of tiny levers are necessary. That is why the large chest is needed to house the elaborate mechanism. Von Kempelen invented this automaton. It is superior to the writing figure devised by Jacquet-Droz."

Caglio looked toward the bird cages, with their mechanical occupants. He decided to pass them for the present. He motioned Hal toward the back of the room. He pointed to the row of cubical boxes.

"The theraphim!"

Caglio's whisper was awed. His eyes showed a wild glare.

"Theraphim?" queried Hal. "What does that mean?"

"A name given to heads that speak," returned Caglio. His tone was hushed. "These are mechanical, yes. But sometimes they possess a human wisdom. That is why I have named each head."

"Is that one Zovex?"

Hal pointed to the waxen Hindu.

"No," replied Caglio. "That is Ganara. A head that displays no more than mechanical attributes. This box" – he picked a closed cube from the shelf – "is the one that contains the head of Zovex."

Carrying the box in careful fashion, Caglio started to the center of the room. Hal moved along with him. The professor stopped suddenly beside the square-topped table. He pushed a stack of books away; then held the box by a handle at the top. The box was swaying in his right hand, a foot above the table. Eagerly, Caglio drew back a catch, to release the front of the box.

"Observe!" he cackled. "See! For the first time! The face of Zovex – The Head that will live forever! Zovex, the undying Oracle!"

The front of the box swung downward on a hinge. Hal Rydler saw the head within the box. He spied a face of waxwork, that gleamed in the reflected light. Spontaneously, a startled, instinctive cry gulped from Hal's throat.

The head within the box had livid lips. Its nose was wide. Its eyes were rounded orbs that bulged from beneath thick brows. Its waxen forehead was a mass of V-shaped wrinkles. Its hair was black and shaggy.

The face of Zovex was identical with the visage of that fearful, bulky prowler whom Hal had seen within his brother's house!

CHAPTER X. THE GUEST REMAINS

Professor Caglio placed the box in the center of the table. He turned to eye Hal Rydler sharply. The visitor's exclamation had reached the old man's ears.

"What troubles you?" queried Caglio, cackle harsh. "Others have not quailed at sight of Zovex."

"Nothing," replied Hal, abruptly. "It – Zovex – well, the face reminded me some one –"

"You have seen a face that resembles of Zovex?"

"No, no! It was just a fleeting thought that gripped me. I found it hard to realize that the head is not alive."

Professor Caglio laughed in cackly fashion. His eyes took on their wildish stare.

"There are those," he chortled, "who believe that Zovex lives. Some who are wise believe it. Perhaps they are right."

"That would be impossible."

"I disagree. Remember, I am a scientist. Yet I have learned of phenomena which science cannot explain. From antiquity, there have been reports of Oracles. Some of them – the wisest – were speaking heads. Like the one that you see before you."

THE CRIME ORACLE

Caglio pointed a bony finger toward the evil face of Zovex. Hal, staring, found sight of the head more distasteful than before. The glare upon the waxen visage was hideous.

"The head of Mirme was an Oracle," affirmed Caglio. "It was brought from Asia, into Scandinavia. The Oracle at Lesbos was a speaking head. It was the head of Orpheus; and it predicted the death of Cyrus, the Persian king.

"There was the head of the physician Dalban, that lived long after death. A legend, perhaps, of the Arabian Nights; but such stories often hold foundation, particularly when later discoveries support their possibility."

Professor Caglio paused. His cackle had become shrill. Hal wondered if this could be the old man's mania.

"The ancients called such heads 'androides'," resumed Caglio, wisely. His tone had suddenly calmed. "The art of constructing speaking heads came down through the Middle Ages. Just prior to the French Revolution, Mical presented a collection of speaking heads to the French Academy of Sciences.

"Mechanical devices, yes. But there lies a difference between the androides and the theraphim. The androides are constructed. The theraphim are the embalmed heads of the dead. This head – the head of Zovex – is of the theraphim!"

"It once lived?" queried Hal. "Upon the shoulders of a living man?"

Caglio nodded wisely. Hal was staring at the head.

"But it is waxwork!" Hal exclaimed. "Wax – or some other composition. Yet it looks real." He stared at the fixed eyes. "It seems monstrous –"

"Zovex belongs to the theraphim," croaked Caglio in interruption. "Zovex will speak when he has heard your story."

Caglio waited, silent. Hal addressed the head.

"MY name is Hal Rydler," he declared. "I have come to learn regarding stolen diamonds, that were taken from my brother's house two nights ago."

Hal paused. He watched The Head. Professor Caglio was close beside the table. The old man's claws were gripping the edge.

The lips of Zovex moved. Their motion was mechanical. A voice grated from the lips:

"Zovex has heard."

Hal stood silent as the lips ceased moving. Caglio leaned forward and put a question of his own:

"Can Zovex answer?"

Again lips moved mechanically. The voice grated:

"Zovex will answer."

THE CRIME ORACLE

Eyelids dropped like shutters. The glare was gone from the waxen face. Hal turned toward the professor. Caglio held a finger to his lips.

"Zovex sleeps!" whispered the old man. "Come! We must be gone until the head awakens. Then the Oracle will answer. Within that head" – Caglio's forefinger was wagging – "lies a living brain!"

They went from the strange room. Hal, in the hallway, caught a last sight of the waxwork head in its box upon the table. Then Caglio shut the door. With a slight smile, the professor conducted Hal forward to the living room.

"We shall wait here," declared the professor. "The Oracle must be given time to decide upon an answer."

"I had no opportunity to give the details of the robbery," remarked Hal.

"Zovex needs no details," responded Caglio. "His brain will picture every circumstance."

THEY sat down in comfortable chairs before the fireplace. Hal heard the crackle of logs. A fire was burning; as he looked about, he could see the reflection of the blaze in the wide gilt-edged mirror on the opposite wall of the room. He turned toward the fireplace and watched the sparkle of the logs.

"An idea of mine," chuckled Professor Caglio. "This house is windowless. I keep it entirely air-conditioned. The temperature varies in different rooms. An open fire is cheerful; so the living room is kept cooler than other apartments. A log fire is therefore quite in order."

The door opened as Caglio was speaking. Hal looked about; then arose as a girl stepped into the room. She was a charming brunette, whose eyes showed friendliness. Caglio introduced Hal.

"This is my niece," he told the visitor. Then, to the girl: "Martha, meet Mr. Rydler. Remain here, Martha, while I summon Selfridge. I want him to meet Mr. Rydler."

The girl took a chair. Hal sat down as Caglio departed. As soon as the old man was gone, the girl spoke to Hal.

"You came here to see Zovex?" she queried.

"Yes," replied Hal, frankly.

"You have already seen him?" asked the girl.

Hal nodded.

"Did The Head tell you to remain?"

"Not exactly," answered Hal. "I am to talk to Zovex again, Miss Caglio."

"My name is not Caglio," smiled the girl. "I am Martha Keswick. Caglio is my uncle's name; but not his real one."

"Not his real name?"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"No. I do not know his actual name. Perhaps I should not tell you this, Mr. Rydler; but I am worried about my uncle and his eccentric notions. I promised myself that I would tell the truth to the next visitor who came here. That is, the next one like yourself. There have been others here, others whom I could not trust!"

The girl stopped abruptly. Caglio had returned, bringing a tall cadaverous man with him. He introduced his companion to Hal. The cadaverous man's clasp felt like the grip of a skeleton.

"This is Mr. Selfridge," stated Professor Caglio. "He is my technician. He attends to the detail work of the mechanical figures. Selfridge is highly competent."

The cadaverous man bowed when he heard the compliment. He remained in the room while Professor Caglio went out again. Selfridge made no effort to begin a conversation; nor did Martha Keswick resume the discussion that she had started.

Hal, silent, gained a sudden suspicion. Caglio had deliberately introduced Selfridge in order to keep his visitor under observation. This meant that the professor might have suspected something because of Hal's first startlement at viewing the head of Zovex.

Where had Caglio gone? Back to the room where he kept the automata?

While Hal was pondering on the subject, Caglio reappeared. He bowed from the doorway and invited Hal to accompany him. When he arose, Hal caught a warning gaze from Martha, who was seated near the fire. He smiled and gave a slight nod; then joined Caglio. The professor led him directly to the rear room on the right.

"Sufficient time has elapsed," remarked Caglio, in his crackly tone. "I believe that the Oracle will speak."

THE cubical box was on the table, where Caglio had left it. The head was staring from within. The bulging eyes had opened. Caglio nodded approvingly, as he closed the door.

"Question the Oracle again," he suggested. "Tell The Head that you wish to know about the stolen diamonds."

Hal faced The Head.

"Tell me about the diamonds," he said. "Where are they?"

Glaring eyes remained fixed. Lips alone moved. The speaking head rasped its answer.

"All can be seen by the eyes of Zovex," it announced. "I have viewed the place where the diamonds lie. They are where they can now be regained."

Hal gaped. His first observation had given him two theories regarding the Oracle. One, that Professor Caglio was a ventriloquist. That idea was shattered. Hal was standing closer to The Head than was Caglio. The professor could not have simulated the voice. Not on this occasion, at least. Ventriloquism was impossible, under present conditions.

Hal's second theory was that of a mechanical head. The previous statements had sounded like set remarks. The present utterance was too prolonged, too sustained to be that of a mere machine. Hal tried another question.

"When can the diamonds be regained?"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Tomorrow," responded Zovex, "I shall speak again."

"You will know the answer at that time?"

"Yes. I shall speak when the moment arrives."

"And you will know about the diamonds? Where they are?"

"All will be known to Zovex."

Hal was convinced that The Head lived. Professor Caglio was plucking at the visitor's sleeve. Persistently, the young man put another question to the Oracle.

"Since you know the future," queried Hal, "why is it necessary to wait?"

"Zovex has spoken," grated The Head. Eyes glared; their gleam lifelike. "When fools hear words of wisdom, they should not expect added explanation!"

The tone was a harsh rebuke.

Caglio was tugging Hal away.

"Come!" cautioned the professor. "Do not offend the Oracle! Zovex will speak again tomorrow. Come! We can talk together in my study."

Hal followed the professor from the room. Hal's head was in a whirl. His second theory was flattened. His chance questions, particularly the last, were ones that could not have been accurately anticipated. No phonographic records could have accounted for those sharp responses. The Head was alive!

WHEN they reached the study, Hal slumped in a chair. He was totally bewildered. He was positive that he had viewed the same head that he had seen upon the clumpy man in New York. Yet this head had rested in a box upon a table; and the pedestal leg of the table was less than two feet square.

Professor Caglio must have noted his guest's bewilderment. He clamped a friendly hand upon Hal's shoulders.

"Wait here," he remarked. "I shall bring the models of some new inventions that will interest you. We shall have time to discuss them, since you will remain overnight."

"No!" Hal was on his feet before Caglio reached the door. "I must go into New York. Positively! I can come out tomorrow."

"Very well." Caglio had opened the door. His sharp eyes saw the determination on Hal's face. "Nevertheless, I shall bring the models. It will not take long to examine them."

He stepped out into the hall and closed the door. Hal went back to the desk. He sat down and stared at the paneled walls. His ears caught a hissing sound. Hal looked about.

He could not locate the direction from which the noise came. He walked about the room; then nervously approached the door. He tried the knob. It did not budge. Hal realized that he was locked in the study.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Clutching his hands, he looked toward the panels. They were all alike, and the walls were thick. Hal had guessed that last fact from the sizes of the rooms. Every apartment, the living room included, seemed smaller than it should have been when gauged by the length of the hall.

Hal started toward the door again. On the way, he faltered. He was becoming dizzy. The hissing was a terror to his ears. He clutched the doorknob. His hand slipped from it. His head began to swim. He sagged to the floor. He was gasping, for the air had become difficult to breathe.

Half crawling, Hal dragged himself to a chair and rolled into it. He tilted his head backward and panted as he stared toward the ceiling. The hissing ended. Hal heard the click of the doorknob; but he was too weak to respond. Turning his head slightly, he saw Professor Caglio.

THE old man's eyes expressed pretended surprise. Caglio called to some one outside the door. Selfridge entered. Hal heard the professor speak to him.

"Bring Marley," ordered the professor. "Mr. Rydler is not feeling well. We must help him to his room."

Selfridge returned with a smug-faced man who looked like a servant. Hal had lost his dizziness; but he was too weak either to aid or resist when Selfridge and Marley dragged him to his feet. Professor Caglio stood nodding while the pair helped Hal from the room. They moved along the hall to the back; there they turned left. Hal saw a stairway at one end of the side passage.

He managed one last look toward the front of the hall. Professor Caglio was standing by the open doorway of the study. Martha had come from the living room and was speaking to her uncle. Hal could see anxiety on the girl's face. He caught Caglio's cackled words of explanation:

"Mr. Rydler is slightly ill. He will feel better after he has rested."

The turn of the passage interrupted further hearing. His knees sagging, Hal moved along with Selfridge and Marley supporting him. He did not care where they were taking him. He was feeling strange after-effects of that recent dizziness.

Hal was dopey. His eyelids were drooping. He was mumbling when they reached the top of the stairs. When Selfridge and Marley had dragged him into a little room, Hal Rydler had become an inert burden. His body floundered when the two men rolled him on a cot.

The door clicked when the pair departed. Hal lay in solitary quarters, beneath a ceiling of frosted skylight through which the moonlight beamed. Deep sleep had overpowered him.

Hal Rydler was a helpless prisoner within this house where Zovex ruled!

CHAPTER XI. THE FINAL VISITOR

The moon was shining from directly overhead at the time the glow had first shown Hal Rydler sprawled upon his cot. It had advanced but little farther when its mellow light revealed another sight, outside of the windowless building.

A second automobile was coming to the gray-walled house. This car was a sedan. Its driver knew the route, for he followed the curving driveway without hesitation. Yet his course, though steady, was slow. The driver was speaking to a man beside him.

"Keep watching back of us, Cliff. I'm uneasy!"

"There's nobody tailing us, Squint."

"I spotted glimmers in the rear-view mirror!"

"That was a couple of miles back. Before we hit the side road."

"We can't chance nothing, though. Keep an eye out, Cliff."

"I'm watching, Squint."

Leaning half around, Cliff dazed steadily back along the drive. He saw nothing; yet he knew that there was reason for Squint's conjecture. A car had actually been on the sedan's trail. Cliff had spied it at odd intervals. He had not mentioned that fact to Squint.

"Guess we're O.K.," decided Squint, as they took the final turn. "Lamp the house, Cliff. Screwy joint, ain't it?"

"How do you get in the place?" queried Cliff. "Seems like there's no door to it."

"Here's one. Opening for us."

They had reached the entrance to the garage. The sliding door was on the move. Squint Proddock drove the car into the space beneath the house. The door slid shut; Havelock came over to meet the visitors.

The chauffeur recognized Squint. He asked no questions concerning the crook's companion. He simply led the way to the automatic elevator and conducted the arrivals to the main floor. He took them to Caglio's study. Squint knocked at the door; when it opened, he shouldered in with Cliff.

"Hello, prof," greeted Squint, meeting Caglio inside the room. "Meet Cliff Marsland. A pal of mine. Come to talk to The Head."

"Ah!" Caglio's eyes gleamed wisely. "He is to be the next?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Wait until we've talked to The Head. Cliff has some dope to spill."

"But he has never yet spoken with Zovex –"

"I know that. I'll start the speech – with Cliff here adding the details. There's been trouble, prof."

A STRAINED expression showed upon Caglio's face. Without another word, the white-haired man led the way to the room at the back of the hall. The trio entered. Cliff stared, while Squint grinned.

"Looks goofy, don't it?" queried the crook. "Wait'll you see things working, Cliff. You'll think different. Say – there's The Head on the table! Been consulting it, prof?"

"Yes." Caglio nodded. "There was a visitor earlier this evening. One whom I did not expect. His name was Rydler."

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Rydler?" Squint spun about. "Say – that's the guy who owned the fancy ice! The diamonds that Moose Sudling snatched!"

"This was not Percy Rydler," cackled Caglio, interrupting, "It was his brother, Hal. Mere chance brought him here."

"What did you do with him?"

"He is remaining overnight."

There was a significant croak to Caglio's final statement. Squint grinned again; then became serious.

"All right if I talk to The Head?"

Professor Caglio nodded an affirmative response.

"Lamp this," remarked Squint, in an undertone to Cliff. "And keep your ears open, bozo."

He approached the table and faced the open front of the cubical box. Cliff looked past Squint to view the ugly face of Zovex. He was gripped by an immediate dislike for that glaring visage. But Cliff was too experienced to give the slightest indication of his actual impressions.

"Bad news, Zovex," informed Squint. "I guess you know about Moose croaking that guy Jemley; and having Hunk Lomus around, like I had Koker Hosch. That was tough enough; but this is worse.

"The Shadow got hold of Chip Mulley. Passed himself as a bird named Beak Thungle; and Chip fell for it. He blabbed, Chip did. Told The Shadow how a lot of us come out here, to get hot tips. But he didn't tell The Shadow where this joint is. Chip didn't know.

"Might have been a bad proposition, if Cliff Marsland hadn't stepped into it. Cliff, here, is one guy that don't worry about The Shadow. Cliff stuck in the hide-out, along with Chip, and joined up with me tonight. Chip has beat it from town."

SQUINT paused, as though expecting a reply. The Head remained motionless. Professor Caglio approached the table; then turned toward Cliff.

"Zovex expects you to speak," clucked Caglio.

"Not much for me to say." Cliff looked straight toward The Head. "I'm out to get The Shadow. I'll bump him any time I get the chance. What I want to know is, how can I get at him? Squint says you can tell me."

Cliff waited. The head retained its wax-faced impression. Cliff was beginning to consider the game a hoax, when the lips of Zovex suddenly began to move. A voice grated:

"Zovex has heard."

Professor Caglio leaned forward. He questioned:

"Can Zovex answer?"

"Zovex will answer."

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Caglio watched the Oracle; then added a question:

"When will the answer be given?"

The lips moved mechanically. They phrased a single word:

"Tomorrow."

An interval; then eyelids dropped. Caglio turned to Cliff and Squint. He added his own statement:

"You have heard the words of Zovex. Your duty is to remain."

Squint nodded. He turned to Cliff. "That just means The Head will think it over," stated Squint. "He don't always hand out info in a hurry. There's a brain inside that bean. This is a scientific racket, Cliff."

Cliff was nodding. Caglio noted his poker-faced expression. The old professor went to the table. Deliberately, he tilted back the top of the cubical box and lifted the head from its resting place.

"I shall show you," croaked Caglio. He lifted the back of the head. It swung upward, hinged beneath the shaggy wig. "See this intricate machinery? It is a thinking device. Those wheels act under thought impulses, directed by those who speak to Zovex."

"Note the steel ribbons coiled below. They are phonographic records. They produce the voice that you heard. Here are coils that are made to shift, to change the word combinations."

He closed the head and replaced it in the box. He shut the box and put it on the shelf above the safe. Lifting the top of the square table, Caglio showed coils and batteries wedged in the upper portion of the pedestal.

"Electromagnetism operates The Head," he affirmed, seriously. "Once the mechanism is charged, it continues its operation. We might liken it to an adding machine; one devised to complete intricate calculations."

"Overnight" – Caglio paused and pointed to the shelf – "the wheels will click into new positions. One day will suffice. Then Zovex will speak again. His lips will utter wise advice. Important problems will be solved."

"That's the lowdown, Cliff," affirmed Squint. "I've listened to The Head pipe the dope I wanted. Me, sitting here, taking down the tips as fast as Zovex spilled them. Making out a list of it. That's how I swung that job the other night."

"Say – it was a cinch, the way The Head had it! A set-up! And it'll be the same when The Head gives us the dope on The Shadow. But it's different tonight than it was before. I didn't come here to tell The Head something; I came to hear what The Head has to tell me."

"This time, we've brought some ideas of our own. Zovex has got to have time to work them out. That's why he answered us the way he did. The prof has explained it."

CLIFF nodded. He doubted Caglio; and he believed that Squint had fallen for the professor's stall. The Oracle had impressed Cliff as being a simple mechanical device, set to deliver a limited number of statements. That fitted with Caglio's first explanation. It was the rest that Cliff doubted.

Cliff was sure that The Head could not think. He was positive that it could not deliver elaborate statements, unless some subterfuge should be employed. He knew that he would have to wait until the next night to learn

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what trick Caglio intended to use. Cliff was willing to wait. That was his purpose here.

Cliff's nod was intended to indicate belief in Caglio's statements. The professor was bluffed, along with Squint. Caglio's next action was designed purely to add new conviction. He conducted Cliff to the automatic chess player.

"I doubt that you are familiar with chess, Marsland –"

Cliff began to shake his head in the middle of the professor's statement.

Actually, Cliff was a competent chess player; but knowledge of the moves of pawns and rooks did not fit his role of a rowdy from the bad lands.

"Perhaps you have played checkers?" Cliff nodded in response to this question. Professor Caglio produced a quantity of pawns and arranged them as checkers on the board. He also stacked a heap of flat metal rings.

"The automaton can play a checker game," declared Caglio. "When kings are made, simply drop a ring over the knob of the pawn. Use the pawns as checkers. But not until I have arranged the mechanism."

He opened the doors, one by one, closing each before he opened the next. With each action, Caglio made an adjustment of the machinery – both inside the figure and in the oblong box upon which the automaton was seated.

Cliff began his game. It was a brief one.

The automaton, playing with slow precision, outguessed its human opponent. Cliff had as bad luck at checkers as Hal Rydler had experienced at chess. Caglio smiled triumphantly when the game was over.

"This demonstration proves my point," declared the professor. "You have seen the skill of the chess player. It outmatches human intelligence. It is trivial, however, with the processes produced within the head of Zovex. I tell you once again: The Oracle possesses an actual brain!"

"Come. We shall return to the study. I shall summon Marley to conduct you to your rooms. You may forget The Shadow while you are within these walls. This house is a fortress. No human being may enter it without my will. Havelock has been instructed to admit no other visitor."

CLIFF was pondering when they reached the study. The performance of the chess player had baffled him. It seemed to support Caglio's statements regarding Zovex, incredible though the claims might be.

Marley arrived and led the visitors upstairs. They entered a hallway that led into a central passage like the one downstairs; except that there were fully a dozen doors, some reached by short side passages that led off from the main one. Marley ushered Squint into one small bedroom; then conducted Cliff to another, on the opposite side of the hall.

The room was lighted; but its ceiling added a silvery tinge. Looking up, Cliff saw that it was paneled with skylights. The silver hue was moonlight. All the skylights were fixed in position by heavy frames. These appeared to be removable.

Cliff did not attempt to open a skylight. Instead, he performed a simpler action. He brought an envelope from his pocket and carefully unfolded it. The edges retained dried mucilage. Cliff moistened the borders of the envelope; then stepped upon a chair and pressed the flattened paper against the lower surface of a skylight.

The envelope remained in position.

OUTSIDE the square-walled building, all was silent. Gray walls loomed forbidding, save for the sparkle of granules in the stones. Set in its lonely clearing, this house of mystery formed a forgotten structure lost amid the Jersey woods.

No watchers were on duty. There seemed no need for them; and there were no windows from which lookouts could have peered. Hence no one saw the strange phenomenon that occurred beneath the moonlight.

A shape emerged from the blackness of the tree that fronted the house. A stalking form, it moved with uncanny glide. Moonbeams revealed it as a shrouded figure cloaked in a habit of black. It was The Shadow.

The sable-hued arrival reached the front wall of the house. His form merged with the shaded stretch beneath. The moon had risen beyond the square house. Here, at the front, the lunar glow was blocked. The Shadow had found a vantage point.

Looking upward, he could see the bulges of the wall. Protuberances showed against the silvered sky. Slight though they were, those projections offered footholds to The Shadow. When he essayed a smooth surface, The Shadow used rubber suction cups; those devices would be useless upon irregular stone. The roughened wall, however, was even more to The Shadow's liking.

His ungloved fingers found cemented spaces. His toes, encased in soft-tipped canvas shoes, were equally adroit. Invisible against the single darkened wall, The Shadow began his upward course. Like a mammoth beetle, he scaled the wall at a slow but constant rate.

Moonlight, bathing the top parapet, produced a sudden sparkle as The Shadow's hands arrived upon the ledge. The rays had caught the girasol; the gem was glinting from The Shadow's finger. Then the cloaked form swung to the ledge itself. Hands donned their black gloves.

Crouched upon the broad-topped rail that girded the roof of the strange house, The Shadow formed a ghostly figure against the pale sky. No one could spy him from within the house. There were none outside who might discern that shape upon the parapet.

The Shadow was a ghostly visitant – a specter that seemed conjured from another realm. His presence added to the sepulchral tenor of this outlandish abode that stood within the woods. The house itself was like a mammoth tomb; The Shadow, a spirit that had chosen a resting place upon its summit.

The final visitor had arrived. Unseen, unsuspected, The Shadow stood ready to plan a foray into the strange recesses of the house below.

CHAPTER XII. A CRY FROM THE GLOOM

The roof presented an odd appearance when viewed from the parapet. It formed a floor plan of the second story. The reason was that the rooms alone had skylights. The passages of the second floor were topped by solid roof.

The Shadow studied this arrangement, viewing it clearly by the moonlight. A long, wide stretch ran from the front of the roof to the back; there it turned to cover the passage to the stairway. All along the central path were blocky projections. These indicated the short side passages that led to rooms on the second floor.

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There were other wide streaks also. The Shadow noted that they were nearly as broad as the paths that represented hallways. These indicated the walls between the rooms on the second floor.

As for the rooms themselves, they were easily located by the skylights. They formed blocks, placed regularly about the roof. Each square of skylights was divided into smaller sections, like a portion of a checkerboard.

The roof offered easy access, for it was a level floor only three feet below the gray granite ledge whereon The Shadow rested. Yet the cloaked figure made no immediate attempt to reach the roof. Keen eyes were studying its surface. Concealed lips whispered a soft laugh.

The roof was striped with burnished copper that shone like old gold in the pale moonlight. The solid pathways had close-set streaks, each a few inches in width, to form a corduroy surface. Thus each solid sector gave a ribbed appearance.

The square ends of the skylights had ten-inch frames between them. These were also of a corduroy formation. This arrangement, coupled with the choice of metal, told The Shadow why the roof had been so devised.

The entire surface was a barrier that would stop entrance from above; and would also prevent exit from the rooms on the second floor. Those copper strips were charged with electricity. To tread upon them, unaware, would bring instant death!

THE SHADOW had been favored by the presence of moonlight. The fact that the copper was new and untarnished had also aided him to spot the snare. It was a long stretch to the nearest block of skylights; even if he used the glass panes as stepping stones, The Shadow would be handicapped. Each pane was but little larger than a man's girth. To pry at one, contact would be necessary with the copper strips that fringed it.

There was a way to navigate the roof, however; and The Shadow had the means with which to accomplish the task. From beneath his cloak he produced a flat stack of rubber disks, that made a compact bundle. These were his suction cups, each six inches wide and concave on the bottom surface. The Shadow girded his cloak about his body. He attached the disks to his hands and feet.

Deliberately, he dropped inward from the parapet and stalked across the roof, keeping to the solid portions. Only the rubber disks contacted the burnished copper. They acted as insulators. No current could pass through them. Nor did the disks deter The Shadow's progress.

His tread was squalid; but the twisting pressure of his feet enabled him to lift the disks with every step. The copper strips were slippery; moreover, there were ridges on the roof. The spaces between prevented the suction cups from taking a firm grip.

Peering toward the various blocks of skylights, The Shadow observed that some were brighter than the others. Each cluster of illuminated glass meant a lighted room beneath. The Shadow counted four such sectors. One, in particular, caught his gaze.

It had sixteen small panels, each a scant two feet in width. One skylights showed a peculiarity. There was a black patch in its very center. Some object had been plastered on the lower side of the glass.

A whispered laugh told that The Shadow had divined the purpose. He had found the room that Cliff Marsland occupied. The blot that cut off the lower light was caused by the envelope that Cliff had pressed against the glass.

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STEPPING from the solid portion of the roof, The Shadow shifted to the frames between the skylights. He stooped; his right hand rested upon a framework. The disk upon The Shadow's hand acted like those upon his feet, serving as a protective insulation. His left hand came free from its disk; his fingers tapped the glass of the skylight.

Inside the room, Cliff had noted the blackness above the glass. His answering taps came promptly. With quick raps, The Shadow and his agent communicated. Their messages were dots and dashes in a special code.

The Shadow was ready to effect entrance to the room below. He wanted to know if the interior was guarded by bare wires. Cliff replied in the negative. The Shadow questioned, to learn if Cliff could work at the skylight from the inside. Cliff responded that the prospects looked good.

The Shadow gave the order to proceed. He waited while the sounds of a working screw driver came from beneath. Cliff had brought along a few odd tools. Such equipment was natural, since he was supposed to be an active worker in the realm of crookdom.

The task was slow and laborious, for Cliff was cautious in his operations. At last the skylight moved downward. Peering through the opening where the pane had been, The Shadow saw Cliff stepping from a chair, carrying the glass in his hands.

A hissed whisper from above. Cliff placed the thick pane upon the cot. He turned out the light. The Shadow's form swished downward through the darkness. The master sleuth had gained his goal.

"Report!"

The whisper was barely audible in the darkened room. Cliff gave detailed response. He described his arrival with Squint Proddock. He told of his first visit to The Head. He expressed his belief that the Oracle was mechanical.

After describing Zovex, Cliff mentioned the matter of Hal Rydler.

"He's in this house," whispered Cliff. "Somewhere on this second floor."

"Report received!"

The Shadow's tone ended Cliff's story. Sibilant instructions followed. Cliff was to wait until The Shadow had departed from the room. Then he was to replace the skylight and affix its supporting inner frame.

Cliff saw the door open as The Shadow tried it. He caught a glimpse of his cloaked chief. The Shadow was pausing, with the door ajar. Something about the barrier had attracted his attention.

The inner knob had yielded slightly when The Shadow had turned it. He was studying that factor. The Shadow pressed the knob inward. It acted like a plunger. Oddly, the knob still operated the latch. The Shadow tried the outer knob. It failed to turn.

He pressed the outer knob in plunger fashion. The inside knob refused to turn. The Shadow lengthened both plungers. Each knob turned with ease. Cliff had drawn close to note the process. He saw the value of the discovery that The Shadow had made.

Cliff had wondered why no doors had locks. He understood at last. Professor Caglio had invented an ingenious arrangement. Pressure upon either doorknob would act upon the other side. This was a device that

would work two ways. It was possible for any occupant to lock the door of his room. Conversely, any one on the outside could make the occupant a prisoner.

The door was closing. The Shadow had moved out into the hall. Cliff turned on the light and began a careful replacement of the skylight, in conformity to his chief's instructions.

SOFT light illuminated the solid-roofed hallway of the second floor. Beneath the indirect glow, The Shadow formed a phantom figure.

He was stalking silently along, eyeing each doorway that he passed. He stopped at a portal near the stairs.

This door bore a slight difference from the rest. Its knob was jammed farther inward. In light of The Shadow's recent discovery, this door became important. The condition of the knob indicated that the room contained a prisoner. This door alone had been locked from the outside. The Shadow knew that this must be Hal Rydler's room.

The Shadow placed his hand upon the knob. He was about to draw it outward when a slight click came from along the hall. With a quick turn, The Shadow swung from the doorway. He wheeled across the hall and gained a short passage that led to another room. The click that The Shadow had heard was the opening of a door. It had come from another side passage. Soft footsteps sounded. Peering from his hiding place, The Shadow saw a girl's figure come into the light. It was Martha Keswick.

Cliff had not met Caglio's niece. Hence he had known nothing of the girl's presence in the house. Martha was attired in a dressing gown. She was going toward the stairs at the back of the hall. The Shadow saw that she was carrying a book beneath her arm. He waited for the girl to pass.

A muffled groan sounded from across the hall. The girl stopped short. She looked toward the door of Hal's room. The Shadow watched her while she listened. The groan was repeated, less distinctly than before. Martha placed her hand upon the doorknob. The Shadow saw worry on the girl's face.

Slowly, The Shadow moved from the alcove, his tall form casting a long silhouette upon the floor beneath. Martha was facing the door of the prisoner's room. She was listening intently for new sounds from the man within. She did not suspect the presence of the tall personage who stood almost beside her.

The Shadow, too, had advanced to listen.

Those stifled groans had told him of some menace. He could foresee danger for the prisoner. He was prepared to meet the emergency, even though his deed might reveal his presence to the girl outside the door.

Then, as answer to The Shadow's expectations, came another sound from beyond the locked door. It was a token that allowed no further doubt. It was the sudden cry of a man unnerved by terror.

A scream that ended in a gurgled wail. A shriek that only quivering lips could have uttered. Though muffled by the thickness of the door, it told of anguish. The call was a plea for rescue from some inhuman torture.

Hal Rydler had delivered that cry from the gloom. The Shadow had heard the call for aid.

CHAPTER XIII. THROUGH INNER WALLS

Hal Rydler had awakened from a hideous nightmare. He had opened his eyes, to stare at moonlight flooding through the skylight of the room. His brain had been in a dazed whirl, its thoughts uncollected. Then had

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come the happening which had produced his instinctive cry.

Dopey, Hal had lain motionless. His groans had ended. Passing seconds seemed like years. Then into the focus of his vision had come a dreaded apparition. It had loomed suddenly, terribly, from the wall beside the prisoner's cot.

The head of Zovex!

Livid, with gloating lips, the hideous countenance had thrust itself toward him. Bulging evil eyes had met Hal's own. In an instant, the awakened prisoner had realized that this was no hallucination. He was face to face with the living head itself!

As venomous breath exhaled upon him, Hal had phrased his frantic, hopeless cry. Then had come hands from nowhere. Fingers that Hal could not see; for his whole gaze was centered on the leering visage above him. Claws had gripped Hal's throat. Their tension had produced that gurgled finish to his shriek.

Hal's own eyes bulged. His lips gasped. He saw murder in the leer above him. The face of Zovex was fiendish – as it had been on that first night when Hal had seen this very head upon the bulky shoulders of the clumpy prowler who had invaded Percy Rydler's home.

Death!

That was the sentence that The Head's expression spelled; and Hal could find no strength to struggle. Brief moments were like stretches of eternal agony. Then came the interruption that ended the terrible strain: two sounds that to Hal seemed hours apart; although actually they were almost simultaneous.

Both were clicks, The first, when some one drew back the outside knob of the door. The second, when the same hand turned the knob.

Zovex heard the clicks. Two actions followed. Though simultaneous, they seemed like the distinct deeds of separate creatures. Hands left Hal Rydler's neck. The distorted face of Zovex bobbed from view.

Hal heard a muffled click from the wall. Then came a stream of light from the door. With an effort, Hal rolled outward on the cot. Dazed, stroking at his throat, he sat up. He saw Martha Keswick standing in the doorway.

HAL managed a weak smile. He tried to gain his feet; but failed. He slumped back on the cot; then steadied and looked toward the wall. He saw nothing but the blankness of the panel. He stared toward Martha and noticed a blackness that hovered thick beyond the girl. Hal blinked; as he did, the background faded.

"What was the matter?" queried Martha, in a tense whisper. "I – I heard your scream..."

"A nightmare!" gulped Hal. "But it was a vivid one. It seemed real! I saw a face that I remembered."

"You saw Zovex?"

The girl's query was awed. Hal nodded.

"I saw The Head," he admitted. "It was here, in this room. There were hands, too, that clawed my throat. But I didn't see them."

Hal finally managed to stand up. He smoothed his rumpled coat.

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"I must have been woozy," he affirmed. "Never even took my coat off after those two chaps lugged me up here. All I remember was that my feet must have lead weights tagged to them. I was in the study when I went groggy."

"It was odd, too." Hal looked toward Martha, as though seeking an explanation. "The air became stifling down in the study. First, I was dizzy; then dopey. Does that happen to every one who stops in to see your uncle?"

Martha stood silent, troubled. At last she spoke.

"It has occurred before," admitted the girl. "It – it has worried me, Mr. Rydler. Perhaps it would not be wise for you to go back to sleep. A cup of hot coffee might be helpful."

"It would be great!" Hal was finding enthusiasm. "Where's the coffee?"

"Downstairs," smiled Martha. "I could not sleep because the moonlight disturbed me. I was going down to the living room to read a book until dawn. If you will come there, I can stop at the kitchen and make the coffee."

"Swell! Thanks a lot, Miss Keswick."

Steadying himself, Hal stepped from the room. He closed the door behind him; then followed Martha along the hall. The two turned toward the passage that led to the stairway.

AS soon as they had gone, a figure issued from the passage opposite Hal's room.

The Shadow had edged back into his hiding place; from that point he had heard the conversation. His path was again clear; but he had found a mission to keep him on the second floor. No occupants of second-story rooms had heard Hal Rydler's stifled cry. There was chance to investigate without disturbance.

Hal had closed the door of the room. Martha had paused to push the knob inward. From this action, The Shadow knew that the girl understood the locking device. Her knowledge of it was not quite perfect, however; for she had first tugged at the knob, then turned it at the time when she had opened the door. Only the latter action had been necessary.

How would the girl explain matters to her uncle?

Doubtless, Professor Caglio would call her to task when he learned that she had released the prisoner. Martha's last pressure of the doorknob was proof that she wished to postpone the time when she would be called to account. Caglio would not know that Hal Rydler had left the prison room – unless the old man should come downstairs from his own quarters. Hal's closed door would give Caglio no clue to the young man's absence.

But Caglio would learn eventually; and from that conjecture, The Shadow drew a conclusion. The girl whom he had seen was probably a privileged person. She had no part in crime, although she probably knew that evil brewed within this house. Caglio would not risk a quarrel with the girl.

Because of his conclusions, The Shadow showed no hesitation when he approached the door of the vacated room. He drew out the knob; then turned it. He entered the room and closed the door. The reason for his double action with the outer knob was that he might have an exit. The Shadow did not care to lock himself automatically within the room.

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MOONLIGHT showed paneled walls, as The Shadow pressed the inner knob to prevent the entry of chance intruders. Keen eyes looked everywhere. The Shadow had heard Hal Rydler's statements. He believed that the prisoner had actually seen The Head. Hal had spoken, too, of hands. Whence had they come?

Noting the pillowed end of the cot, The Shadow saw a narrow panel of less than eight-inch width. Next, a slight space; then a panel nearly three feet broad. Space – narrow panel – space – broad panel; the arrangement continued all along the wall. The Shadow concentrated upon the wide panel that was nearest the head of the bed.

Gloved fingers tapped, but their strokes were amazingly light. It was almost as if The Shadow felt the thickness of the woodwork; as though his testing fingers could sense space beyond. His hands were moving, groping for the secret of the panel. Each hand found a vital spot. With one thumb at each side of the panel, The Shadow pressed. The woodwork gave; the panel moved inward several inches then slid toward the foot of the bed.

Dank air pervaded blackness. The space beyond the panel was not conditioned like the atmosphere of the room. The Shadow placed one knee upon the cot; then edged across and stooped through the low doorway that the opened panel had produced. He found the panel, slid it back into place. There was a muffled click from the wall.

A flashlight glimmered. The Shadow was in a narrow corridor. The thick wall was hollow, but it was lined with brick, except for the opening that afforded access to Hal's room. The Shadow followed the passage; he came to another opening in the opposite wall. This led to the panel of another bedroom.

A spiral staircase appeared at the end of the passage. This was in the house wall itself. The Shadow descended. At the bottom, he discovered a lengthwise passage in the house wall. He followed it, to discover other metal stairways. The passage reached the front wall of the house. It turned. The Shadow continued his progress.

He had noted openings in the bricks of the inner wall. Calculating from Cliff's description of the ground floor, The Shadow knew that these must open into the study, the living room, and finally the hall. It was at this last opening that the passage ended. The Shadow knew why.

The elevator shaft blocked it.

Probably, there was a similar passage starting on the other side of the shaft. One that could be entered from hall, dining room or kitchen; with spiral staircases to the second floor. Thus a hidden prowler, starting from downstairs, could gain secret entry to any room on the second floor.

THE SHADOW returned along the passage. He found the opening to the study. He pressed the panel. It slid aside. The Shadow stepped into Professor Caglio's headquarters. He found a light switch and pressed it.

Illuminated, the study looked quite ordinary. The Shadow had closed the panel; the walls seemed all alike. There were points, however, that concerned The Shadow. First: the passage had ended with the side opening into the study. Why had it not continued farther? There was still space.

Did another passage begin past some blockade? It was possible; for The Shadow had found no opening that indicated the mysterious corner room that housed the professor's automata, including Zovex.

The Shadow tried the wall. He found a panel near the corner, that gave beneath capable pressure. The oak moved sidewise. The Shadow saw a cavity that housed a tall, bulky safe. This was Professor Caglio's vault.

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Here, perhaps, was where he kept blue prints and models of his various inventions.

The Shadow closed the panel. There was no indication of a passage beginning from beside the safe. The cavity was thoroughly bricked. If there should be a passage to the Oracle room, it would be found in the wall directly between the study and the room itself.

Deliberately, The Shadow probed wide panels. Not one broad space of the side wall gave results. The panels conformed to the usual procedure, alternately narrow and wide. There were five of the broad ones. The Shadow tested them all.

Starting back toward the rear panel, The Shadow paused. He looked toward the wall that lay between the study and the living room. He decided to test it also. He came to the middle panel. He found that it yielded under proper pressure. His hands urged the barrier inward.

Instantly, the study light went out.

To any but The Shadow, the sudden sweep of blackness would have been startling. It might have signified a sudden danger. But The Shadow remained at ease. Dark was his habitat. He linked two facts immediately.

This panel had a special purpose. For some reason, no one was supposed to open it while the study was lighted. To insure that procedure, the panel was fitted with a switch that automatically cut off the lights.

To test his prompt theory, The Shadow released the panel so that it pushed toward him, impelled by an inner spring, like the previous panels that he had opened. The movable woodwork came flush with the wall. The lights in the study glowed promptly, again revealing The Shadow's cloaked form by the wall.

The Shadow stepped over and pressed the regular light switch. In total darkness, he returned to the side wall panel. He pressed it inward and slid it to the left. Light greeted him – from a broad, windowlike space a few feet away. The Shadow stepped forward.

ONLY glass lay between The Shadow and the scene that he viewed. He was looking into the living room, through the big mirror that adorned the wall opposite the fireplace. Hal Rydler and Martha Keswick were seated by the fire, sipping coffee.

The sheet of glass was an Argus mirror.

This was a contraption with which The Shadow had long been familiar. The glass, silvered by a special process, made a perfect reflector, so long as all light struck the front of it.

To any one in the living room, the glass would appear as a framed mirror. That situation would exist always, since lights would have to be on in the living room for any one to study the glass from that side.

Conversely, any one in the wall cavity would always be able to see through the Argus mirror and watch the occupants of the living room. The cavity was a perfect spy room, so long as one precaution was steadfastly observed.

All light must be kept from the space behind the mirror. Even the flicker of a match might be a give-away.

The Argus mirror explained the cutoff to the light switch, that ended illumination in the study whenever any one pressed the panel. That was Professor Caglio's arrangement to prevent a chance betrayal of the secret.

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Sound was cut off by the glass. The Shadow saw no reason for silence in motion. He probed about in the darkness of the narrow spy room. He discovered a folding beach chair at one end. This was for the benefit of any one who might be posted on a long vigil.

The Shadow stepped back through the opening into the study. He closed the panel. He sought the passage that led through the main walls of the house. He came to the blockade caused by the elevator shaft. Carefully, he opened the panel that led into the hall.

He could hear voices from the living room; but he was out of sight as he glided past the door of the elevator shaft. Reaching the panel just beyond, The Shadow opened it and stepped into the passage which he had guessed was on the other side. He closed the opening.

THE room that Cliff Marsland occupied was above the dining room. Cliff, awake on his couch, was suddenly swung to alertness when he heard a hiss from the opposite wall. Staring, he saw The Shadow in the moonlight.

The Shadow had found Cliff's room. In this case – unlike Hal's – the opening was across from the cot. Propped on an elbow, Cliff heard The Shadow's whisper. He stared, astounded by the facts he heard. He listened to brief instructions; then repeated his understanding in a low, cautious tone.

Cliff saw The Shadow move toward the door; then glide out into the hall. Soon the cloaked master returned. He had gone to set the outer knob of Hal Rydler's door. The Shadow's figure faded. Cliff heard a slight click as the panel closed.

Below, The Shadow appeared again when he came out from the far passage and passed the elevator shaft. Then he was gone, into the secret corridor that skirted living room and study. This time, The Shadow took the spiral stairway that gave access to Hal Rydler's room.

He had one detail that needed attention: to unlock the inner knob of the room where the prisoner had been. That accomplished, The Shadow returned below. Again, he entered Professor Caglio's study. He did not turn on the light. Instead, he went directly to the panel that opened into the spy room.

Stepping beside the Argus mirror, The Shadow closed the opening through which he had come. Totally obscured by blackness, he indulged in a whispered laugh – a prophetic quiver of mirth that was stifled within these narrow walls. The Shadow had another view of Hal and Martha, as they chatted above their coffee cups. He watched the motions of their lips.

Finally, The Shadow stretched out in the beach chair. His whisper came like an echo of his former thoughts. Here, in the midst of Professor Caglio's abode, The Shadow had found a headquarters of his own. From here he could issue forth to new forays; and try again to find a secret entry into the room where Zovex might be found.

No space could have been better suited to The Shadow's needs than was this spy room. It extended past the end frames of the glass; hence either extremity of the space would serve a hidden lurker, should Caglio or any other enter.

Moreover, the presence of the Argus mirror meant that no light would be introduced into the spy room. With no thought of a bold intruder hiding here; with no illumination to reveal a silent, watching form, the old professor would never chance to learn of The Shadow's presence.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Through keen ability, The Shadow had penetrated to a spot where he would dwell secure. He could watch the living room; he had access to Caglio's study. Entrenched in a strategic position, The Shadow could remain.

Unseen, unheard, his very presence unsuspected, this master sleuth would await the time for action. Hal Rydler was safe for the present, under The Shadow's own surveillance. At present, The Shadow was willing to defer new moves until after Cliff had gained another interview with Zovex.

The Shadow was willing to let the Oracle speak. To hear, through Cliff, how The Head itself intended to deal with The Shadow.

Then would The Shadow plan his countermove. He, master of justice, would deal with Zovex, the living head of crime!

CHAPTER XIV. CLIFF GIVES WORD

It was the next afternoon.

Cliff Marsland and Squint Proddock were seated by the fireplace in the living room. Opposite them was Hal Rydler. Cliff and Squint had just finished a trivial conversation. Hal was reading a book; he had scarcely noticed the words that passed between the others.

With the lull in conversation, Cliff reviewed the events of today. He had risen early; he had come downstairs to find Hal and Martha talking in the living room. Having met neither one before, Cliff introduced himself. Hal had accepted him as another guest.

Professor Caglio had arrived next. He had been surprised to see Hal; but had quickly recovered from his puzzlement. Hal had mentioned that he had slept poorly; and Martha had added an explanation.

"It was the moonlight, uncle," the girl had said. "Mr. Rydler was troubled by bad dreams. I was passing his room when he awoke. I invited him to come downstairs."

Professor Caglio had pressed no further query. Cliff guessed that the old man knew that the girl had released the prisoner.

Squint Proddock had joined them for breakfast in the dining room. An uneventful morning had followed. Then lunch; now, afternoon. They had been in the living room constantly, except for the intervals at meal times. Cliff and Squint had refrained from any mention of Zovex.

With the day dwindling, Cliff knew that The Shadow had kept watch all the while. From his cloaked chief, Cliff had heard the secret of the Argus mirror. Cliff could almost sense keen eyes, peering from a perfect watching place. Yet Cliff found it difficult to curb impatience. He had the urge for action.

A clock was chiming six when Professor Caglio and Martha entered the living room. They were followed by Marley. The glum-faced servant was carrying wood to build a new fire, for the old one had gone out, hours before. Martha sat down and began to chat with Hal. Caglio spoke to Squint.

"I have the model prepared," declared the professor, wisely. "Selfridge is ready to give us a demonstration. Would you care to come to the study, Mr. Proddock?"

"Huh?" queried Squint. "Say – what –"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"I was the one who wished to see the model," put in Cliff, quickly. "You say it is ready, professor?"

"Yes."

Caglio showed a pleased smile at Cliff's quickness to fill the stop-gap. Cliff arose, made a sign to Squint, then said:

"Wait here, Proddock. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Cliff followed Caglio through the hall, where the permanent, mellow light pervaded. They entered the study. As soon as the door was closed, the professor clamped an approving claw upon Cliff's shoulder.

"Timely work, Marsland!" clucked Caglio. "I thought that Proddock would catch the idea I gave him. That I wanted to talk about matters – but could not mention them in front of Rydler."

"Squint's slow, sometimes," he rejoined. "He ought to have got the drift of it; but he didn't. That's his way."

"You were alert, however."

"Sure. You needed a pinch-hit and I delivered."

"But you were doubly alert. You saw that I wanted only one of you to come with me."

"Why not? You only asked Squint, didn't you?"

Caglio nodded.

"Well observed!" he chortled. "Can you guess my reason?"

"You didn't want your niece to talk to Rydler."

"Right. I could not count on Marley stayin' there indefinitely. I wanted either you or Proddock to remain."

"I got it, prof. Well, it's O.K. with Squint there."

CAGLIO sat down behind his desk.

"Marsland," he stated, "young Rydler is of no use to us. I intend to be rid of him. Unfortunately, my niece has befriended him. Therefore, I cannot harm him at present, unless some emergency should render it necessary."

"Martha was here for a purpose, though she did not realize it. Originally, Zovex acted only as an Oracle, to tell the fortunes of society folk who came here. Martha entertained the visitors."

"I get it," grunted Cliff. "The moll was the front for a spook racket. How was the take, prof?"

Caglio smiled at Cliff's slang. He was convinced that The Shadow's agent was a product of the bad lands.

"The take?" queried Caglio. "You mean the revenue? The income?"

Cliff nodded.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"It was quite large," declared the professor. "But since Zovex has changed his policy, the receipts have increased immensely. Of course, you know his present terms?"

"Squint told me," answered Cliff. "Fifty-fifty. Zovex is the brain. He uses fellows like Squint and me to stage the jobs. We deliver the swag. It stays here so Zovex can figure a way to fence it. We get our cut later."

"Yes. When it is safe. Very well. There is always the chance that we may be investigated."

"Through some cluck muffing a job?"

"Yes. As was the case with Moose Sudling."

"Did Moose muff?"

"Yes." Caglio smiled, sourly. "Zovex, however, had prepared for such an occurrence. Every worker is covered during his act of crime. Nevertheless, some one might visit this house – some one not wanted –"

"Like some smart dick –"

"Yes. A sleuth expecting to find a supercriminal. But what would he find? I shall tell you. Nothing but a talking head! An automaton that can be examined. A device once used for telling fortunes."

"They can pinch you on that charge, prof."

"Never! Because I asked no fee for Zovex's services. Wealthy persons sent anonymous contributions. But no requests were made for money."

"I get it. The moll – your niece – she'll back that story. That'll crimp any wise district attorney who wants to make trouble for you."

"Exactly! Any trouble must be quickly squashed. I shall tell you why, Marsland. The mechanical brain of Zovex received much of its stimulation from information that was given by my former clients."

"You mean the society folks blabbed too much?"

"They talked a great deal to Zovex. He learned of many private subjects, that concerned money and its handling. Names were mentioned, also."

"Names like Threed? And Sautelle?"

"Yes. Also that of Percy Rydler. You are beginning to see the situation, Marsland. While we are faced by this problem of The Shadow, it will be best to keep Hal Rydler here, lulled with the hope of a future chat with Zovex. He should not have many opportunities to talk with Martha."

"Soon after our other plans are in operation, young Rydler will leave. Perhaps he will not actually leave. There are ways to dispose of him here. On the contrary, it may be better to actually send him away, to be handled outside."

Cliff nodded. Caglio was counting upon a mob such as Squint's.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Our basic policy," reminded the professor, "will be to bring my niece to a state of quietude, with all her suspicions gone. Once she believes that Hal Rydler is free from danger, Martha will again be useful."

PROFESSOR CAGLIO was drumming the desk top as he spoke. Cliff could see that the old inventor was a capable analyst. Caglio had covered the situation well. His policy was obviously planned to cover up the future, as well as the present and the past. Yet Cliff could not picture the old man as the actual plotter.

Did Caglio, himself, consult the Oracle?

Was he but the servant of his own invention?

Cliff wondered; and with the thought came new speculation regarding Zovex. The Head had looked mechanical. Cliff had so described it to The Shadow. But there were reasons why it might be real.

Caglio's own actions indicated that The Head must live. The professor's explanations of the Oracle's mechanism had been glib ones. He had bluffed both Cliff and Squint last night; yet, today, Caglio was talking straight. So long as his speech did not concern the secret of the Oracle, Caglio lacked guile.

This made Cliff believe that the old man's actions had been ordained by some master whom Caglio himself served.

By Zovex.

Yet Zovex was not a human being. He was a head!

Even as Cliff pondered, the answer came. Caglio was studying Cliff's countenance. It was a poker face that gave the old man no inkling of Cliff's own thoughts. Caglio knew only that his companion was engaged in speculation. Admiring Cliff's keenness, the old man suddenly became confidential.

"I mentioned a model of an invention," cackled Caglio, leaning forward. His eyes were alight and wide. "My invention! My masterpiece! Heh–heh–heh! Few eyes have seen it. Yours will be privileged.

"My invention" – his tone had become a croak – "will revolutionize industry! It will give me commercial mastery of the world! The ways of mankind shall some day follow my dictates. Why? Because human beings are the slaves of the machine age. The man with the greatest machine will rule.

"Zovex is a brain." Caglio grinned, cunningly, showing his stumpy teeth. "I shall count upon him as my adviser. I shall harness my mechanized controllers to machinery everywhere. Power plants, steamship engines, printing presses – all will become perpetual when controlled by my master device. It shall be the heart of industry!"

A clucked laugh trailed from Caglio's lips. The old man arose behind the desk and wagged a bony forefinger.

"Later, I shall show you the Caglio controller. You are a man who would recognize its potentiality."

Cliff understood at last. Caglio was a victim of the mania so common to inventors. He believed that he had solved the impossible. He had been working on a device to produce perpetual motion.

"For years I have endeavored." Caglio's finger was still wagging. "I have approached the threshold of success. A brain greater than my own has approved my efforts. I have gained encouragement from an infallible source."

THE CRIME ORACLE

The old man had reference to Zovex. Cliff knew the hold that The Head had gained. Caglio had become the Oracle's tool because of his own urge to complete his impossible invention. Zovex had gone in for crime. Caglio had aided willingly; not because he had a lust for evil, but because nothing, good or bad, could stop the old man's mania for the impossible.

Zovex had humored Caglio. The professor had returned the favor. He owned full fealty to The Head.

HOW far Caglio would have followed his present tangent, Cliff never learned. Amid the trail of the professor's maddened cackle came an interruption. It was a knock at the door of the study. Caglio recognized it. His manner changed. He clucked an order to enter.

Havelock came into the room. The chauffeur was wearing cap and gloves. He had evidently come back from a trip in the big roadster, for he was carrying a folded newspaper beneath his arm. Havelock's face was serious.

"What is it?" demanded Caglio. "You have brought news, Havelock?"

The chauffeur nodded. He was shifting the newspaper.

"Look at this, professor." He spread the newspaper upon the desk. "It's about Pinky Garson. He was in an auto smash. Coming through New York."

Caglio seized the newspaper. He muttered; then spoke:

"Garson should not have come back to the city."

"Nobody had anything on him," reminded Havelock. "He was just going through on his way South, when he smacked that taxi under the Sixth Avenue 'L.' He must have bounced off and hit a pillar. He's in a hospital. Looks like it was curtains for him."

"He has not recovered consciousness," remarked Caglio, studying the newspaper. "There is a chance, though, that he may."

"That's just it," agreed Caglio. "And if he don't know where he is, maybe he'll say too much!"

"That can be learned. Go downstairs, Havelock. Await orders there."

Havelock retired. Caglio slapped the newspaper to the desk. He turned to Cliff.

"Go back to the living room," urged the professor. "Engage the others in conversation. Tell Proddock that you admire my invention. Say that I shall let him see it later. That will give me a chance to talk with him."

As Cliff strolled from the room, Caglio followed. Cliff saw the old man press the outer knob. Caglio pointed forward. Cliff went to the living room. As he entered the door, he glanced sidelong and saw Caglio stepping in the opposite direction, toward the door of the room where he housed his automata. Cliff guessed that Caglio had gone to speak with Zovex.

ONCE inside the living room, Cliff had a mission to perform. He knew that The Shadow had not overheard the conversation with Caglio. The Shadow could not have opened the panel from the spy room, for that would have extinguished the lights. It was Cliff's job to pass word. He had a way to do it. He nodded to Squint Proddock; then strolled to the big Argus mirror. In nonchalant fashion, Cliff began to adjust his

necktie.

"The prof has a swell invention, Proddock," remarked Cliff. He avoided the nickname "Squint," because Hal and Martha were present. "It ought to bring a lot of money. All it needs is a promoter."

"What's the invention?" queried Squint. He had caught on to the bluff this time. "Did you see it work?"

"I saw the model."

Cliff paused. His eyes were moving. Left – straight – upward – downward. Letter by letter, Cliff was spelling a message. It was a system that he had learned from The Shadow: speech through motions of the eyes. Slight head tilts added to the code. Cliff was a slow speller with the system; but he managed his first message:

"Rydler – is – safe –"

"You saw the model?" Squint was questioning. "What does it do?"

"You'll see it later." Cliff had brought a comb from his pocket. Using the comb in front of the mirror, he flashed his eye signals:

"Prof – with – Zovex –"

A pause. Then:

"News – in – study –"

Cliff turned away from the mirror. He pocketed his comb and sat down to talk with Squint. He knew that The Shadow, ever watchful, had seen his message through the silvered glass.

The door of the living room opened immediately afterward. Professor Caglio entered. Smiling benignly, he closed the door. He noted that Marley, the servant, had gone. Caglio addressed the others:

"Dinner will be at seven o'clock. I notice that Marley has gone to prepare the meal."

FROM behind the Argus mirror, keen eyes had noticed the professor's lips. The Shadow, already cognizant of Cliff's message, could also see that Caglio intended to remain here. The professor was just inside the closed door. Evidently he wanted to keep every one in the living room.

The Shadow stirred within the spy room. He had the right opportunity to enter the study, knowing that Caglio had not returned there after his visit to Zovex. The Shadow opened the panel. Darkness greeted him; but as soon as he had gained the study and closed the panel from that side, the lights came on again.

The newspaper was on the desk. The Shadow eyed the headlines. He saw the news about Pinky Garson. The crook was in a New York hospital. As The Shadow read, he detected a sound. It came from beyond the wall between the study and the automata room.

The Shadow sprang across and listened by a narrow panel. It was from that spot that the noise came most plainly. A scuffling; a slight scrape; then a thump. A click, like that of a doorknob.

Swiftly, The Shadow reached the light switch and extinguished the glow in the study. He placed his hand upon the doorknob, intending to open the barrier and peer into the hall. Some one had left the room where

Caglio kept the Oracle!

The doorknob would not turn. It was locked from the outside. The Shadow turned on the light and made for the rear of the room. He gained the hidden passage that skirted the living room. Though silent in tread, he was speedy. He arrived at the end of the passage, at the elevator shaft. He heard a rumbling sound. The elevator was descending with a passenger.

The Shadow had arrived too late. Some one, coming from the automata room, had gone along the hall past the closed door of the living room. That person had already descended to join Havelock in the roadster. There was no chance to overtake him and block the departure.

The Shadow returned to the study, via the skirting passage. The lights went out as he entered the spy room. They came on again, after the panel closed. Ensnconced behind the Argus mirror, The Shadow viewed the living room. Caglio was still standing just within the door.

Whispering lips chilled the tiny chamber wherein The Shadow stood. The exit of a dweller from the automata room was to The Shadow's liking, even though he had failed to see the one who had departed. Actually, The Shadow had gained an advantage.

Soon he would have a chance that he had purposely postponed: a visit to the room wherein the Oracle dwelt. The Shadow would later form his own conclusions regarding Zovex, The Head that lived!

CHAPTER XV. AT THE HOSPITAL

"Too bad about Pinky Garson. He had a clean bill."

Joe Cardona, acting inspector, made the statement from behind his desk at police headquarters. His words were addressed to listening reporters. One made an objection:

"Thought he was a slick con man, Joe?"

"Pinky was," admitted Cardona, chewing at the stump of a cigar. "You're right on that guess, Burke. But Pinky squared that part of his past."

"Then you're not going up to see him?"

"Why should I? Markham here talked with him just a little while ago. Pinky was conscious for five minutes, wasn't he, Markham?"

Detective Sergeant Markham nodded.

"And what did he have to say?"

"Nothing important, Joe."

Reporters shuffled out, Cardona smiled. He had bluffed Clyde Burke, sharp news hawk of the tabloid Classic. Secretly, Burke was one of The Shadow's agents.

Markham started to speak. Joe motioned for silence. He wanted to be sure that the reporters were out of earshot. At last, Cardona nodded.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Pinky wants to talk to you, Joe," informed Markham. "Says he'll only talk to you alone."

"Got the car out back?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go."

The dashboard clock showed seven when the police car stopped in front of a small hospital near Sixth Avenue. Cardona entered alone. He encountered an interne, showed his badge, and was conducted to a tiny private room.

"We had him moved in from the ward," informed the interne. "It's all right to talk to him; but he won't last long."

CARDONA entered the room. The interne closed the door from the outside. Pinky Garson, head bandaged, opened his eyes and looked up with a glassy stare. He recognized the swarthy face that bent above him, in the glow of a bed lamp.

"H'lo, Joe. Guess I'm woozy."

"How's that, Pinky?"

"Can't see nothing but your head."

"You've got a concussion. That's the way it hits you. I had one once."

"I'm done for, Joe."

Cardona made no reply. Pinky reached feebly for a glass of water. Cardona raised the tumbler and pressed it to the dying man's lips.

"You're a square-shooter, Joe," whispered Pinky. "Wisht I'd been the same. I oughta stayed straight."

"Though you did go straight, Pinky."

"Yeah. I did. But I slipped back. I'll tell you how and why, Joe – if you'll promise to do something for me."

Cardona made no response. He was noncommittal.

"Nothing that'll put you in Dutch, Joe –"

"All right. Let's hear it."

Pinky's glazed eyes saw friendliness in Cardona's gaze. The dying man motioned for another sip of water. Cardona supplied it. Pinky spoke.

"It's this, Joe," he affirmed. "I had two keys on me. The interne's got 'em, I guess. Both are to safe-deposit boxes. In the same bank. You'd have trouble finding the bank and learning the name the boxes are under. I'll tell you both."

THE CRIME ORACLE

He gave Joe the name of a bank in Cleveland, and the name under which the safe–deposit boxes were held.

Cardona scribbled the facts on a pad.

"Listen, Joe." Pinky was pleading. "One box has dough that's mine. Twenty grand, that I'd built up out of good investments. I gotta couple of kids, in Cincinnati. I ditched 'em years ago. The dough's for them, Joe.

"They say crooks have pals. That's the bunk. Every crook's a rat! I'm a rat! I'd double–cross a dying pal! That's the kind of a mug I am. The only decent guys I've ever met was the fellows I done dirt to. Fellows like you, Joe."

"That's why I wanted you to come here I don't want no rat to get the mazuma that I made when I played straight. It's for the kids. If you say they'll get it, I'll die knowing they will."

Pinky paused. His eyes closed. He was awaiting Cardona's reply. Joe's answer came low, but emphatic.

"The money goes to the kids," assured the ace. "Tell me about the other deposit box, Pinky."

Pinky managed a smile.

"This'll throw you, Joe," he said. "Y'know what's in it? Some of them bonds that Threed shoulda got. I was the guy that staged that job, Joe. I turned 'em over to The Head. He kept more'n half o' 'em; but wanted me to drag some along an' peddle 'em out West.

"If it worked, I was to bring in the dough, and take out some more of 'em. Being a con man once, it looked like a pipe. I took a trip to Buffalo, before I started to peddle. Thought I'd come through New York, go South, then head up to Cleveland. But that don't matter. I'm through. Them bonds is yours, Joe. You'll turn 'em back to Threed."

CARDONA was silent. Pinky opened his eyes.

"I know what you're thinking, Joe," the dying man. "The dough ought go to Threed, too. It ought to make for the rest of them bonds. I know that, Joe; but the kids have got to get the twenty grand. That's why I'm telling you where the rest of the bonds are put.

"Not just them, but other swag. The gold from the steamship Arabia; the fifty grand that was took from Sautelle; the diamonds that was Percy Rydler's – those weren't my jobs, Joe. But the swag all went to the same guy. His name is Professor Caglio. He lives near Littenden, New Jersey."

Pinky reached for Joe's pad. Weakly, he traced lines to indicate a route. He finished with a square that represented Caglio's house. An arrow served to show the entrance.

"Caglio ain't the big–shot, Joe." Pinky's words came with an effort. "The brain is called 'Zovex.' The prof called him that; but we called him 'The Head.' That's what he is, Joe – a head.

"Sounds screwy; but it ain't. Zovex is The Head. He's a konk with a clockwork brain. And The Head is smart. It won't do to barge in there with a squad. Unless you call in G–men. You can do that, if you know the lay. And the only way to get wise is to get there alone and see The Head. Don't trust nobody, Joe. Nobody but yourself."

"How do I get in?" queried Cardona.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Drive in," replied Pinky. "Alone. Talk to the prof. Ask to see Zovex. Tell The Head you was with Pinky Garson. Tell him I talked because I was through. Say that you're Tony Darelli, from Cleveland. The Head won't know Tony.

"And there won't be nobody there that knows you. The guys with the prof ain't gorillas. They don't know nobody in New York. There was guys like me that worked for The Head; but they all took it on the lam. The Head don't keep 'em around that joint.

"You can swing it, Joe; but I'm telling you, it's a one-man job. You can't take no chances on nobody but yourself. Don't use no outside cover. The Head might get wise. The guys outside might get jittery. The Head will want to use you. Savvy it, Joe?"

"I get it." Cardona nodded, as Pinky sank back and closed his eyes. "I can go in and out as Tony Darelli."

Pinky smiled, and nodded feebly. He did not open his eyes.

Cardona waited a few minutes; then departed. Downstairs, he asked for Pinky's effects and received them. He found the safe-deposit box keys in an envelope. He handed the latter to Markham, when he had joined the detective sergeant.

"Take me to Tom's garage," ordered Cardona. "I'm going to use that old coupe he keeps there."

"Pinky wised you to something?" queried Markham.

"Yeah," returned Cardona. "You'll know about it later. I'm going somewhere alone. You can slide back to headquarters and keep mum."

LIGHTS were gloomy in the downstairs corridor of the secluded hospital. The interne had left the office. On the ledge lay a sheet of paper with a notation referring to Pinky Garson and the dying man's room number.

A strange sound came from the hospital entrance, a dozen minutes after Cardona had gone. It was a thumping succession of footsteps. Into the dim light clumped a horrendous figure. It was the square-formed creature that Hal Rydler had seen that night at his brother Percy's.

The monster was wide and bulky. Limbs and body were thick and rounded. Its arms extended oddly, hanging short from square-rigged shoulders. Heavy, clumsy gloves covered the hands. Above the thick-sweated body was a down-turned head, its features lost below the visor of a pulled-down cap.

The clumping visitor stopped by the window of the office. He saw the paper that bore Garson's name. With an evil snarl, the fiendish creature thumped toward the stairs. Upward it went with steady, heavy footsteps. At the top of a flight, it paused.

A nurse had heard the sound and was standing in the hallway. She could not locate the direction from which the thumps had come. The nurse went along the corridor. Peering from the stairway, the clumper saw her departure. He moved forward and reached Pinky Garson's door. He opened the barrier and entered.

Pinky was lying with closed eyes; but his ears sensed the thumps as the figure thudded up beside the bed. An interval followed. Pinky opened his eyes. His half smile faded. His lips gasped. All that Pinky could see before him was a face. He recognized that fiendish, leering visage with its gloating leer, its squatty nose, its bulging bulbous eyes.

"The Head!"

VENOMOUS eyes saw Pinky's consternation. Evil lips phrased grating words that were as nothing human:

"You have already told your story!"

"I – I couldn't help it!" gasped Pinky. "It – it wasn't no squawk. Honest, Zovex! I didn't think you could come here. The Head – always stayed – there in the room –"

"I can be anywhere!" The words were vicious. "You knew that I would find you!"

"I – I wasn't sure. I was croaking; I had to send for a pal. Honest, it was a pal I talked to! Tony Darelli, from Cleveland –"

Furious lips twisted as they spat a demonish snarl. Thick gloves gripped Pinky's throat. Half choked, the dying man heard the fierce-mouthed challenge.

"It was not Darelli!"

Pinky gurgled. The clutch was relinquished. Panting, Pinky gulped:

"I – I thought it was Darelli. He said he was Tony. But I wasn't sure – until after – after I'd told him to go to you, alone –"

"Then you knew –"

"Yeah. It – it wasn't Tony. It was Joe Cardona. But he's – he's gone out alone –"

Spasmodically, Pinky had uttered the words despite himself. His eyes had never closed since the moment that he had seen the face he dreaded. The past had surged through Pinky's brain. He had quailed, unable to resist the evil might of Zovex.

The Head had come here! That very impossibility had overwhelmed Pinky Garson. He had not wanted to blab regarding Joe Cardona. Pinky had tried to play straight with the ace detective. But he had failed. Zovex had arrived to gain last-moment knowledge.

While the glaring face still loomed above the dying man, Pinky Garson gave an involuntary gulp. His rigid form relaxed as the sound left his lips.

Pinky Garson was dead.

The face of Zovex remained within the focused glow of the bed lamp. Seconds passed; then gloating lips showed new distortion. Projected eyes glittered in satanic triumph. The face moved upward. Circling in its steady stride, the wide, squatty figure stamped from the dead man's room.

No one was in the upper corridor. The interne had not yet returned when the horrible figure passed the office. The clumping creature reached the street and clumsily shifted itself into a waiting roadster. Havelock was at the wheel. The car rolled away.

Zovex had learned of Pinky Garson's confession. Joe Cardona had started on a mission that would prove a snare soon after The Head returned to find him at the windowless abode. Death would be designed for Joe

Cardona.

Only The Shadow might avert it!

CHAPTER XVI. THE LAST INTERLUDE

Dinner had begun at Professor Caglio's. The meal had been delayed, probably through some fault of the servant Marley's. Hence the clock in the living room was chiming half past seven when the expectant diners were called.

The Shadow, watching through the Argus mirror, saw the last of the throng depart. He turned about and opened the panel to the study. He stepped into the silent darkness. Light came on as The Shadow closed the wall.

This was The Shadow's hour of opportunity. He had delayed in order to make sure that Caglio would not return to the study. Knowing that the old professor would be at dinner, The Shadow had time to operate.

His first goal was the narrow panel on the other side of the study. It was there that he had heard the sounds from the automata room. The Shadow knew that there must be a hollow space beyond the narrow panel.

He had not learned that fact upon his previous investigation. That was because he had tapped the broad panels only. All other special panels had been wide ones. This narrow space was inches, only. It could not serve as a way to a regular passage. In view of present circumstances, however, the narrow panel demanded survey.

The upright strip opened under proper pressure. It slid aside. The study lights revealed a space between brick walls. It was a cleft straight through to the next room, with another barrier at the other end. The space was considerably less than six inches in width.

The Shadow could not squeeze his shoulders through it. Nor could he manage to reach the barrier at the other end. He had found a passage to the room that he wanted to reach; but the avenue was useless.

The Shadow closed the panel. He tried the door of the study and found it locked from the outside. He took to the roundabout passage that skirted the living room. He came to the end of the elevator shaft. Cautiously, he opened the final panel.

From the end of the hall, The Shadow could see into the dining room. Professor Caglio was seated at the head of the table, with Martha on his right and Hal on his left. Cliff Marsland was seated next to Martha. Squint Proddock was beside Hal.

Marley entered from the kitchen. The servant was carrying a platter. Martha took a helping; then, the professor. While the old man was engaged, The Shadow edged out into the hall and closed the panel. Neither Caglio nor Marley saw his advent. As for Hal and Squint, their backs were toward the hall.

If Cliff saw, it would not matter. The Shadow was running a risk only so far as Martha was concerned. As it happened, Cliff did not spy The Shadow. But Martha, chancing to look toward the hall, caught a full view of the cloaked figure.

THE SHADOW saw the girl's stare. He had closed the panel. Martha did not know whence he had come. For an instant, burning eyes were focused from a distance. Then The Shadow had swept noiselessly along the hall.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Martha blurted a cry of surprise. Cliff looked toward the girl and saw the direction of her gaze. He knew that Martha had seen The Shadow. With quick impulse, Cliff scuffed his chair backward and snatched at a glass of water that was near Martha's plate. His action caused the others to look toward him. Martha looked with the others.

"Clumsy of me!" exclaimed Cliff.

"You will excuse me, Miss Keswick. I don't blame you for being startled. I almost toppled that glass of water."

The girl delivered a relieved smile. She did not know that Cliff had purposely covered the lapse that she had made. She thought the incident of the glass was a chance one. It gave her time, however, to regain her composure.

Martha knew that this house held secrets. She had seen the Oracle; she had guessed that there was a lurker here whom she had never seen. Hal's experience had added to her belief. Sight of The Shadow had startled her but momentarily. Her conclusion was that the cloaked shape must be identified with Zovex. The girl was glad that she had been able to gain an excuse for her alarm.

IN the hallway, The Shadow had passed the door of the study. He stopped at the door of the automata room and found the knob pressed inward. He turned it. The door opened. The Shadow gained his first entrance into the abode of Zovex.

The Shadow had known that this door would ordinarily be locked from the inside. But since some one had departed from the room, he had inferred that it would be locked from the outside only. In order to be sure of later exit, The Shadow pulled the outside knob outward. Then, in the room itself, he closed the door behind him.

The Shadow noted the mechanical chess player and the doll-like writing figure. He passed beneath the cages with their artificial birds. He saw the boxes of heads upon the shelf. He picked a closed one and opened it. Inside he saw the head he wanted. It was the Oracle.

The Shadow studied the leering face of Zovex. The bulging eyes were glaring, despite their glassiness. The Shadow removed The Head from its box. He studied the surface of the evil, V-lined face. It was not ordinary waxwork; nor was it an embalmed head. The Oracle was made of some peculiar composition that possessed flexibility.

The Shadow opened the back of the head and examined the interior mechanism. He tested various levers, set them; then placed the head upon the square-topped table. The Shadow waited. The lips began to move. They made no sound. The Shadow had not started the ribbon rollers.

Lips stalled. The Shadow joggled the table. An interval; the lips moved again. They stopped. Eyelids dropped with a slight click. The Shadow lifted the head, opened it again and made another inspection. He pressed a catch. The eyes opened.

There were six roller ribbons inside the head. The Shadow counted them; but made no test. He knew that they acted as phonographic records. He saw no reason to make the head speak. He replaced the automaton in its box and put the latter upon the shelf.

The square-topped table interested The Shadow; for it was there that the head had rested, according to Cliff's account. The Shadow removed the top of the table. First, he studied the top itself.

THE CRIME ORACLE

It was formed of nine squares, each about six inches across. These were grooved together to form a solid top. They were held compact by a four-sided border, that added six inches to each edge. Thus the entire top measured about two and one half feet across.

That space was considerably more than the pedestal, which The Shadow estimated to be twenty inches square at the top. The Shadow saw the array of batteries nestled in the pedestal. He removed them. The pedestal narrowed downward on the outside. Viewing its interior, The Shadow saw that the cavity tapered in similar fashion.

The Shadow tested the batteries. They were dead. Caglio's explanation of electromagnetism was sheer bunk.

WITH a whispered laugh, The Shadow replaced the bordered table top. He had learned one fact. He wanted another. He went to the waxwork chess player and opened the door in its chest. He also unclosed the two doors in the supporting oblong box. He saw the array of interior levers; but he needed his flashlight to make a full inspection.

By the glimmer of the little torch, The Shadow studied the machinery. The levers were not thickly placed; for he was able to extend his arm up through the hollow body of the chess player. A glow shone through the door in the figure's chest. The door was merely a light framework, its front stretched with cloth.

The Shadow extinguished the flashlight. He walked about the room, tapping at every panel, broad and narrow. The only one that opened was the panel that connected with the cramped passage into the study. Hence The Shadow had no outlet except by the door of the room.

Finished with the panels, The Shadow went to the safe. It was unlocked.

All that The Shadow found inside was a long box that looked like a carrying case; but there was room for other objects, if required. The Shadow opened the carrying case. It was empty. It had plush-lined sections; and all of these were curved, in both top and bottom of the hinge-lidded box.

It was easy to see that the box had contained cylinders of various lengths and widths. If hollow, larger cylinders could have held smaller. This was likely for, beside the box, The Shadow found fiber wedges. With large cylinders inside small ones, these plugs would prevent the interior tubes from rattling.

The Shadow shut the carrying case and closed the safe. A repetition of his low-toned laugh told that his inspection was concluded. The room was as The Shadow had found it. He made his exit into the hall. He closed the door and pressed the outer knob.

Instead of returning toward the front end of the hallway, The Shadow chose the stairway to the second floor. He had seen every one in the dining room, except Selfridge. It was likely that the technician would be in the garage during Havelock's absence. The second floor proved clear, and The Shadow chose a room on the living-room side of the house. He found its secret panel and descended by a spiral stairway to the study.

The Shadow crossed the lighted room and stopped at the panel to the spy room. He had accomplished his intended purpose. He had visited the room where Professor Caglio kept the talking head. For the present, The Shadow desired a return to obscurity. He was upon the point of gaining it.

JUST as The Shadow pressed the panel to produce darkness, his ears caught a click. It came from the door of the study. It meant that Professor Caglio had returned from dinner. The warning sound was the old man's pull upon the outer knob. Methodically, Caglio was following the sensible procedure of assuring himself an unlocked door when he came to make his later exit.

Had The Shadow paused one instant, Caglio would have discovered darkness when he entered the study. The Shadow's plans would have been crimped. But, to The Shadow, the warning click was an immediate spur to quickness. He swung into the spy room and closed the panel behind him. Lights were on again at the moment when Caglio opened the door from the hall.

Behind the Argus mirror, The Shadow saw the diners returning to the living room. Cliff Marsland strolled in front of the mirror and glanced at his reflection in the glass. Cliff's eyes moved, choosing varied directions. The Shadow's agent was passing a brief message to his hidden chief.

All was well for the present. Cliff would be on watch, ready to give word of any important event that he might notice. He was counting upon another trip to the closed room. Cliff expected that he and Squint would soon hold an interview with Zovex.

The Shadow, watching, knew facts that Cliff did not recognize. He doubted that the interview would come as soon as his agent anticipated. For The Shadow had learned new and deeper secrets through his visit to the Oracle's abode. He had solved the riddle of The Head that lived.

Strange events would soon be due. The Shadow was prepared for them, now that the last interlude was ended. The master sleuth had completed plans of action. They might alter, however, should chance compel it.

It was well that The Shadow had made such allowance. Within the next half hour, he was to be faced by complications that even he had not foreseen!

CHAPTER XVII. THE NEW ALLY

Martha Keswick seemed very weary, as she seated herself beside the fireplace. The Shadow could see that the girl was drowsy. Several minutes passed; Martha suddenly roused from her stupor. The Shadow saw the girl rise and speak. He read her lips. She was stating that she planned to go upstairs and nap.

Apparently, Martha had decided that no harm would befall Hal Rydler during the evening. Cliff Marsland and Squint Proddock had played their part as guests. Cliff, through his natural courtesy; Squint, by saying little. Though she still held mistrust of her uncle, Martha felt certain there would be no danger to Hal while the others were about.

The girl was intending another all-night vigil. Therefore, she felt the need of sleep in preparation for the later hours.

Shortly after Martha had left, Professor Caglio entered. He noticed that Hal was reading a book. With a slight smile, Caglio spoke to Cliff.

"Perhaps you and Mr. Proddock would like to see the model of my invention?"

"Certainly," interposed Cliff. "Come along, Proddock."

The three strolled from the room. The Shadow knew that they were bound for the professor's study. He would hear from Cliff later. That assumption was correct; but The Shadow's contact with his agent was to come in a different manner than by eye signals through the Argus mirror.

In the study, Professor Caglio spoke:

THE CRIME ORACLE

"I have heard from Selfridge. He telephoned up from the garage below. A stranger has arrived. Selfridge is in doubt about him."

"Who is it?" queried Squint. "Any guy I might know?"

"Possibly," replied Caglio. "The newcomer claims to be a friend of Pinky Garson. Selfridge, of course, disclaimed any acquaintance with Garson."

"What moniker did the bird give?"

"He calls himself Tony Darelli. He claims to be from Cleveland."

"Tony Darelli, huh? I've heard of him. He's from Cleveland, all right. Pinky should have knowed him. Ever meet Tony, Cliff?"

Cliff shook his head in response to Squint's question.

"I should like you to observe him," remarked Caglio. "Both of you can deliver sound opinions. I shall have Selfridge conduct him to the living room, so that I may interview him there."

"Is that where we'll lamp him?" questioned Squint.

"Yes," replied the professor, "but he will not see you. Come. I shall show you an interesting feature of this room. Do not be disturbed when the lights extinguish automatically."

He stepped to the panel on the living room side. He opened it; the study lights did a quick black-out. The glow from the Argus mirror greeted Cliff and Squint.

"Step forward," ordered Caglio. "Wait here until I return. Watch through the mirror."

The panel closed. Squint whispered to Cliff.

"Ain't this the hot one!" declaimed the crook. "Say – I'd never have guessed that the mirror was a phony!"

"Stick close to the center," suggested Cliff. "Keep watching for Tony to show up."

Cliff knew that The Shadow was here in the darkness. He added information that he knew his chief would appreciate.

"Pinky must have talked to Tony Darelli," remarked Cliff. "The prof is wise, though, having us here to look Tony over. Here's the prof coming into the living room. I guess Selfridge is on his way up with Tony."

"Here they are now," put in Squint. "Selfridge is showing the guy in –"

The sentence ended with an oath. Squint followed with a harsh whisper of recognition:

"Joe Cardona!"

Cliff grunted.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"The mug's got crust!" added Squint. "Say – Pinky must have spilled something and then croaked! So he calls himself Darelli, huh? Wait'll we give the lowdown to the prof."

"The prof is introducing him to Rydler," remarked Cliff.

"Yeah," nodded Squint. "And Joe's wise that this bird is some relation to the guy whose place was cracked. Joe thinks he's getting somewhere."

"Looks like he has."

Cliff's remark was significant. It indicated trouble for the ace detective. Squint gave a chuckle.

"The prof is leaving Selfridge with them," he declared. "He's gone out and he's closed the door. He'll be calling us in a minute."

SOMETHING gripped Cliff's hand in the darkness. Gloved fingers thrust a wad of paper into his agent's fist. A message from The Shadow.

The panel opened a minute later.

There was a whisper from the darkness of the study. Cliff and Squint stepped back into the large room. Squint was talking as the lights came on. The professor heard him from beside the panel.

"It's Joe Cardona!" exclaimed the crook. "Used to be a fly-cop; now he's acting as an inspector. He's the smart guy that's been trying to get wise to our jobs."

Professor Caglio glared. His lips moved, seeking words.

"We gotta smear him," added Squint. "Say – putting him in there with Rydler was a bum guess."

"Perhaps not," Caglio's voice had returned. The old man had calmed. "It may work to our advantage. Remember, Marsland? I told you this afternoon that I was prepared for such emergency as this."

Cliff nodded.

"If this detective has brought others," clucked Caglio, "we shall handle him politely; and Rydler as well. But if he has come alone –"

"The spot for both of them, huh?"

Caglio nodded slowly, as he heard Squint's interjection.

"Probably," decided the professor. "First, I shall seek the advice of Zovex. I shall visit the Oracle presently –"

A rap at the door. Caglio's eyes gleamed. He gave the summons to enter. Havelock appeared.

"Where's Selfridge?" queried the chauffeur. "Did he bring any one up?"

Caglio nodded, wisely.

"A fellow named Cardona?"

THE CRIME ORACLE

Another nod to Havelock's query. The chauffeur grinned.

"Keen work, prof! We figured he'd be here by now. We were looking around when we came in by the drive. There's nobody outside –"

"Go below, Havelock. I shall confer with The Head."

Caglio's cackled statement was emphatic. The professor followed the chauffeur from the room, leaving Cliff and Squint alone by the desk.

"Looks good, Cliff," chuckled Squint. "Some easy work for The Head, before he figures out how to get The Shadow."

"It looks good for us," agreed Cliff, "but it looks sour for Joe Cardona."

"That cluck was due for trouble some day."

"This is the day he's gotten it."

Seated by the desk, Cliff had opportunity to open the folded paper, without Squint noting it. Cliff read coded lines in bluish ink. He understood their meaning. Brief instructions from The Shadow. The writing faded. It was in a special disappearing ink. Cliff let the paper flutter beneath the desk.

Five minutes passed. The door opened and Professor Caglio entered. The old man's face showed a pleased leer.

"We shall make a test," informed the inventor. "Cardona shall see The Head, along with Rydler. The Head, in turn, will see them. Our purpose will be to lull them. Zovex will learn the extent of their suspicions. Their reactions will determine the measures that will be taken to dispose of them."

"Curtains for both?" queried Squint.

"Death," assured Caglio. "But not until afterward. Unless some unforeseen emergency should arise. In that case, I shall call upon you. Be in readiness."

Chuckling, Caglio left the study. Cliff rubbed his chin; then spoke to Squint.

"I'm going to take another look through that mirror," decided The Shadow's agent. "Stick here, Squint."

Cliff went to the light switch.

"You don't have to turn out the lights," observed Squint. "The prof didn't douse them."

"I don't want to take chances," returned Cliff. "He did something at the panel. I'd better be sure."

"Guess you're right. Any glim would queer that phony mirror."

Cliff turned off the lights. Edging through darkness, he found the panel. He opened it as Caglio had. Light showed from the living room; then ended as Cliff stepped into the space between and shut the panel after him.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Quickly, Cliff whispered the news to The Shadow. He told of the proposed visit to Zovex; of Caglio's verdict; and finally that he and Squint were to stand by.

The Shadow spoke in response. Cliff saw his silhouette against the silvered glass. The Shadow was looking through the Argus mirror. Caglio had not come back to the living room.

"Open the panel!"

Cliff obeyed the whispered order. He stepped into the darkness of the study. He blundered toward the door, to find the light switch. Cliff did not close the panel. He had left that to The Shadow.

A muffled click came from the back of the room. Promptly, Cliff turned on the lights. He saw Squint, staring. The crook turned about.

"Funny," Squint remarked. "I thought I heard something at the back of the room; like the light switch was there."

"You can't guess sounds in the dark, Squint."

"You're right. Say – what was doing in the living room?"

"Nothing. Cardona was chinning with Selfridge. Rydler was looking on."

"The prof wasn't there?"

"Not yet."

"Guess he's in with Zovex, then."

Cliff was pleased. Squint had dropped the subject of that muffled click. It had been a deliberate signal from The Shadow. The cloaked chief had gone through the study in the darkness. He had taken to the wall passage that offered access to the upper floor. Cliff had abetted the process, stalling with the light switch until The Shadow was clear.

Such had been the purpose of The Shadow's message. He had wanted to gain an exit from the spy room. Cliff's cooperation had aided him. But Cliff had not guessed The Shadow's motive. He would have been astonished, had he seen the sequel.

UPSTAIRS, The Shadow appeared suddenly in the mellow light of the vacant hall. He had come through one of the rooms on the study side of the house.

He moved toward a door, stopped there and tapped softly on the door.

Martha's voice came from within: "Who is it?"

"Important!" The Shadow's response was in a breathless tone that simulated Hal Rydler's. "I must see you at once, Miss Keswick!"

The door opened.

THE CRIME ORACLE

Moonlight showed Martha Keswick, standing within the room. A gasp came from the girl. She could see The Shadow plainly in the light of the hall.

For the second time, Martha was viewing that weird figure. But on this occasion, she was faced squarely by the eyes that burned from beneath the hat brim. One fearful thought gripped the frightened girl.

"Zovex!"

Martha was barely able to phrase the terrible name. The Shadow's whisper came in sibilant return.

"Not Zovex," he declared. "I am a friend! One whom you must trust!"

The words carried a commanding force. Martha nodded.

"Another guest has arrived," pronounced The Shadow. "He is a detective named Cardona. Like Hal Rydler, he stands in danger."

"At this moment?"

"No. The danger will strike later. It can be averted."

"But – but how?"

"By forcing it. The present task is yours. The rest will be mine."

Martha nodded soberly. There was a calming quality in The Shadow's tone. The burning eyes brought confidence. They always did to those who were worthy of a trust. But to men of crime they delivered a fear that nothing could overpower.

"Go to the living room." The Shadow's tone was emphatic. "Speak to Hal Rydler. Tell him to insist upon two points after he has visited Zovex."

Martha nodded her understanding.

"First," enumerated The Shadow, "he must request another brief interview with The Head. Second, he must ask for a full explanation of the mechanism in the automatic chess player."

"I shall tell him," stated Martha. "He is to insist after he has first talked with Zovex, tonight."

"Yes. After he has left the room where Zovex is."

"And then?"

"You will return upstairs. Remain here."

The Shadow had moved backward across the hall. Martha closed the door of her room. She turned to look for the mysterious being in black. The Shadow was gone. He had merged with the darkness of some doorway. Martha looked about in vain. She heard a whispered voice that uttered a single word:

"Proceed!"

Nodding, the girl hastened toward the stairway. As she reached the end of the hall, she caught the tones of a subdued laugh. It came from unseen lips, a whispered note of mirth that brought a shudder through the corridor.

Yet, strangely, the weird mockery did not bring fear to Martha Keswick. Instead, it was an urge; a final inspiration that gave determination to complete the mission. It was a reminder of the promise that the girl had given.

Such was the laugh of The Shadow.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE DOUBLE GAME

Joe Cardona was still talking to Selfridge when Martha Keswick entered the living room. Professor Caglio had not returned. The girl sat down and found opportunity to speak with Hal Rydler. The Shadow had foreseen this situation. He knew that Selfridge would be busy making conversation with Cardona.

Quickly, Martha repeated the instructions. Hal looked puzzled; but his trust in the girl was sufficient. He nodded his agreement. Martha arose and was idling toward the door when Caglio arrived. The professor eyed his niece shrewdly; Martha met his gaze mildly. Caglio suspected nothing.

He paused long enough, however, to see the girl go upstairs. Then he entered the living room and spoke to his two guests.

"Come," suggested Caglio. "We shall visit the Oracle."

Hal and Cardona followed the professor to the room at the end of the hall. Selfridge came along. Marley went by them on his way to the kitchen. The professor opened the door of the end room. Cardona stared about as they entered.

"I hope this will interest you, Mr. Darelli," said Caglio, in a polite cackle. "I do not recall the name of the man whom you mentioned. Who was it again?"

"A fellow named Garson," returned Cardona, gruffly. "He said you'd know him. Pinky Garson."

"He must have jested," decided Caglio. "My patrons do not make themselves known by their nicknames. Mr. Garson must have been a stranger who came here with one of my wealthy clients."

"He said The Head would talk to me."

"Quite true. Here is The Head. But, as I have explained to Mr. Rydler, it is nothing but a mechanical device."

Hal started an objection.

"Last night," he reminded. "You spoke of the theraphim –"

"Ah, yes." Caglio caught himself. He had chosen the wrong story. "I told you the legends of the theraphim and the androides. I spoke of the head of Mirme. I said that the theraphim were supposed to be embalmed heads.

"Heads with gold plates beneath their tongues. But this head has no such device. Perhaps you misunderstood me, Mr. Rydler. I meant that the head of Zovex simulates those that the ancients knew."

THE CRIME ORACLE

Caglio had brought the talking head from the shelf. Cardona and Hal were viewing the evil face through the opened front of the box. Caglio placed the box upon the table; then removed the head itself.

He opened the back of the head and showed the mechanism. He chortled as he closed the hinged section and placed the ugly head in its usual place within the box. Shrewdly, Caglio began an eccentric part. He tapped his forehead; then spoke:

"Some say that I am lacking here. That is not true. I am a dreamer. I have visioned a mechanical brain. That may be why people form strange theories. Some think my own brain is incomplete. Others – superstitious persons, of course – believe that I have actually achieved my dream."

"They believe that Zovex lives. That he thinks. They have attached odd meanings to the words that mechanical lips have uttered. Because of that, I no longer demonstrate the Oracle without explaining the truth about it."

"See? The Head is ready. It will answer questions; but its range is limited. Suppose, Mr. Darelli, that you tell the Oracle who you are. Then listen for its response."

Cardona faced the evil-eyed visage of Zovex.

"I am Tony Darelli," stated Joe. "Tony Darelli, from Cleveland."

Caglio was beside the table, watching The Head. The lips of the image moved. They grated a reply:

"Zovex has heard."

"Ask a question," suggested Caglio. "Hear what The Head replies."

"Tell me what I'm here for," put Cardona.

Again, The Head responded:

"Zovex will answer."

Cardona narrowed his gaze. The answer was an evasion.

"When will Zovex answer?"

Caglio, himself, put the last question. The Head replied:

"Tomorrow."

Eyelids clicked shut. Caglio bowed.

"That is all," he decided. "Come! Look at the automatic chess player. It is a marvelous curio! Ah! The board is set for checkers. Try your game, Mr. Darelli."

Cardona began the game of checkers. He was usually good at the pastime; but tonight he lapsed. Joe thought the waxwork Turk a poor opponent; moreover, he was constantly forgetting his moves in order to glance toward the head of Zovex.

THE CRIME ORACLE

"Heh!" Caglio's chuckle made Cardona stare at the checkerboard in time to see the automaton negotiate a triple jump. "You are beaten, Mr. Darelli! You made one bad move. That was a mistake."

Caglio motioned toward the door. The visitors filed out with Selfridge. They walked toward the living room, where the professor expressed an invitation.

"MARLEY reports that the sky is clouding," declared the professor. "It will probably storm tonight. Both of you must remain here as my guests. You will sleep better, Mr. Rydler, than you did before. Soon there will be no moonlight to disturb your rest."

"I'd sleep better if I talked to The Head," grumbled Hal, suddenly. "You promised me that opportunity, professor."

"You heard Zovex speak tonight."

"And say the same things that he said before. Only I talked twice to The Head last night. The second time, it gave a better demonstration. It was more like an Oracle."

Caglio was shrewd in his gaze. He saw that Cardona was interested in Hal's statements.

"You may both have another interview," remarked the professor. "But I can promise very little more than you already heard. The device is purely mechanical. You must allow me time to make adjustments."

"All right," agreed Hal. Then, as Caglio turned, "One other thing, professor: a favor that I know you will readily grant. I'd like to know more about the chess player. Its operation amazes me."

"You forgot to show Mr. Darelli the machinery. I think he'd like to see it. He would realize then how complicated it is. I suppose, of course, that the figure can be removed from the big chest? To give a better view of the mechanism?"

Caglio hesitated; then replied:

"I think I can arrange it. I shall adjust the mechanism in the head; then I shall consider the matter of the chess player."

The professor left the group. It was five minutes before he returned to the living room.

"The Head is adjusted," he cackled, "but I shall need your aid, Selfridge, to dismantle the chess player. Let us go to the room."

THEY returned to view the Oracle. Selfridge set to work at once upon the chess player, while Hal faced Zovex and spoke:

"I have a question."

The eyes of Zovex glared. The lips rasped:

"Zovex will answer."

"I should like to know more about the subject that we discussed last night. Where are my brother's jewels?"

THE CRIME ORACLE

Cardona wheeled about when he heard Hal's question.

"Zovex sees no jewels," hissed The Head.

"You saw them last night," retorted Hal. "Why can't you see them again?"

"Zovex has spoken!"

There was finality in the Oracle's tone. Professor Caglio chuckled.

"That is all," he decided. "Look! Selfridge has dismantled the chess player."

The technician had removed the waxwork figure from the oblong box. The chess player was lying on the floor, tilted over. The observers saw that it was hollow. They looked down into the oblong box. Hal put a surprised exclamation.

"The machinery is only at the front!" he ejaculated. "The rest of the box is empty."

"No more mechanism is necessary," explained Caglio.

"Then why such a large box?" asked Hal. "And such a large figure? The player itself contains only a shell of mechanism."

Without knowing it, Hal was making the same discovery as The Shadow; but without a probe of his own. Hal was acting as The Shadow had expected. More began to occur in accordance with The Shadow's hopes. The Shadow had pictured Hal Rydler and Joe Cardona as a competent pair – Hal to produce statements that would bring hunches from Joe. It was Cardona who spoke next.

"Say – that thing trimmed me," grumbled Cardona. "I don't care how it works. I'd like to have another game."

"The automaton is dismantled," reminded Caglio.

"It only took a few minutes to get it apart," remarked Joe. "As I see it, there's only a couple of levers to be hooked and it will work again. How about it, Selfridge?"

The technician was caught wordless. Professor Caglio glared. He suddenly changed policy.

"We shall replace the figure," he decided. "That is your task, Selfridge. Perhaps you will need Marley –"

THE professor stepped over and opened the door to the hallway. He went out to look for Marley; but returned a half minute later to find that Cardona had already aided Selfridge. The automaton was on its pedestal. Selfridge was attaching levers.

Caglio shouldered forward and pushed the technician aside. He reached in through one of the doorways in the box. He tugged at a lever. Something snapped. Caglio cackled angrily. He withdrew his hand, bringing forth a broken rod of metal.

"Bah!" announced the professor. "The automaton will not operate. It will be three days before I can replace this broken part –"

"That you broke yourself!" growled Cardona. "I'm wise to your bluff, professor. I don't know your game; but its phony! You made a slip when you showed us the inside of this thing.

"Why? – because there's too much space there. Plenty of room to hide a man and have him move around –"

"By opening one door after the other!" interjected Hal. "That's it, Darelli!"

"I'm not Darelli," inserted Joe. "I'm from New York police headquarters! My name is Cardona and I know the inside of this racket! You're coming clean, professor –"

Selfridge made a spring for Cardona. The technician was whipping out a revolver. Cardona was quicker. The ace detective already had a grip on his own gun. He jabbed a stubby revolver into Selfridge's ribs and snapped an order to Hal.

"Grab the professor!"

Hal snatched at Caglio's wrist. He wrenched the professor's hand from his pocket. A revolver plopped to the floor. Caglio shouted a cry for aid. Men pounded into the doorway with leveled guns. Cliff and Squint had arrived at the professor's call.

Cardona stood dumfounded, while Hal grunted a hopeless utterance. And from across the room, the face of Zovex glared triumphant from the box upon the table!

CHAPTER XIX. THE LAST ORACLE

"STICK 'em up!"

Squint Proddock barked the words. With Cliff Marsland beside him, the narrow-eyed ruffian was ready to deliver massacre. He wanted his foemen helpless before he started.

Hal's hands raised. Cardona's gun fist slowly drew away from Selfridge's body. Then came a steady order:

"Drop the rod, Squint!"

Cliff Marsland was the speaker. From behind Squint's left shoulder, he jabbed his automatic hard against the crook's ribs. Squint's eyes blinked; his lips snarled.

"Drop it! Quick!"

The revolver thudded the floor. Gun-less, Squint lifted his own arms. Cliff was grim, as he spoke to Cardona.

"Keep Selfridge covered, Joe. You, Rydler, watch the professor. I came out here, just for this!"

Cardona was amazed. He had known Cliff Marsland as a character in the bad lands. For the first time, Joe realized that Cliff was on the side of the law. A sudden explanation struck Cardona. The Shadow had been in the earlier game. Cliff must be one of The Shadow's aids.

Cliff grinned at Cardona's surprise. He was sorry that the issue had been forced – for he had long kept the police in ignorance of the parts that he had played in aiding The Shadow. Some day, Cliff had known, his role would have to be found out. Only The Shadow was keen enough to permanently play a hidden part. His agents lacked that ability.

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Cliff was glad, though, that Joe was the only representative of the law upon this scene. Joe would keep mum. Cliff could still be useful to The Shadow, in New York.

Then speculation ended.

It came when a rasped tone sounded from across the room. All eyes turned as listeners heard. It was a venomous utterance that only fiendish lips could have voiced. That snarl was the challenge of Zovex!

THERE was a clatter. As men stared, Professor Caglio cackled an echo to The Head's demoniac snarl. The box upon the table was hurtling upward, the table top with it, impelled by the spring of swiftly rising shoulders. Away went the box, to crash upon the floor, bottomless. The table top whirled after it, struck by an upward-swinging forearm.

From the pedestal projected a distorted figure that had bobbed up like a jack-in-the-box. It was a body of skin and bones, a dwarfish, long-limbed shape garbed in tight-fitting jersey. Upon twisted shoulders rested the head of Zovex.

That head was real! Full-sized, it formed the only normal portion of the monstrosity that had sprung from the cramped pedestal. The arms, though scrawny, were as quick as whiplashes. Long limbs sped forward from a sidearm swing. Clawish fists were aiming ready revolvers that Zovex had held within the compact hiding place.

Zovex was a freak who would have attracted thousands to a side show. More than that, he was a murderer, ready to put on a swift performance. His itching fingers were upon the gun triggers. He had taken his opponents unaware; point-blank, he was about to mow down startled men with quick, successive shots.

Hard upon the fiend's snarl came a chilling laugh, that drowned Professor Caglio's intervening chuckle. The peal of mirth sounded from the doorway. Zovex heard. His bulging eyes saw. His snarl repeated, he forgot all others.

He jabbed both guns straight for the doorway.

There stood The Shadow.

This climax was one that he had planned. He had learned the secret ways of Zovex. He shared none of the bewilderment that gripped the others. He had expected this spindly creature to rise from the interior of the pedestal. The Shadow's investigation of this room had given him every clue he wanted.

Zovex had whipped upward with the flashing speed of a cobra. The Shadow, watching from outside the door, had barely matched the fiend's swiftness. Zovex had spied him instantly. As the creature aimed, his vicious eyes were wild in their gleam. His lips spat his harsh-rasped verdict:

"Death!"

WITHIN the doorway The Shadow stood, his left hand extended gloveless. His thumb and second finger were pressed tip to tip. The girasol glimmered from his hand. His right fist was half beneath his cloak, stalled on its way to draw an automatic.

No wonder Zovex had again played the part of an oracle. His one word – "Death!" – seemed a positive prophecy!

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Long arms, as thin as tentacles, were coming in to center. The fingers of scrawny hands were on their triggers. Only split-second speed could save The Shadow. It came.

His thumb and finger snapped. Blazed thunder split the cramped atmosphere of the room. From The Shadow's left hand came a vivid flash, with the blinding effect of lightning. A puff of smoke enveloped the black-hued form.

Bulging eyes were dazzled. Scrawny hands faltered. Dazzled by the flash squarely in his path of vision, Zovex was halted. Then he pressed the triggers. His aim was wide. The fiend's revolvers rocketed their bullets to the panels on each side of the door. His centering guns had stopped too soon.

Simultaneously, The Shadow acted. His right hand had whipped from beneath his cloak. With a short wrist-snap, he aimed a .45 and blazed a shot that accompanied the fire of Zovex.

The booming automatic tongued straight to its mark. A bullet withered the evil heart of Zovex. The power behind the speeding slug was terrific. It produced an unexpected result.

Zovex had recoiled with the fire of his own guns. The impact of The Shadow's bullet trebled the jolt. Backward went the livid-faced fiend, carrying the table base with him. The pedestal thudded the floor. Out spilled Zovex, to sprawl like a long-coiled devil-fish landed upon a ship's deck.

The Shadow had gained the vital edge in this amazing combat. That flash from his finger tips had stopped The Head's aim. (Note: The explosion from the finger tips, produced by the action of two chemicals, is terrific in its power. It is extremely dangerous in use; for an over-amount, even though seemingly slight, will produce an explosion with the effect of TNT. The Shadow has used it but seldom; on those occasions, with the strictest care. Properly produced, the explosion is so instantaneous that the operator remains uninjured. Because of the danger from these chemicals, I have never made a copy of the formula; and can answer no requests concerning it. – Maxwell Grant.) Hard upon his dazzling stroke, The Shadow had delivered his close-range shot. He stood, triumphant.

SHOTS ripped from the hall. The Shadow wheeled, his left hand drawing a second .45. His new target was the elevator at the front of the corridor. Three men had arrived. Havelock had come up with Marley. They were bringing an unexpected newcomer – Moose Sudling, the murderer who had left Manhattan.

Jemley's killer had picked a bad time visit The Head. Moose was the first of the trio to taste The Shadow's lead. The arrivals had fired too quickly. Havelock and Marley regretted it, when Moose sprawled between them. Again, The Shadow's guns were tonguing doom.

Two bullets had found Moose. A third clipped Havelock's gun arm. The chauffeur dropped to the floor, howling. Marley threw up his hands, delivering his gun with a wild toss.

From inside the room, one man made a frenzied attack. Squint Proddock, snatching up his gun from the floor, was on the aim for The Shadow. Squint had lunged Cliff aside. Before The Shadow's agent could recover, a revolver spoke. It was Joe Cardona's.

Squint toppled to the floor, his gun jouncing from his fist. Cardona had finished the thuggish killer. Selfridge was too slow to make a move. Caglio, breaking away from Hal, found Cliff on hand to cover him. Wildly, the professor backed away; then stared toward the dead form of Zovex.

Sight of the slain monstrosity brought a terrible cackle from the old inventor's lips. Cliff and Hal seized him as he clawed the air and uttered maddened screams. Caglio suddenly collapsed within their grasp and

floundered to the floor. He lay there, groaning, muttering.

Selfridge, subdued, spoke to Cardona:

"He counted on The Head to back him with his impossible invention. We couldn't help it, Marley and I. Havelock was the only bad one among us. Marley and I played along. But we weren't for it."

Marley was coming into the room, aiding Havelock. Cardona ordered Marley and Selfridge to attend to the crippled chauffeur. Joe stepped to the hall, expecting to see The Shadow. The cloaked fighter was gone. He had given an order to Marley; then he had departed. Cardona could hear the rumble of the elevator.

Martha Keswick was standing in the passage from the stairs. The girl stepped forward as Cardona spoke to her. Looking past Joe, Martha saw Hal Rydler stepping soberly into the hall. The girl gave a choke of thankful happiness. Cardona grinned; then went back into the room.

Joe joined Cliff. Together, they stood beside the toppled pedestal. Solemnly, they eyed the dead form of Zovex. Twisted crazily, long arms and legs outspread, the spidery creature looked like nothing human. Its over-large head was tilted back upon the floor. Glazed eyes stared sightless toward the ceiling.

The lips still wore their twist, fixed in their finish of the fiend's last word. The Oracle had made its last speech. It had phrased a sentence that had been executed:

"Death!"

In oracular manner, Zovex had decreed it. Like all evasive oracles, he had failed to specify upon whom the doom would fall. Zovex had tried to carry out his own verdict, with The Shadow as the victim. Zovex had failed.

The Shadow had completed the decree. He had ended the vile career of Zovex, the monstrous murderer.

The Shadow had placed death where it belonged!

CHAPTER XX. RIDDLES ARE SOLVED

Half an hour later, Joe Cardona and Cliff Marsland stood again in the room where battle had been fought. They had opened the safe beneath the shelf. From its interior, they had brought a medley of objects.

One was the carrying case that The Shadow had found there previously. It was filled with cylinders, large and small, made of light fiber and stacked together. Stuffed in the case were garments – sweater, trousers, shoes, gloves and cap, all of an overlarge size.

With the case they had found the mechanical head. They had observed how closely the composition face resembled the V-furrowed countenance of Zovex. They had discovered a single square of wood, six inches in diameter. It was the center of the table top. With it were the batteries that had once been wedged into the pedestal.

"A great racket," decided Cardona, with a shake of his head. "When the professor flashed the clockwork head, Zovex stayed in the chess player. When the Oracle was to stage a real show, Zovex crawled into the pedestal and shoved his head up through the hinged bottom of the cubical box."

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"After, he put away the dummy head," nodded Cliff. "Along with the center square of the table top, and the batteries. They stayed in the safe. The pedestal was a cinch for Zovex. That spindly body of his could get into anything."

"Even that passage we found, from this room to the professor's study," explained Joe. "A special exit for Zovex, if he wanted it. No good for anybody else. Nothing wider than a cat could have gone through it. Zovex must have made it just wide enough for his head. His body didn't count. Say – he could have pulled those legs and arms underneath a door! Pretty nearly, anyway."

"These cylinders were the great gag, Joe. With those around his body and on his arms and legs, Zovex must have looked as wide as he was tall."

"Sure! That's what Hal Rydler was telling us. He was fooled when he saw Zovex down at his brother's. He never would have dreamed that anybody like that could get into the chess player, let alone the pedestal."

"Easy enough for Zovex to work the chess player when he was in it. He did it by putting his hand down through the hollow arm and looking through that cloth door at the front. Easy to shift around, too, when the professor opened the doors."

"As easy as the game of being The Head. One thing, though, I can't dope. Zovex was scrawny. How did he look so wide, even with the cylinders?"

Cliff considered. Then he found the answer. He extended his own arms straight out from his body and let his forearms dangle.

"That was the stunt," he explained. "The top half of his arms made the shoulders, to match up with the big cylinders around his body. The forearms, dangling, looked long enough for full arms."

"They would," agreed Joe – "considering that Zovex had arms that were twice too long for his own body."

HAL RYDLER called from the hall. Cliff and Joe went from the room. They saw Hal pointing into the study. Selfridge had opened the professor's safe.

The top half of the vault beyond the panel contained the model of the perpetual motion machine. Beneath it were boxes. Selfridge opened them. Cardona saw the green of bank notes; a mass of printed bonds. One small box showed the sparkle of Percy Rydler's diamonds.

"This one is too heavy to move," stated Selfridge. "It must contain the stolen gold. Everything is here, sir. If –"

"It will go easy with you and Marley," interrupted Cardona, catching the gist of the technician's unworded plea. "How's Havelock? We don't want any trouble from him."

"Marley is guarding him in the living room."

"And the professor?"

Martha Keswick answered. The girl had arrived at the doorway and was standing there with Hal Rydler.

"My uncle has gone to sleep," stated Martha. "But I am afraid!"

THE CRIME ORACLE

"I know," nodded Cardona. "We'll take care of him."

"He will think of nothing but perpetual motion," affirmed Martha. "It was only Zovex who could talk him into other schemes. Ones that were worse than his mania. But I did not know. I thought that The Head was mechanical – one of his inventions. I suspected that some creature lived here. That was all."

"You were never sure?"

"Never! Otherwise, I would have informed the law. The only secret that I learned was the method of unlocking the doors by pulling the knobs."

The girl paused; then added:

"There are others who will take care of my uncle. It was only at his request that I came to live with him. Once I was here, he would not let me leave."

A BABBLE from the stairway told that Professor Caglio had awakened and was coming to the ground floor. Cardona ordered a departure. They took the cackling old professor with them. Selfridge and Marley brought Havelock. Before arranging the parties in the automobiles, Cardona drew Cliff to a corner, where they had previously carried three bodies. He pointed to the twisted form of Zovex.

"Remember The Strangler of a few years back?" queried Joe. "The one they were after, but never got? He used to go up ivy vines to the second floor. Some people saw him. He was a burglar by trade."

"And a murderer by inclination," added Cliff. "Zovex was The Strangler? Is that your hunch?"

"It fits," affirmed Cardona. "Hal Rydler saw The Head in his room. He felt a clutch at his throat, just before the girl came in to help him. It's another reason why Zovex went around in that clumsy outfit. He didn't want to be spotted as he was."

"He was a deep schemer," nodded Cliff. "Getting facts from dupes; then tipping off crooks like Pinky, Squint and Moose."

"And covering," put in Cardona. "He smeared any tracks that Moose left at Percy Rydler's."

Automobiles rolled from beneath the windowless building. They skirted the house and headed for the road. They were bound for the town of Littenden, where Cardona could report to local authorities. A drizzle had begun. The cars moved carefully.

As the procession slowed at the outlet to the road, a sound came from the gloom. Cliff Marsland alone knew its source. It was from a parked coupe hidden off the drive – the car that had trailed Squint Proddock when he had brought Marsland to this lair.

The sound was a weird laugh. A tone of finality, from somewhere near the house where horror had held sway. Solemn, it began as a knell. Rising strident, it changed to a peal of eerie triumph.

It told of hidden prowess, that token of The Shadow. It was the mirth of a master who had solved and ended the riddles surrounding Zovex. It was a reminder, that taunt, that The Shadow had fathomed every move. That he had tricked a supercrook to his undoing.

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Through Martha's word to Hal, The Shadow had begun the climax. Hal's double request had caused Professor Caglio to confer with Zovex. To lull the prospective victims, The Head had moved from the chess player to the table pedestal. Zovex had placed himself where he could not fire from ambush.

Then had The Shadow counted upon the moves of others. Watching, he had known that The Head would be forced to show his game. In the crisis, Zovex lacked the sure position that he would have had within the chess player. He had been handicapped, hurling away table top and cubical box. Despite his speed, The Head had been too late. The Shadow had tricked, then downed, the murderous fiend.

The chilling laugh was a saga – a full recounting of The Shadow's deeds. Fading amid the patter of the rain, the shuddering echoes faded; but their memory persisted within the minds of those who heard.

The Shadow had won the verdict against crime. His triumph laugh predicted that new tasks would follow. The Shadow's cause would continue, ceaseless.

Justice was the watchword of The Shadow!

THE END