

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Maxwell Grant

Table of Contents

<u>CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS</u>	1
Maxwell Grant.....	1
<u>CHAPTER I. TRAILS IN THE NIGHT</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER II. WAIL OF DEATH</u>	5
<u>CHAPTER III. ALLIES OF DARKNESS</u>	9
<u>CHAPTER IV. AT SEVEN OAKS</u>	13
<u>CHAPTER V. BATTLE BELOW</u>	17
<u>CHAPTER VI. CROOK VERSUS CROOK</u>	21
<u>CHAPTER VII. CRIME'S CROSSROADS</u>	25
<u>CHAPTER VIII. DEATH ON THE HIGHWAY</u>	29
<u>CHAPTER IX. NEW TRAGEDY</u>	33
<u>CHAPTER X. CLUES TO THE FUTURE</u>	37
<u>CHAPTER XI. MOVES AT MIDNIGHT</u>	41
<u>CHAPTER XII. OUT OF THE DARK</u>	46
<u>CHAPTER XIII. FRIENDS OF THE NIGHT</u>	49
<u>CHAPTER XIV. NIGHT OF MENACE</u>	52
<u>CHAPTER XV. DEATH COMES HOME</u>	56
<u>CHAPTER XVI. WITHIN THE SNARE</u>	60
<u>CHAPTER XVII. THE ROUNDUP</u>	63
<u>CHAPTER XVIII. CRIMES CONFESSED</u>	66
<u>CHAPTER XIX. DEATH'S DOUBLE TALE</u>	69
<u>CHAPTER XX. THE THING FROM THE PAST</u>	73

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- [CHAPTER I. TRAILS IN THE NIGHT](#)
 - [CHAPTER II. WAIL OF DEATH](#)
 - [CHAPTER III. ALLIES OF DARKNESS](#)
 - [CHAPTER IV. AT SEVEN OAKS](#)
 - [CHAPTER V. BATTLE BELOW](#)
 - [CHAPTER VI. CROOK VERSUS CROOK](#)
 - [CHAPTER VII. CRIME'S CROSSROADS](#)
 - [CHAPTER VIII. DEATH ON THE HIGHWAY](#)
 - [CHAPTER IX. NEW TRAGEDY](#)
 - [CHAPTER X. CLUES TO THE FUTURE](#)
 - [CHAPTER XI. MOVES AT MIDNIGHT](#)
 - [CHAPTER XII. OUT OF THE DARK](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIII. FRIENDS OF THE NIGHT](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIV. NIGHT OF MENACE](#)
 - [CHAPTER XV. DEATH COMES HOME](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVI. WITHIN THE SNARE](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVII. THE ROUNDUP](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVIII. CRIMES CONFESSED](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIX. DEATH'S DOUBLE TALE](#)
 - [CHAPTER XX. THE THING FROM THE PAST](#)
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CHAPTER I. TRAILS IN THE NIGHT

THE sleek sepia roadster slid to a stop near the crossroads. It stood there, motor purring idly, while the driver leaned from the leather-cushioned seat to read the weather-beaten signpost.

It was night, but strong moonlight predominated, etching the car and its driver. The roadster was of the convertible type, an expensive custom-built job. On its door the initials "C.T." were visible, and the lowered top allowed a full view of the driver.

The man at the wheel was unquestionably "C.T."; he needed nothing more than his appearance to prove himself the owner of the elaborate roadster. He was handsome, his smooth face darkish; but it was tanned rather than sallow. He was hatless, and his black hair showed sleek in the moonlight.

His was a face of lines. Black eyebrows formed straight streaks above narrow-lidded eyes; his nose was high, aristocratic. His lips, also straight, marked C.T. as a man of experience, quite satisfied with his place in life. There were other lines, such as furrows in his forehead, which formed another index.

Either C.T. was older than he looked, or he had lived a life of strenuous action. He appeared to be about

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

thirty, though a skeptic might have added ten years or so to that total and been right. Whatever his age or history, C.T. looked quite competent to take care of himself.

Even the way in which he placed a cigarette between his lips, his manner in reaching for the lighter on the dashboard, showed ease and poise. His choice of a car was an added key to his character.

This youngish man seemed intent on getting the most out of life with the least expenditure of effort; but behind his smoothness, one sensed a latent energy that could carry through to any purpose.

One arm of the signboard pointed to Northdale. It was the road that C.T. wanted. Sliding the car into gear, he cruised along a narrow but well-paved road, scanning the rolling landscape that spread beneath the moonlight.

The car reached a hilltop; in the far distance, the sleek man saw the tiny twinkles of the town. He reduced speed to a slow coast, as the car descended a winding road through a thick woods.

Trees filtered the moonlight, almost blotting it out. The roadster's headlights cut a gleaming swath ahead; out of the darkness, twin masses of gray rose like ghostly sentinels, to warn of a curve ahead. Pressing the brake pedal, the youngish man brought the car to a complete stop.

The gray things were pillars; between them ran a roadway that formed the entrance to an estate. Above, stretching from post to post, was a grilled archway that bore the name:

SEVEN OAKS

Instead of continuing along the road to Northdale, the sleek man veered his roadster between the pillars. The turn was sharp; to make it, he had to back the long roadster out into the road.

As he pushed the gear into reverse, he heard an approaching roar, saw headlights curving in from the road that had brought him here.

Directly in the path of the arriving car, the sleek man calmly nudged his roadster forward, expecting to be clear of any reckless driver. But the car that took the turn did a most unusual thing.

Its driver saw the roadster dead ahead; instead of staying to the road, he slashed for the gateway, jerking his car to a halt as he arrived.

The incoming car was a rakish sedan. Clashing fenders with the roadster, it blocked the fancy car from the driveway between the gates. Doors slapping open, the sedan disgorged a quartet of active ruffians, who made a united drive for the man in the roadster. As they came, the fringing lights of headlamps showed the glitter of revolvers swinging in their fists.

Against such odds, the man in the roadster had no chance. With one hand, he grabbed for a revolver in the pocket of the roadster's door; with the other, he snatched a suitcase from the seat beside him. Such delay was all that the attackers required to complete their onslaught.

Overwhelming their victim, they hauled him from his car. Hands plucked away the gun before he could use it. The suitcase was torn from his clutch. Slugging guns descended upon his head, as he tried to ward off the blows with his arms. Another minute would have brought complete disaster to the sleek man, if a third car had not entered the scene.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

It came from the same route that the other cars had used. The rapid spurt of its motor, the sudden shriek of brakes, told that another combatant was anxious to join the fray. Instinctively, the four attackers flung their sagging victim into a gully and swung, with aiming guns, to greet the new challenger.

Guns could not help them; not against an adversary who opened fire as he came. The stabs of an automatic crashed the night air, and with those shots figures began to stagger in the gleam of powerful headlights.

As a token that such shooting was the work of a master marksman, foemen heard a mocking laugh.

Long, strident, the taunting mirth brought ghoulish echoes from the surrounding slopes, as though the tongues of a thousand demons had joined in the challenge. Out of those echoes came the hoarse cries of the scattering fighters, who were learning the lone marksman's prowess:

"The Shadow!"

THERE were other men in the rakish sedan. Crouched low, they opened a counterattack against the lone marksman, trying to flank him while their pals found safety. But they did not reckon with the strategy of their superfoe, The Shadow.

He was gone from his car before bullets raked it. Still flinging his evasive laugh, the taunter swung suddenly into sight directly in front of the headlights. Still voicing his sardonic mockery, he invited the depleted crooks to shoot it out with him.

They saw The Shadow – a tall figure cloaked in black, a slouch hat clamped upon his head. His hands, thin-gloved, held a pair of automatics, their muzzles smoking, as a reminder of his marksmanship.

Eagerly, two men in the car lunged for the cloaked opponent, aiming as they came. Others, stumbling or wounded, turned to aid in the new combat.

Guns blasted. Their spurts were livid tongues, adding color to the brilliance of the headlights. The shots became a volley; but the only result was another rise of that strange, outlandish mockery. Bullets had found nothingness.

The Shadow was gone!

How, where he had vanished was a stunning mystery to his half dozen foemen. They didn't stop to reason that The Shadow, cloaked in black, was a veritable creature of night itself; that his sudden appearance in the glare had been a feint to draw them in the same direction, while he whisked back into darkness.

They might have calculated it, particularly those who had been crippled by The Shadow's bullets, had he not followed his quick exploit with another of those mocking laughs. The challenge riveted them, leaving them flat-footed where they stood. They couldn't locate the mockery.

Terror overtook them, even the hardest of that thuggish crew. They were ready to fling their guns away, to plead for mercy, rather than continue strife with an invisible foe who could be everywhere, yet nowhere.

Then, when victory was in The Shadow's grasp, a new gleam sliced from the descending road. More mobsters were at hand, a reserve crew that the others had not expected so soon. By rights, those new arrivals should have pushed themselves into the same plight as their pals; but luck turned against The Shadow.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

A swerve of the headlights caught the black-cloaked shape directly in the glare, showed crime's chief enemy in the center of the roadway, away from any shelter. Only The Shadow's swiftness saved him from calamity. He needed cover and took it, against a background of trees; but this time, his enemies gauged the direction and opened a barrage.

Even then, they could not outshoot their shifty foe. The Shadow was somewhere in the gully, like the victim that the crooks had abandoned. Their shots were high, but his aim proved accurate. Even the low shots that The Shadow fired were dangerous, as they ricocheted from the road.

Counting upon the reserves to cover them, wounded crooks reeled to two cars, the roadster and the sedan. Huddled low, they took to wild flight along the road to Northdale.

By then, the reserves were tasting The Shadow's fire. They didn't attempt to capture the cloaked fighter's car, which he had left in a turnout near the gully. As frantic as the rest, the cover-up crew joined the flight. Rising from his improvised intrenchment, The Shadow fired final shots at the last of the departing cars.

A jutting rock saved tires and gasoline tank from The Shadow's amazing aim. By the time the cloaked marksman had an open target, his guns were empty. Delivering a parting laugh that made fleeing evildoers expect immediate pursuit; The Shadow climbed up to the road and stowed his guns beneath his cloak.

Though crooks had not guessed it, The Shadow's car was ditched to stay a while. The turnout had looked better than it was when the lone fighter chose it as a strategic spot.

The wheels on the right were mired, and getting them out was something that would make pursuit useless. They had done better than they supposed, those fleeing fighters, when they took along the roadster.

One trail was lost, but The Shadow had another. He was thinking of the man that he had rescued. The highwaymen had not slain their victim; of that The Shadow was certain.

He had seen the fellow sprawl into the gully before a single shot was fired. There was a chance that the man in question could give some facts concerning them.

THE SHADOW already knew the identity of the attackers. They were a band of dangerous criminals, operating under the leadership of Clint Flenn, long under suspicion as a bank robber. Clint was a specialist in the art of alibi, and the law had never pinned a robbery on him.

Having learned, through secret sources, that Clint was leaving New York with a picked crew, The Shadow had followed them along the route to Northdale.

Why they had chosen to attempt highway robbery was one problem; how they had happened to pick their victim was another. The two matters could prove links in an important chain. If the rescued man knew enough facts, he could not only help The Shadow to trace Clint Flenn, but might prove a valuable ally in the quest.

Such was The Shadow's summary, when he reached the muddy spot where the man had sprawled. There, The Shadow spoke in a whisper, announcing himself to be a friend.

There was no answer from the mire. Blinking a tiny flashlight, The Shadow turned its rays downward. All that the light showed was a patch of mud recently compressed by a flattened form.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

The little light moved upward. It revealed loose sod above the gully, where tufts of grass had been torn away by clutching hands. Beyond was broken underbrush, showing where a man had scrambled, seeking flight amid the gunfire.

Moving through the briars, The Shadow saw torn cloth among the brambles. He reached the driveway beyond the gray stone pillars that bore the name: "Seven Oaks."

The hard surface of the paved drive showed traces of muddy footprints, which zigzagged. At intervals, the marks were well apart, indicating that their maker had taken long strides. Other spots showed where the victim had stumbled.

Following those revealing marks, The Shadow saw moonlight penetrating the thinning trees along the ascending driveway. In the distance, dim lights showed a mansion, the house called Seven Oaks. A whispered laugh came from The Shadow's hidden lips; the tone was lost in the wind that whipped the open hillside.

The Shadow had lost his trail to men of crime, but this route pleased him better. It promised the unknown, and in the past, such trails had produced remarkable consequences.

There was prophecy in The Shadow's laugh; yet even he could not foresee the singular future that lay beyond this venture!

CHAPTER II. WAIL OF DEATH

DINNER was over at Seven Oaks, but a silent group still sat at the big table in the dining room.

The man at the head of the table was elderly; his gray hair had a droop that matched his tired-faced expression. He was Grover Melridge, owner of the mansion, and age had crept upon him during the past few months.

Opposite Melridge was his wife, Lucretia, the cause of his worry. She looked younger than her husband, but her very vigor spelled warning.

Lucretia Melridge was nervous, restless. Whenever her eyes steadied, they took on a distant gaze, and her wan lips formed a smile. She had a way of staring through people that Melridge did not like. She acted as though she could see objects that were visible to no eyes other than her own.

Frequently, Melridge glanced at the others of the family: Robert and Janice. They were twins, twenty years of age, and they had an understanding that their parents lacked. Often, Melridge had noted, the twins seemed to speak through glances alone. Like Melridge, they were anxious about their mother.

This was one of Lucretia's bad evenings. Whatever her mental ailment, it was aggravated by the howling wind and the rattle of doors and shutters. Those were the sounds that made her smile, as though she heard whispering voices, speaking to her alone.

There was a witness to the scene, who stood near a deep window watching Lucretia Melridge. He was Dr. Martin Heverly, the family physician. Though scarcely thirty, Heverly had a professional air that made him look much older; but his manner was not a pose.

Heverly had already gained a reputation as a psychiatrist, and was a consulting physician at the Northdale Sanitarium, noted for its treatment of mental disorders.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Looking past the others, Heverly caught Robert's eye and gave a slight beckon. Janice was gazing toward her mother, but she turned toward Robert the moment that he arose and watched him join Heverly. As the two talked, Janice could almost sense their conversation from her brother's expression.

"Don't worry, Bob," said Heverly, in an undertone. "I doubt that your mother's condition is serious. It seems to be induced more by outside circumstances than by her own subconscious moods."

"We've kept her quiet," whispered Bob. "For the past week there hasn't been the slightest excitement here –"

"Which may be the real trouble," inserted Heverly. "I think it would be better if she lived closer to the world. She needs something to offset her imagination."

Janice saw Bob glance toward his mother, then turn back to Heverly with a nod. Somehow, she caught what was in her brother's mind and knew why he was agreeing with Heverly. She watched Heverly speak again, but this time, Janice gained no impression of the words that Bob heard.

"A few minutes ago," said Heverly, "I thought I heard gunshots, probably from the gate. I think we should investigate. I am going down there, and if your mother should ask where I have gone, it would be best to tell her."

"Suppose I go," suggested Bob. "Then you can stay here and watch her reactions."

While Heverly pondered, the others arose from the table. Heverly nudged Bob, and they followed out into the hall. Janice joined them, just beyond the doorway; quietly, she insisted upon knowing the reason for their conference.

"I shall tell her, Bob," decided Heverly. "You take my car and go down to the gate. But don't mix into any trouble. Come back here, instead."

Nodding, Bob started toward the front door. As if timed to his action, a surge of wind whistled about the house and rose to a weird howl.

As the blast ended, shutters beat a tattoo with their rattle, and from the medley came a shrill, prolonged shriek – wild laughter that ended with a soprano cackle.

LUCRETIA MELRIDGE was standing in the center of the hall, her arms lifted, hands clenched. Her eyes were agleam and her head tilted back. Her lips were wide, for they had delivered that laugh, which she meant as a welcome. Her fixed eyes seemed to pierce into the past, seeking some long-buried tradition.

Shivers swept Janice, and she saw that the others felt the same chilling sensation. Bob was halted halfway to the door. Grover Melridge stood swaying, very pale. Even Dr. Heverly, usually complacent, betrayed alarm. Then:

"The wail of the banshee," cackled Lucretia. "The wandering spirit that comes to foretell death! I can see him hovering among the oaks, waiting for someone to admit him! When the banshee summons the –"

Words failing at that moment, Lucretia gave another high-pitched laugh, sharper than before. It was answered by a curious noise from the living room, a basso whimper, so deep that it sounded like a giant cough from the chimney.

Janice turned toward the living room.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"Quiet, Vulcan," she said soothingly. "Quiet!"

"I'm going out," gritted Bob, suddenly. He turned to Heverly. "If mother asks where I've gone, tell her."

Lucretia was staring toward the door as Bob reached it, but she did not seem to see him at all. Her mind took up the thread that she had momentarily lost.

"When the banshee summons –"

It wasn't Lucretia's voice that riveted Bob. It was the thing that interrupted; a sound so startling that it seemed an answer to a prophecy. From the door came a muffled pounding, that finished with a scrape. Some hand, wearied by an effort, had subsided with a last desperate clutch.

It was the scraping sound that made Bob realize that the thing outdoors was human. With a quick jerk, he yanked the door open.

In with a gust of wind came a sprawling, bedraggled figure that took a rising stumble, then stretched full-length upon the floor. Dr. Heverly was watching Lucretia Melridge.

He saw the wild gaze leave her eyes; a look of sympathy replaced it. She was the first to reach the unfortunate stranger who had plunged across the Melridge threshold.

At a motion from Heverly, Bob mechanically closed the door. Profiting by Lucretia's mood, Heverly had her help him place the man upon a couch. Her mind returning to things about her, Lucretia Melridge again became mistress of the mansion. She began to call the servants, telling them to bring hot water and bandages.

Janice stepped over to the couch to help Heverly. By the time he had bathed the victim's forehead, the physician had a verdict regarding the man's condition.

"No deep cuts," he said. "Some bad bruises, but no chance of a fracture. Probably a slight concussion" – Heverly was eyeing the man's closed eyes – "so he should be kept quiet."

He propped the man's head higher. As he did, a wallet dropped from the pocket of the victim's coat. Like the pocket, the wallet had been ripped apart; evidently the man had fought to get it back again.

It contained no money, but there were some cards, among them a driver's license and an automobile owner's card. Both bore the same name.

"Carl Thayner," read Janice, aloud. "Hotel Clairmont, New York."

"Put in a long-distance call, Bob," suggested Melridge. "Find out what they know about this chap."

Before Bob could reach the telephone, Thayner stirred. Janice saw his eyes open, watched a weary smile form upon his lips. Even with its pallor, his face struck her as handsome. There was something plaintive in the way his hand tried to stroke back his blood-clotted hair.

"The Clairmont," muttered Thayner. "Haven't lived there... for months. Been driving... everywhere. Fellows... from the other car... tonight –" He settled back; his narrow eyes went shut. Then: "Look out for my bag," he said. "Very valuable. Lots of money in it."

"Your bag?" queried Janice. "But where is it?"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

THE question jolted Thayner like an electric shock. He came up stiffly from the couch, staring at everyone about him. His eyes went to the door, as he tried to gain his feet. Thayner's action was startling enough, but it was but part of what occurred.

Other eyes had been watching the entire scene – eyes from the blackness beyond a window near the door. They were eyes that carried a burning glow: the eyes of The Shadow.

Intent upon Thayner, no one had thought of looking toward the window. But as Thayner started toward the door, one pair of eyes proved wayward. They belonged to Lucretia Melridge.

Perhaps it was the rising wind, lifting to a new wail, that brought the woman to her former trend. That, plus sight of the peering eyes, was certainly enough to produce what followed.

Lucretia's shriek reached new heights; coupled with the wind's howl, the words were like a call:

"The banshee –"

A vast roar interrupted. With a tremendous lunge, a huge dog came from the living room. The dog was a Great Dane, his coat a dark gray. Timed almost to the dog's leaps, the door came clattering inward. Bob had left it loosely latched, and the wind did the rest.

Thayner was staggering toward the door, when he saw the huge beast. The wind seemed to spin the man about, blocking the dog's path.

As Janice shrieked, "Vulcan!" the Great Dane's lifting forepaws struck Thayner's shoulders and flattened him upon the floor. Bob made a frantic dive for the dog and went rolling with Vulcan, dragging the great beast from the stranger.

Lucretia was pointing past Thayner to the door, as though she spied something in the moonlight, flitting toward the great oaks far out on the lawn.

"There will be death!" she cackled. "Death in this house – soon! I have seen the banshee –"

Heverly slammed the door and bolted it. Melridge tried to quiet Lucretia; he and the servants started her upstairs. Vulcan was supplying huge growls as the door went shut, when Bob silenced him with a cuff and dragged him away. From the stairs, Lucretia gave a strange chortle.

"I saw!" she announced. "So did Vulcan! There will be death... in this house!"

Settled in her prophecy, Lucretia quieted. The maid went upstairs with her, and Melridge returned. Thayner had risen groggily and was beginning an apology, so heartfelt that it brought a quiver to Janice's lips.

For a man who had undergone misfortune at the hands of highwaymen, Thayner's regret at having caused the household trouble was more than gentlemanly. It was touching.

"I feel better," he said, "and I think I can be on my way. I thank you all for helping me. I shall be all right when I get to – " He paused, his hand to his forehead. "What is the name of the town near here?"

"Northdale," said Janice. "I'm sorry about Vulcan, Mr. Thayner. He must have seen something outdoors."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"Vulcan?" Thayner's gaze went blank; then his weary smile returned. "Oh, yes, the dog. He rather startled me, but it was my fault. I'm the one to be sorry, Miss... Miss –"

"Catch him, Melridge!" broke in Heverly, springing forward. "Quickly! Before he falls!"

Melridge was too late to stop Thayner's sway. It was Heverly's quick grasp that broke the man's heavy sprawl. Bob came dashing in from the kitchen, to help the others lift Thayner back to the couch where he had been before.

"He's really out," declared Heverly, solemnly. "I was right; he has a brain concussion."

"A gritty chap," approved Bob. "Say, what were you folks doing? Letting him walk out into the cold?"

"Not at all," returned Janice, indignantly. "He's welcome to stay here as long as he likes." She turned to Melridge. "Isn't he, dad?"

"He is," assured Melridge. "We have never been lacking in hospitality. Prepare a room, Janice, and we shall bring our guest upstairs."

From the floor above came a high, trilling laugh, that marked the end of Lucretia's hysterical outburst. There was a muffled bark from the kennel behind the house, where Bob had chained Vulcan. The low, sullen moan of the wind was followed by a rattle at the hallway window, as though a ghostly hand had rapped a reminder.

Those tokens passed unnoticed by the persons in the lower hall. They had forgotten the prophecy of death as voiced by Lucretia Melridge. Yet that prediction was to be recalled in the near future.

Already, the hand of death was hovering over Seven Oaks; nor would the menace end until that hand had found a victim!

CHAPTER III. ALLIES OF DARKNESS

THE next half hour brought quiet to the mansion; even the troublemaking wind had faded. In Melridge's study on the ground floor, Dr. Heverly was talking about Lucretia's condition. Arms folded, Grover Melridge nodded his approval of the physician's statements.

"The facts bear out my theory," declared Heverly. "You noticed how lucid Mrs. Melridge became when an actual emergency arose. She needs life; not gloom. We have been giving her the wrong treatment."

"I agree," said Melridge. "Lucretia was herself again, the moment that she saw a stranger in trouble. I am glad that we are keeping Thayner here. Lucretia will probably ask about him, the first thing in the morning. The question is: how long will Thayner stay?"

"Several days, at least," assured Heverly. "It would be unwise for him to overtax himself. If he needs any persuasion to remain, let me talk to him."

Bob came into the study. He announced that Thayner was asleep, after taking some pills that Dr. Heverly had prescribed. Bob had seated himself beside the desk, when Janice arrived and spoke from the door.

"Mother is asleep," she said, "and I have a headache. I'm going to bed and get some rest, so you won't have another patient, Dr. Heverly. Good night."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

As she spoke, Janice glanced upward, then was gone. Heverly noticed Bob turn his head, as though inspired by his sister's gaze. Heverly had seen the twins do that before, and the fact interested him. In this case, they had simply chanced to look at a portrait on the wall behind their father's desk.

In the darkness of her second-floor room, Janice felt her headache lessen. Viewing the moonlit lawn, she wondered about the old theory of the full moon taking sway upon strained minds. She was quite sure that her mother's condition was not serious; nevertheless, it had come at the time of the full moon.

There was another theory, too – that dogs were troubled by the moon. It could account for Vulcan's actions this evening. The dog's kennel was just around the corner of the house, and Janice listened for any sounds from that direction. She was almost undressed when she heard the dog whine.

The sound startled her; it didn't seem like Vulcan. Even when he whimpered, the big dog's tone was rumbly. But these whines were high, almost yelps. Mechanically, Janice approached the window and raised it.

With the whines, she heard the clatter of Vulcan's chain. Puzzled, the girl stared across the lawn at random. Then her eyes fixed as if magnetized.

It wasn't the breeze from the window that chilled her, although Janice was nearly unclad. The breeze was mild, compared to the harsher gusts that had wailed earlier. Janice was frozen by the distant figure that she saw moving past the oaks. It was a shape of blackness that had every quality of a wandering ghost.

Janice wondered if her mother had seen that cloaked figure off beyond the house. If so, her talk of a banshee hadn't been imagination, even though the threat of death could be regarded as groundless.

Lucretia Melridge had read deeply into the lore of apparitions, and believed that old mansions attracted specters from the night; but, so far, she – and no one else – had claimed that such visitants were about.

This was Janice's turn to see the apparition, and the way that the darkness suddenly swallowed the cloaked shape seemed further proof of its spirit origin. Next, Janice caught the blinks of a tiny light, which made her think of other ghostly manifestations.

Shakily, the girl came from the window and found kimono and slippers. By the time she had put them on, fear overwhelmed her. She made a record dash downstairs and arrived, panting, in the lighted study.

TRYING to pour her story in one breath, Janice made a botch of it. Her father gripped her shoulders, found that she was trembling. He was looking anxiously at Dr. Heverly, when Bob intervened, saying:

"Let me talk to her."

Again, the mental bond between the twins was demonstrated. Collecting her wits, Janice spoke calmly to Bob, as if expressing thoughts to herself. There was firmness on Bob's face when he turned to the others.

"She saw something," he said. "I know it as positively as if I had been there myself. A figure in black, off by the oaks, that faded into the trees below the drive, followed by tiny blinks of light. Two blinks, you said, Janice?"

The girl nodded. Heverly reached for the telephone and gave a number that the others recognized.

"I'm calling the sheriff," he stated. "I'll tell him to start a search, beginning from the gateway. Apparently, some of those troublemakers are still about. This proves Thayer's story."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Outside the mansion, Vulcan was still straining at his chain. The big dog was whining no longer; he was putting full effort into his tugs, with an intelligence that seemed almost human. Each jerk was wearing at the ring that hooked the chain to the dog's collar.

Janice had mentioned Vulcan's whine, and she and the others were listening for it. Not hearing the sound, they thought that the Great Dane had quieted.

Yet Vulcan, in his way, was giving proof to Janice's story. He had seen the fading figure and the dwindling lights that marked its disappearance.

The Shadow had returned to the gate. There, he was checking the ground for every possible clue. He was interested first in tire marks, and found those of Thayner's roadster, where they cut in toward the gate, reversed, and made another forward try.

He identified the tires of the other cars, made careful recordings of their treads. In a ditch, he found a crook's revolver; farther along, he came across a dark-gray hat, new and of expensive make.

Judging from the new condition of the tires, the modern revolver, and the new hat, Clint Flenn had brought along a well-equipped crew. Probably they had working clothes for any bank jobs, but they were certainly traveling as well-to-do citizens and sparing no expense.

How they had come across Thayner and how much they had gained by robbing him were questions that only the victim could answer, and such information could wait until he recuperated from his adventure. Thayner's car, alone, was quite a prize, but The Shadow doubted that Flenn would attempt to peddle it.

Clint Flenn was after more than ordinary game; that was a certainty. He would do nothing that might put a crimp in his present activities. Handling stolen cars wasn't one of Clint's rackets. He would avoid it.

Other clues were trivial, hardly worth the time that The Shadow spent in finding them. The cloaked investigator started past the gateway, toward the turnout where he had ditched his own car.

There was a stir from the underbrush; The Shadow wheeled, shoving his hand to a ready gun. Before he could even draw the weapon, a mighty mass sprang toward him, with a roar.

Whipping his hands apart, gunless, The Shadow thrust one to the throat of the giant creature that hit him like an avalanche. He wrapped his other arm higher, folding it about an enormous muzzle that bristled with glistening teeth.

Though braced for the onslaught, the black-cloaked fighter was swept from his feet and rolled half-across the road by the hurtling bulk that met him.

It was Vulcan, loose with all the fiery spirit that he had shown earlier. Such a dog, launched upon a self-appointed mission, could prove himself a killer. Vulcan had given evidence of his ability, and The Shadow had witnessed it, through a window. But he had also seen the way in which the beast was handled when Bob had intervened.

Intuitively, The Shadow had provided the process: one grip to fling the dog's head aside, another to muzzle him. As they struck, The Shadow gave a shoulder roll that tightened his grip on the powerful dog.

But Bob's system wasn't the only one The Shadow used. Even before he struck the ground, he had voiced a sibilant call that reached the dog's ear.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

SOMETHING in that strange whisper spoke of mastery. The Shadow demonstrated the needed prowess that went with it, and on the second roll, he felt the dog relax. Half-beneath Vulcan's bulk, he released his grip, at the same time speaking a calm, subdued command.

As Vulcan let his mouth yawn, The Shadow's arm eased in between the dog's jaws. Playfully, Vulcan worried the cloaked arm without an attempt at a bite. Rolling the dog to his feet, The Shadow came up with him. He drew a gun and thrust it toward the Great Dane.

Vulcan did exactly what The Shadow expected; he caught his new friend's wrist between easy-pressing teeth and gave a twist that sent the gun skidding from The Shadow's hand.

Reclaiming the gun, The Shadow warded the dog away, speaking another command. He turned toward his car, followed obediently by his new ally. In Vulcan, The Shadow had found a most unusual dog – one trained in police methods, which meant that he had intelligence in proportion to his bulk.

While The Shadow jacked the rear wheel of his car to insert gravel between the tire and the mire, Vulcan sat patiently by, wagging his tail as though wishing he could help.

The Shadow paused at moments, to pat the dog's head, assuring him of some future opportunity. It was good policy, for Vulcan's turn was coming earlier than The Shadow anticipated.

About to step into the car, The Shadow saw lights swing in along the road from the direction of Northdale. Crouching on the far side of the car, he drew Vulcan beside him. The arriving automobile swung in toward the gates; the turn of its lights threw a glare straight toward The Shadow's car.

Gruff voices sounded. Gravel churned beneath heavy boots, as men alighted. It wasn't Clint Flenn Co. returning. These were newcomers, obviously some of the local police authorities. They thought that they had found an empty car; nevertheless, they were drawing revolvers as they approached.

Easing Vulcan forward, The Shadow spoke a low command. The dog showed even more vigor than when on his own. He became a canine thunderbolt as he sprang for the approaching deputies, taking them totally off guard.

Even in the dim light, Vulcan saw his targets: the glittering revolvers. He disarmed one man with a superfine twist that carried the fellow into a somersault. As the other deputy wheeled about, Vulcan met him with both paws and flattened him, trapping the gun on the way.

That done, Vulcan was around again, ready to overtake the scrambling men and demolish them before they reached their car. But Vulcan had an ear wide, waiting for a mere word from his new master.

It came, a sibilant tone that the deputies didn't hear amid their clatter. Stopping short, Vulcan barked in grandiose style, to hurry the flight of the two men.

There was a loud voice from the car, audible despite Vulcan's huge bark. It was the sheriff who shouted:

"It's Melridge's dog! Stay in here, you fellows. We'll swing up and take a look at that car."

The Shadow saved the sheriff the trouble. He had pressed the starter while Vulcan barked. With a twist, the rear wheel caught the gravel and jerked the car out to the road. Before the sheriff had time to swing his car about, The Shadow's machine was zooming past him, whining in high-speed second gear.

Forgetting that Vulcan had disarmed the deputies, the sheriff kept yelling for them to shoot, drowning out their loud replies that they couldn't. Lights glimmered suddenly from The Shadow's car, but all that the sheriff glimpsed was the spot of red that followed it around the bend.

A laugh trailed back from distant darkness, to be answered by the farewell barks of Vulcan, The Shadow's new ally!

CHAPTER IV. AT SEVEN OAKS

LIFE slipped by pleasantly at Seven Oaks, as Carl Thayner learned during a few days of residence there. The Melridge hospitality, once established, proved itself wholehearted. The house was wide open to the unfortunate stranger, and thanks to his appreciative way, Thayner was regarded almost as a member of the family, rather than a guest.

Thayner's hurts, though not serious, proved numerous. In addition to his bandaged head, he carried his right arm in a sling, due to a severe sprain which troubled him. He had a limp which tired him when he walked; hence he spent much of his time lounging about the house and on the veranda.

He talked often with Lucretia Melridge, and his chats proved a better tonic than any that Dr. Heverly could have prescribed. Thayner had traveled to many distant places; he talked of Buenos Aires and Shanghai in the same breath as New York. His descriptions pleased Mrs. Melridge, for she had a flare for travel, too.

Moreover, Thayner was tactful, as Dr. Heverly noted. When he mentioned the pampas of the Argentine, Lucretia asked eagerly if he had ever seen any of the huge vampire bats that frequented those plains. Thayner promptly swung the conversation to descriptions of the gauchos, telling of the riding feats performed by those South American cowboys.

When Thayner happened to speak of Irish castles that he had visited, Lucretia swung the talk to banshees, whereupon Thayner skillfully shifted to humorous legends concerning the famed Blarney Stone, thereby avoiding discussion of spooks that wandered by night.

Grover Melridge felt himself indebted to Thayner, and said so. Smilingly, Thayner discounted the praise and assured Melridge that the obligation was the other way about. As for Bob, he and Thayner became pals.

They talked about polo, which both liked, a game which Thayner had played in the Argentine. When it came to adventures, Thayner had many to relate, which he did in a matter-of-fact style that captured Bob's imagination, along with his esteem.

Meanwhile, of course, Thayner had described his most recent adventure – the battle wherein he had somehow managed to escape from murderous attackers down by the gate. Who his assailants were, whether they had overtaken him by chance or design, he could not tell.

If they were New York mobsmen, they might have marked him while he was in Manhattan, for there Thayner had been a large spender. If they had come across him while he was driving toward Northdale, his car was probably the reason for their attack. Ruefully, Thayner admitted that the big sepia roadster was too conspicuous and branded its owner as a man of wealth.

So far, the car had not been located, and Sheriff Rawley, a gruff, blunt-spoken man, told Thayner that he could probably kiss the roadster good-by. Crooks had cleared the neighborhood, taking the car with them, and about the best that Thayner could do would be to collect what insurance he had on it.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Thayner took the situation cheerfully. What worried him more was the loss of his bag, which contained all of his funds. Thayner computed the total at approximately ten thousand dollars, his savings of the past five years. But he treated the matter philosophically, when he spoke to Janice Melridge.

"All my life," said Thayner, in a reflective tone, "I have been making friends, not money. There are dozens of places in this world where I am welcome. Places where cash is unneeded."

"Is Seven Oaks such a place?" inquired Janice, hopefully. "I hope you have added it to the list."

"I have," assured Thayner, soberly, "and you can be sure that I shall some day return your hospitality tenfold. I am getting older, Janice, and it is time that I made my fortune. I know of opportunities: forgotten gold mines, islands with buried treasure. Friends have often wanted to stake me on such ventures."

THEY were on the veranda, and dusk was gathering. Janice suggested that they go through the house and walk out to the Italian Garden, to view the rising moon. As they entered the front door, Thayner noted a reflective look on the girl's face.

It was an interesting face, firm-featured yet lovely. At most moments, Janice seemed softly feminine. Her smile was winsome; her blond hair had a way of dropping its stray locks across her forehead, almost to her roundish cheeks. When she became conscious of the fact, she brushed her hair back, tightened her lips and gave her chin a lift, as though she wanted to be independent.

At such times, she most resembled her brother, Bob, who always kept his chin up. When Bob became reflective, his face seemed to mature. That was where they differed. Bob had shaken off his youth, whereas Janice was still governed by childhood moods and recollections.

"You say you're growing old," Janice told Thayner. She was speaking in Bob's style. "Just how old are you?"

"Twice your age," laughed Thayner. Then, as Janice showed surprise: "In experience; though probably not in years. I'm still about thirty, though I look much older."

In Janice's opinion, he didn't. She was contrasting him with Dr. Heverly. When so compared, Thayner seemed really young, and his buoyancy was the sort that would last. Despite herself, Janice began to reflect how little difference ten years made. She was about to express the thought, when they heard an interruption.

The voices came from the stairway. Grover Melridge and his wife Lucretia were coming downstairs, engaging in an argument. It was seldom that Melridge lost his temper with Lucretia, but this was one such time.

"I've had enough of your folly!" stormed Melridge. "I can put up with many things, Lucretia, but not with this —"

"It is time that I should speak!" shrieked Lucretia. "The truth must be known! The world must learn! Summon everyone. I must tell them —"

"About banshees?" interrupted Melridge. "We've heard enough of that silly chatter! Forget the ghosts, Lucretia!"

"Some ghosts are real," cackled Lucretia. "You cannot deny it, Grover. They are ghosts of the past, that live in our memories. Have you forgotten —"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Her words broke off into a gargly sound. Thayner was about to start forward, when Janice caught his arm and drew him into the nearest doorway, which happened to be Melridge's study. They heard Lucretia's shriek turn into a gargle:

"I'll tell... I'll tell –"

"If you do" – Melridge's outburst was punctuated by his wife's choking – "you know what will happen, Lucretia!"

Chokes changed to moans. Looking from the doorway, Thayner and Janice saw servants arrive to help Melridge lift his wife's limp form. Melridge's hands were fidgeting, as though they regretted the recent grip that they had taken on Lucretia's throat. Watching his wife steadily, Melridge saw that her mood had passed.

"Help her upstairs," he told the servants, wearily. "Keep her quiet; while I summon Dr. Heverly."

Melridge went to the hallway telephone. Janice drew Thayner into the study and gently closed the door.

"You mustn't think too harshly of father," the girl told Thayner. "He's lost his temper that way before. Bob and I understand; we know that he would never hurt her. But the servants –"

"They would not understand," inserted Thayner. "Servants never do. It is too bad that they chanced to be around. But there is no need to worry, Janice. Your mother's hysteria was brief. It is a sign that she has changed for the better."

OFFERING the girl a cigarette, Thayner lighted one himself and glanced around the study. He noted the portrait above Melridge's desk.

It showed a firm-faced man, with grizzled hair, whose gray-tinged mustache gave him an ironclad expression. The eyes were of a steely hue, but in them dwelt a kindly expression that the artist had captured straight from life.

"A fine-looking gentleman," observed Thayner. "Who is he?"

"Howard Loyden," replied Janice. "My father's finest friend. I must have met him, though he died nearly twenty years ago. Every time I look at the portrait, I seem to feel it speak. Bob has said the same."

"What does it say?" inquired Thayner, earnestly. "Can you hear its voice?"

"Almost," declared Janice, "but that is either memory or imagination. The picture speaks with its eyes, the way that Bob and I do, sometimes. But there are never words. We just feel that the portrait sees us and understands us. I suppose it's very silly."

"Not at all," mused Thayner. "It is a very fine thought, Janice. Your father was very fortunate to know such a friend."

Thayner was still studying Loyden's portrait, when Janice opened the study door and tiptoed a few paces into the hall. He heard the girl's low tone:

"Come, Carl. Father has gone out to the veranda, to wait for Dr. Heverly. We can go to the Italian Garden."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

As they went through the hallway, Janice looked about her. The house was dark, except for the few lights that the servants had turned on. Something in the blackness of the living room made Janice think of the night when she had looked from her window.

In one glance, she fancied that she saw burning eyes that might belong to a black-cloaked figure. Then she decided that they were embers in the fireplace; that any shape in the living room was purely her imagination.

Yet there was a shape, that neither Janice nor Thayner saw. It came from the living room after they had gone outdoors. It was the gliding figure of The Shadow; he paused by the door of the study and looked into the lighted room.

There, The Shadow observed the portrait of Howard Loyden and noted the characteristics of the life-sized face.

Moving from the study, The Shadow paused to look toward the veranda, then upstairs. It was plain from his actions that he had witnessed the entire scene between Grover and Lucretia Melridge, though he had not overheard the conversation in the study between Janice and Thayner. Gliding ahead, The Shadow went out through the side door that led to the Italian Garden.

Already outside, Janice and Thayner were passing Vulcan's kennel. The dog was gnawing a huge ham bone; he forgot his meal, to rise with a deep-throated growl and give a violent clank at his new chain.

"Quiet, Vulcan!" spoke Janice. "Quiet!"

Vulcan didn't quiet. His growl became a fierce bark, as the girl approached with Thayner. In the moonlight, Vulcan could have passed for a huge werewolf, a mighty creature ready to slaughter all humans in sight. Janet drew Thayner back; then approached a few steps, alone:

"Quiet, Vulcan," she repeated. "We won't disturb you, old boy."

Letting his growls subside, Vulcan resumed operations on the ham bone. Rejoining Thayner, Janice laughed.

"Even a toy dog will fuss when having dinner," the girl said. "Vulcan doesn't like to be disturbed, either, so he puts up an argument, too. Only he does it on such a huge scale that he sounds terribly dangerous, which he really isn't."

Thayner agreed. They continued to the garden, where they chatted lightly on subjects that included moonlight. Janice was trying to forget the recent scene in the house, and Thayner did his utmost to soothe her worries.

CHIMES from the house announced the dinner hour. They left the garden, with its marble pillars and benches. Looking back, Janice observed a moving blot of blackness that seemed to efface itself. For a moment, she thought that it was a living figure, and started to grip Thayner's arm in fright.

Then she noted that the night was clouding. Probably the blackness had been caused by a cloud drifting across the moon. Remembering Vulcan, Janice drew Thayner toward another doorway, to give the kennel a wide berth in case the dog did not want to be disturbed.

Yet they heard Vulcan bark as they entered the house. The great dog had seen something sneaking beyond the house. Janice was about to turn back, when the barks subsided. She went into the house with Thayner; as a result, the girl failed to see the singular thing that occurred beside the kennel.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

The darkened blotch from the marble-pillared garden was more real than Janice supposed. It had become a gliding figure, moving swiftly toward the kennel.

It was the arrival of that form that quieted Vulcan. The Great Dane recognized his friend, The Shadow. Under the stroke of a gloved hand, the dog settled back upon its haunches.

The Shadow, too, was crouched, invisible against the dark gray of the weather-beaten kennel. Like Vulcan, he was watching for another sight of a furtive figure that had slipped beyond the house. A prowler had come to the grounds of Seven Oaks; one whose very manner foreboded trouble.

In seeking new traces of the shifty stranger, The Shadow was counting on another trail. But the master of darkness had not forgotten the things that he had seen, and learned, at Seven Oaks. There was a whispered laugh beside the kennel. Vulcan nestled his great head in the folds of The Shadow's cloak.

This was the night The Shadow had awaited. Trails had crossed beneath the darkening moon. Soon, The Shadow would be finding new paths in the night, leading him to men of crime.

CHAPTER V. BATTLE BELOW

SLEEK and shiny, except for one dented fender, Thayner's sepia roadster was parked under the shelter of thick trees, on a dirt road to the rear of Seven Oaks. At the wheel sat a crouched man who indulged in grumbles.

A flashlight glimmered from a wooded path. Another man stumbled through to the road. As his light played on the car, the arrival gave a hoarse whisper:

"It's me, Trigg!"

"Wouldn't I know it?" growled the man in the car. "Clint must have been screwy when he put you on the job, Gumbo! Cripes! You were tripping over your own shoe leather worse than some flat-foot cop."

"I was all right in the open," argued Gumbo, "and that's what I was sent for, to case the house up on the hill. I done it – so what?"

"You took your own time about it!"

"Sure, I did, Trigg. You'd have taken longer. It was moonlight when I went up, which made it tough. The big pooch spotted me, so I had to wait until it got cloudy."

"All right, Gumbo. What did you find out?"

Faces showed in the dashlight. Trigg's was hard, square-jawed, with an ugly glint to its eyes. Gumbo's countenance was thin and pasty, with little, blinking eyes that were both sharp and shrewd. His reply to Trigg was cagey.

"You'll find out," informed Gumbo, "when I tell Clint Flenn."

Trigg shoved the car into gear. He hadn't been in a hurry to get started; not until he had quizzed Gumbo. Finding that the sneak was close-mouthed, Trigg saw no use in lingering longer. At the same time, he considered that the delay had been worthwhile.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

So it had been, but not for Trigg. The roadster had waited just long enough to suit another arrival, who had reached the road in absolute silence. Contrasted with Gumbo's stumble–bum approach, a quiet advent had naturally taken more time, even for The Shadow.

Despite the darkness up by the mansion, The Shadow had observed Gumbo steal away from shelter of the house. A slight whine from Vulcan had certified The Shadow's impression. Leaving his canine friend, The Shadow had trailed Gumbo down the hillside.

At present, he was riding the curved back of Thayner's fancy roadster, having reached that vantage point just as the sleek car pulled away. He had learned the identity of the two men in the car, and one of them was important. The man in question was Trigg. The Shadow knew his full name: Trigg Ungrel.

Clint Flenn, the big–time criminal sought by The Shadow, was a man who trusted very few of his own ilk. Yet Clint, like other big–shots, occasionally needed a lieutenant. He had chosen one a few years ago, and the man of his choice was Trigg Ungrel.

If any man could speak for Clint, and tell something worthwhile, that man was Trigg. The fact was one that The Shadow filed mentally for future reference.

The roadster took a twisty path along a network of dirt roads. Peering over the side, The Shadow recognized landmarks in the glow of the headlights. During the past few days, The Shadow had inspected the terrain around Northdale and found marks of incriminating tire tracks, but they were too infrequent to produce a trail.

However, The Shadow had learned what Sheriff Rawley did not guess: that the crooks who attacked Thayner were still in the vicinity. On all his trips to Seven Oaks, The Shadow had been on the lookout for members of Flenn's tribe, and tonight he had scored results, by spying Gumbo.

The present route interested The Shadow. It was doubling back along a paved road, which accounted for The Shadow's difficulty in tracing the intermittent tire marks. The car was surprisingly close to the little town of Northdale, when Trigg swung into an old gravel quarry.

The ground was too hard to show tire marks; and the quarry had another peculiarity, which The Shadow had not noted the few times that he had passed it.

There was an outlet at the rear of the quarry – a curved road that led up to an old, deserted house that clung to a hillside. Trigg extinguished the headlights as he approached, and with good reason. Through the trees that flanked the house, The Shadow could see glimmering lights from a valley.

Those lights represented Northdale. The abandoned house was on the very outskirts of the little town, yet unapproachable except by the quarry road. Choice of such a hideaway was proof that Clint Flenn was crafty. He had tucked his crew safely away, almost within shouting distance of Sheriff Rawley and the latter's deputies.

TRIGG UNGREL rapped at the side door of the house, then shoved it open. He entered, followed by Gumbo, and The Shadow immediately took up the short trail. Working the door open, he saw what he expected.

There was a guard inside, but the fellow had dropped his duty as soon as Trigg and Gumbo arrived. He was following the pair into a big room at the end of a hall. Using darkness as his cover, The Shadow reached the door itself and peered through a sizable crack.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

The house looked like an old store that had once supplied the quarry workers. Clint Flenn was seated on a cracker barrel under the light of a swinging kerosene lantern. Long-jawed and hard-faced, Clint nevertheless had a poise that could not pass unnoticed, even in these surroundings.

He was well dressed, and his manner went with it. In New York, Clint had made a specialty of appearing at gaudy restaurants and gilded nightclubs. He had used those places every time he needed an alibi.

In the light, Trigg Ungrel looked like an imitation of Clint Flenn, and the rest of the band – even Gumbo – were trying to assume Clint's pose.

Some had difficulty, because they had arms in slings and shoulders thick with bandages, tokens of their recent battle with The Shadow. There was a dapper man among them; when Clint addressed the fellow, he called him "Doc." Evidently Doc had served an apprenticeship at some hospital, and knew enough about first aid to attend any wounded crooks.

In a smooth, easy tone, Clint inquired what Gumbo had learned. The pasty-faced snooper put it in a nutshell.

"The guy is still up at the house," declared Gumbo. "Thayner, I mean. There's a dame there, that's gone sweet on him. They were talking mush out in a garden that was rigged like a cemetery. I figure it will be tough to snatch Thayner."

Clint fixed a steady eye on Gumbo and asked: "Just why?"

"There's three other guys in the house," replied Gumbo. "Old man Melridge, his son, and a flunky named Jasper. The medico comes there a lot, too, which makes four. Besides, there's the pooch. He's half as big as an elephant, and as tough!"

Stroking his long chin, Clint pondered on Gumbo's details. Then, rising from the barrel, he decided:

"The Thayner job is off."

There were mutters from the dozen men who surrounded the big-shot. Trigg Ungrel shoved himself forward, motioning the others to be silent. Acting as their spokesman, Trigg demanded sarcastically:

"What's the matter, Clint? Afraid you can't build an alibi, like you did when the Feds knocked off that partner of yours, Nick Bargo?"

The Shadow caught the full point of Trigg's caustic challenge. The Bargo case had often been discussed in Manhattan's crime centers. Everyone knew how Nick Bargo had been trapped right after a bank job, and had lost his life battling the Feds.

There was another question that Trigg could have asked. It concerned fifty thousand dollars that Bargo had taken in his last haul. Though Bargo had been killed in the getaway, the Feds had never found the cash. If anyone had it, crooks argued, the present owner of the money was Clint Flenn.

In fact, there had been rumors that Clint had double-crossed Nick. The fact that Clint had an alibi meant nothing. It would have been easy for him to go on the job with Nick, leave his partner to the Feds, and slide off with the cash.

Still, mobsters agreed that Clint had probably profited through circumstances, rather than by intent. He wasn't a double-crosser; he was smart. Therefore, they were willing to serve him.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Yet such service carried an element of mistrust, as voiced by Trigg Ungrel. The rest of the crew expected Clint Flenn to go into a rage. Instead, Clint spoke icily.

"Sometimes, Trigg," said Clint, "you open your big face too wide. You'll swallow something, some day, that won't agree with you. Maybe a few pills, and not the kind that Doc serves."

Ignoring Trigg, Clint turned to the others, to resume his theme. His tone was almost casual.

"What did we get from Thayner the other night?" he queried. "Only a couple of grand. Maybe the guy hasn't got any more dough. If that's the case, putting the heat on him won't do us any good. If we make a regular snatch out of it, who's going to fork over any ransom dough? We don't know."

"I say the Thayner job is off. That goes! I've got a better plan. Gumbo says that Thayner is making a play for the Melridge doll. All right, we'll snatch her instead: Her old man has dough, and can pay. Besides" – Clint gave a gloating chuckle – "it will put this guy Thayner in a tough spot. They'll figure he's a finger man, working in our racket."

THERE were grunts of approval from the listeners. Clint threw a contemptuous look at Trigg. The lieutenant made a rapid effort to regain the confidence of the others.

"Clint has gone screwy," began Trigg. "This is another of his smart ideas that won't work out. What's the dope, Clint?" He turned savagely to the big-shot. "Did you get more dough out of Thayner's bag than you told us? Are you trying to shove us in a tight spot, like you did Nick Bargo?"

Clint's answer was a lightning punch that came straight from the hip and took Trigg's wagging jaw as a target. Clint's knuckles seemed to draw back as they landed, retarding so they wouldn't feel the blow. Trigg took a sprawl and slowly crawled to his feet.

"Outside, Trigg," ordered Clint, smoothly. "You're demoted to doorkeeper. Talk to yourself awhile."

Sheepishly, Trigg accepted the demotion. His hand stopped as it reached the gun on his hip. With his other hand he rubbed his chin, and muttered something about Clint being "all right." He was still mumbling when he reached the hall, and there he had a listener.

Drawing back into darkness, The Shadow had found a deep doorway and was waiting for Trigg to pass. He heard Trigg's utterances. Sensibly enough, Trigg was cursing his own foolishness. His mutters indicated that he still wanted to take over Clint's racket and run it his own way, but the chance was gone.

In fact, Trigg was debating whether or not he wanted to stay in the racket at all. Maybe he'd be getting some of those pills that Clint talked about – bullets from a .38 to be delivered when he wasn't looking. Trigg was sure that no one would be surprised if he decamped; and The Shadow agreed.

Shifting silently from the doorway, The Shadow decided to make up Trigg's mind. There were facts that The Shadow wanted to know, particularly concerning the former partnership between Clint Flenn and Nick Bargo, as well as the reasons why Clint had taken up the present expedition. Trigg Ungrel was the man to supply such data, under The Shadow's persuasion.

Out of the darkness came two things: a whisper and a gun muzzle. The whisper reached Trigg's ear; the gunpoint pressed icily against the crime lieutenant's neck. Trigg's lips moved in darkness. They formed a name, but did not voice it:

"The Shadow!"

"Keep moving, Trigg," the whisper said. "We're going for a ride in Thayner's car. Clint said you talk too much. Perhaps" – the hissed word chilled Trigg – "perhaps you haven't talked enough. Sometimes, Trigg, people live long when they talk."

Trigg was gasping, as though he wanted to talk right then and there. A few seconds more, The Shadow would have marched the shaky lieutenant right out of Clint's camp and away. But an intervention came.

The door of the main room opened and Gumbo stepped out, followed by Clint's voice telling him to bring Trigg in again.

The Shadow's free fist clamped like a vise on Trigg's arm, jerked the faltering lieutenant into the deep doorway. Swinging Trigg full–about, The Shadow pressed him against the door itself, intending to keep him covered while Gumbo passed. It was a hard shove, the sort that Trigg needed, but the door didn't stand the strain.

With a rip, the barrier gave on broken hinges. Clutched by Trigg's frantic hands, The Shadow went headlong into lower darkness, down into the cellar of the ramshackle house. Together, the cloaked fighter and his prisoner hit the steps with long bounces that ended as they struck the cellar floor.

Despite his efforts to land Trigg underneath, The Shadow took the final thump – a vicious shoulder thud that somersaulted him across the floor, where he tumbled a stack of boxes with terrific clatter.

Trigg, rolling clear, grabbed for his revolver, but couldn't find it. The gun had left his pocket somewhere on the stairs.

It didn't matter, though, to Trigg, when he heard shouts and heavy thumping feet from the floor above. There was silence from the boxes where The Shadow lay, half stunned, and that, to Trigg, spelled opportunity.

Reaching the steps on hands and knees, Trigg came across his gun and promptly grabbed it; then raised a triumphant cry. He was squaring himself with Clint Flenn, and at the same time building himself into an uglier hero than his chief.

For Trigg's call could mean but one thing: sure death to The Shadow, crime's greatest foe.

"Come on, Clint!" shouted Trigg. "I've nailed The Shadow!"

CHAPTER VI. CROOK VERSUS CROOK

TO The Shadow, sprawled beneath the mass of boxes, Trigg's shout was a hazy thing, a voice that didn't belong. The whole place was a whirl of darkness that couldn't be Thayner's car in motion. Answering shouts from upstairs, the clatter of arriving feet, were like things from outdoors.

Mere moments seemed endless. The Shadow felt as Thayner must have felt when tumbled in the gully. All was confusion; sheer instinct told him he ought to be someplace else.

Shifting groggily against the pressing weight, The Shadow received a glancing blow from a falling box. The sound brought another shout from Trigg:

"Quick, you guys!"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

As he yelled, Trigg turned and stabbed bullets at the boxes. He had heard one spill and guessed its direction well. But Trigg was simply splintering a box above The Shadow's head. The cloaked fighter had not risen. His leg wouldn't lift him; the wrench that it took produced a half groan from The Shadow's lips.

Gunshots had aroused The Shadow, as they always did. His hand gripped the butt of the automatic that he had clutched throughout the fall. His grip on the gun brought back his fighting desire: a wish for battle, regardless of odds. His crippled condition didn't matter to The Shadow. Flat on his back, he was still ready to shoot his way out of trouble.

The Shadow did not reckon that the only out in this case seemed certain death – for himself.

Fate had played serious tricks upon The Shadow, and this was as bad as any. But the situation was a freaky one, more so than The Shadow could realize. Odd factors were at work, and they were due to produce odd results.

The first factor was Trigg Ungrel. He heard the groan, and misinterpreted it. To Trigg, it sounded like a death rattle from The Shadow's throat. In the darkness, Trigg wheeled toward the boxes; then, as flashlights burned from the stairway, he sprang about to face the glare.

Trigg saw the face of Clint Flenn thrusting forward. Pointing with one hand, brandishing the gun with the other, Trigg yelled:

"I croaked The Shadow! Hurry down, Clint, and take a gander. He's right here, cold –"

At that moment Clint interrupted, by shoving Gumbo forward with the light. He was sending the spotter down first, and intended to follow, when another interruption came. This time, it was The Shadow who provided it, in a purely instinctive style.

Through a rift between the boxes, The Shadow saw the downcoming light. He poked his gun muzzle into the crevice and pressed the trigger.

Never had The Shadow provided a more timely shot. Even his wavering hand could function, for the gun was jammed in place. His target was a big spot of light that he could pick out, although groggy, and there was a man behind it. The sizzling bullet found its mark, in Gumbo.

With a shriek, the scrawny spy dived into a breakneck spill, the flashlight bobbing along like a giant firefly imitating a grasshopper. Another flashlight was swinging into sight, but Clint Flenn didn't wait for it to become a target.

Beyond Gumbo's bouncing form, Clint saw Trigg Ungrel, standing with an upraised revolver that curled smoke from its muzzle.

Though Trigg was rooted, his lips still wore a gleeful smile at thought that he had finished The Shadow. It wasn't surprising that Clint Flenn should misunderstand the grin.

Clint said: "Give it!"

Clint's gun spoke first; it was followed by a combined roar, as other marksmen eagerly sought to prove their loyalty to their chief. They didn't stop to think, for it didn't seem necessary. All got the same quick flash that inspired Clint.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

They saw Trigg and his smoking gun. They thought that he had fired the shot from the cellar. They knew that Trigg couldn't have seen Gumbo, for Clint's face was the first that had pushed into the light. To them, Trigg Ungrel had proved himself an ace among double-crossers.

THE barrage withered Trigg. He went down crazily, mouthing something about The Shadow. Clint was sneering when he reached the sprawled lieutenant and found him lying half across Gumbo's dead and twisted figure. Trigg was dead, too, but Clint didn't care to notice it.

"So you got The Shadow," scoffed Clint, as he yanked Trigg's face into a light that another thug provided. "Yes, you did – not! Swell hokum, raising hob down here, to bring me! All you wanted was a shot at me, that Gumbo got instead.

"You'd have said that The Shadow got away, wouldn't you? Yeah, got away, like he always does. Easy enough to say; when The Shadow isn't even around. You'd have told the bunch that The Shadow plugged me, and you'd have done some shooting out the window to prove it.

"Smart stuff, Trigg, but it didn't work. I'm still running this racket. All you're getting out of your smartness is – this!"

Dropping Trigg's head, Clint supplied a facial massage in the form of a kick. Taking a flashlight, he approached the boxes and stared at the slats that Trigg's bullets had ripped. Clint was far closer to death than before, as he started to yank boxes away simply to show his contempt for Trigg's supposed game.

One box more and Clint would have received a death bullet from The Shadow's handy gun. The cloaked fighter, his wits returned, was simply withholding fire until it became the only course. In his present plight, The Shadow recognized that battle, for once, would be folly and preferred to avoid it.

The cellar was still reeling; The Shadow could see nothing but wavering lights. His free arm was trapped beneath the boxes; he couldn't reach his other gun. The cartridges remaining in his one automatic weren't enough to settle Clint's entire crew. It was better that they should think that Trigg had played a crazy game, and failed.

One box more. Clint's hands were on it, when a call came from above. A watchful crook had spotted lights coming up the steep hill from the town. Savagely, Clint flung the box back in place and snapped orders to his crew.

"Get going!" he told them. "Take all the wheelers, except Thayner's. Let them find it; they'll suspect us, anyhow. It will make them think we've really lammed. We'll get together, out at Kendry's farm.

"Mouser is there already. He's made a deal with Kendry, and the guy will take us in. Only, don't leave any trail to the joint. Guys like Kendry are all right until they get jittery. We don't want to spoil a good thing while we've got it."

Leaving the bodies of Trigg and Gumbo, the crooks piled for the stairs. Clint went with them, and found that he had given his orders just in time. The men from the town had made a quicker trip than Clint supposed.

Leaping into three cars, the crooks wheeled away by the quarry route. They abandoned Thayner's roadster, as Clint had ordered, but they had practically no choice in the matter. The sepia-hued car was the first one that the sheriff's men saw, and the nearest. They had already occupied it when the crooks began their flight.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

From the cellar, The Shadow heard the rattle of fading guns, knew that the fight had been wild and futile on both sides. Pushing boxes away; he managed to crawl to the window and pull himself upright, hoping that he could drill a few tires at long range.

By then, the cars were off through the quarry, and the sheriff's squad had no vehicle except Thayner's. They couldn't use the roadster, because Trigg had locked it.

The keys were still in the dead man's pocket, but The Shadow did not look for them. Instead, he stumbled back to the boxes and dragged a strong one to the window. Favoring his wrenched leg, The Shadow managed to crawl out. Clutching the turf outside the ground-level window, he flattened in darkness and lay there.

Deputies were heading into the house. Their shouts told that they had found the bodies in the cellar. Others joined them, leaving a silence outdoors. Painfully, The Shadow crept around the house, found the steep hill on the town side.

Below, a car was whizzing through the village of Northdale, its occupants shooting away at closed storefronts. It was one of Clint's cars, its crew supplying what their chief would have described as a false trail. The roar of its motor had faded when The Shadow began his descent.

THE hill was a cliff at spots, but sliding down it was not difficult. The Shadow had reached the bottom before the sheriff's men left the houses above.

They found The Shadow later, but he was well away from the bottom of the cliff. He was lying beside a car parked near the main street, and he was no longer garbed in black. He had stowed his cloak, hat, and guns in the rumble of the parked car, which happened to be his own.

Weakly, The Shadow introduced himself as Lamont Cranston, from New York. Bound on a trip to the Middle West, he had stopped in Northdale, intending to look for a hotel. Getting out of his car, he had been struck by a speeder who roared down upon him without warning.

Cranston's ill luck was marked up as another misdeed on the part of Clint's unidentified crew, which happened to be quite correct, although he had been injured in a fashion other than the one he described. He was taken to the local hotel, and a physician was promptly summoned.

Northdale thought in terms of only one physician, Dr. Heverly. As Cranston, The Shadow had his first meeting with Heverly, and the doctor found the patient in a talkative mood. Since Cranston's condition was not at all serious, Heverly provided him with all the local news.

Heverly told of Thayner's misadventure; how the band of highwaymen had turned up close to town. This time, Heverly was quite sure, the crooks had gone to stay.

However, the sheriff had ordered an intensive manhunt throughout the county. Two crooks had died in a fight among themselves, evidently in a dispute over Thayner's cash, which totaled considerably more than ten thousand dollars.

They had obviously taken the money with them, but they had lost the stolen car through their strife. It would be returned to Thayner tomorrow; and since Thayner was also one of Heverly's patients, Cranston could meet him later. Not for a few days, however, for Cranston would have to rest that long.

When the obliging physician had gone, The Shadow rose from bed and reached the window. Resting there, he stared out into the darkness and phrased a whispered laugh.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Heverly's advice was to take a rest, and The Shadow intended to follow it, for one night only. He knew that Clint Flenn would not attempt further crime until the band was properly established at Kendry's farm.

Despite his near disaster, The Shadow was pleased with his night's work. He had pieced important facts, although Trigg Ungrel had not lived long enough to add some needed embellishments. Considering Clint Flenn and the crime-leader's smooth ways, The Shadow could see deeply into the game.

It was a game within a game, carrying a strong dash of the double cross that Clint would not avow. The episode with Trigg had given Clint full control, but he couldn't afford to let his crew get out of hand again. Besides, Clint had shown his hand to some degree by staying near Northdale.

Crime could not afford to wait beyond tomorrow night. That was when Clint Flenn would move to kidnap Janice Melridge and throw what blame he could on Carl Thayner. It would seem safe enough to Clint, who thought that his schemes, like his location, were completely unknown.

It happened that The Shadow knew both. The rest that Dr. Heverly had advised was pleasant, but it did not belong on The Shadow's calendar. Stopping crime was not enough; its whole purpose had to be revealed. One being, alone, could accomplish both requirements.

The Shadow!

CHAPTER VII. CRIME'S CROSSROADS

THAYNER'S sepia roadster, glistening beautifully in the afternoon sun, stood in front of the Melridge mansion. The car was spick-and-span, the dents gone from its fender, which bore fresh paint instead. Janice was smiling, as she turned from the car to look at Thayner.

Like the roadster, Thayner was in shape again. The bandage was gone from his head, his arm no longer in a sling. He stroked his sleek hair, then ruefully shook his head.

"You shouldn't have had the car fixed," he told Janice. "How am I to pay for the repairs? In fact, I'm sorry that the roadster came back. I was counting on the insurance money to start me on my way again."

"We'll keep the car here as security," bantered Janice, "and you'll have to stay with it. Meanwhile, I've run up another little bill. I had the tank filled with gasoline."

Thayner lifted his straight eyebrows, inquiringly.

"The servants have the night off," explained Janice. "So you and I are going out to dinner."

"But I have no money –"

"I'll get some from Bob," interrupted Janice, "and charge it up against the car. We'll go over to the Cherry Tree Inn and have one of their marvelous chicken dinners."

Thayner had heard of the Cherry Tree Inn, a dozen miles from Northdale, but understood that the place was closed. Janice explained that it had opened again; she had heard about it from a trucker who had stopped at Seven Oaks that morning, selling vegetables and other farm products.

"The inn is under the same management," said the girl, "and the man told me they were hoping that their old patrons would come back. He was going over there with a load of vegetables, so I told him to have them

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

reserve a table for us."

"I remember the man in the truck," recalled Thayner. "You were talking to him while I was strolling in from the Italian Garden, this morning."

"And Vulcan began to bark," added Janice. "I really don't know what's wrong with Vulcan lately. He usually has some reason when he barks at people, but I'm positive that the vegetable man did not make a move in his direction."

They went into the house. The afternoon was late and Janice remarked that she would have to hurry, so that they could get started before dark. With the servants gone, there were many household duties for Janice to complete; and after that, she would have to change her clothes.

Such matters took longer than Janice anticipated. Dusk was settling when the girl came down the stairs, wearing a blue sport's costume that showed her trim figure to perfection.

Thayner was in the hallway, gazing with admiring eye. He added a smile, as Janice scampered cutely across the hallway to answer the telephone when it began to ring.

"Hello... Oh, it's you, Dr. Heverly..." Janice's tone was pleased. "Yes, I was going to call you before we left... Left for where? Over to the Cherry Tree Inn... Yes, it has reopened – haven't you heard?"

"I'm going with Carl, and we'll be back early... Yes, mother is quite all right. She went to sleep an hour ago... Father is here, in the study, and Bob has gone out somewhere... Yes" – Janice sobered at something that Heverly said – "I suppose that it would be best for you to come here... Thank you, doctor."

HEVERLY was making the call from Cranston's room in the Northdale Hotel. The physician's face was troubled as he laid the telephone aside; but his lips relaxed when he turned toward Cranston. Propped in the bed, the patient was amusing himself with a wooden whistle.

"It won't blow," said Cranston, ruefully, handing the whistle to Heverly. "Maybe I'm weak. You try it, doctor. Maybe we can stir up some excitement in this town."

Heverly tried to blow the whistle, while Cranston looked hopefully from the window. But the whistle gave no sound. Pedestrians plodded along the main street, undisturbed. The nearest thing to excitement was a friendly scrap between two dogs across the street, but the mongrels stopped their capers and sat in attentive attitudes, as Cranston watched them.

"Give me the whistle," said Cranston in a tired tone. "I'll send it back to the five-and-ten-cent store. By the way, doctor, where is the Cherry Tree Inn?"

"It's a roadhouse," replied Heverly, "a few miles beyond Kendry's farm. I thought the place had gone out of business permanently. I'm glad it has reopened. The dinners are good."

"We might drive over there –"

"Not this evening," interjected Heverly, firmly. "You're staying right here, Cranston – and I have to go up to Melridge's."

"To see Thayner?"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Heverly shook his head.

"Thayner is fully recovered," he said, dryly, "because he followed my advice, to rest. My concern is for Mrs. Melridge. Her mental condition has been on the border line for some time. Something has been preying on her mind, but she has taken a turn for the better."

Stepping to the door, Heverly paused to take a final look at his weary patient.

"If you want me," said the doctor, "call Melridge's. I'll be there all evening. Grover Melridge has been under a severe strain, bearing the brunt of his wife's mania. If one of them should crack" – Heverly gave a worried gesture – "well, I'd prefer to be there; that's all."

By the time Heverly's car had pulled away from the hotel, a marked improvement had come over Lamont Cranston. His expression was wearied no longer. Instead, a gleam had come to his hawklike features.

He was out of bed, dressing rapidly, though he was still careful of his injured leg. His arm twinged him, too; as he paused, he lifted it gingerly to shoulder level and soon found how much effort it could stand.

With a slight limp, Cranston left the hotel room and descended a stairway to the lobby. His limp was a half-glide, as he went out through a side door, unnoticed by the clerk, who was buried deeply in a magazine that bore The Shadow's portrait on the cover.

Within the next few minutes, The Shadow became an actuality in the dusk-shrouded town of Northdale. As Cranston, he stopped behind a coupe stationed in a secluded parking lot alongside the hotel.

From the rumble seat, he brought a black cloak and flung it across his shoulders. Clamping a slouch hat on his head, The Shadow gathered in a brace of automatics.

Closing the rumble, he swung himself in through the door of the coupe and started the car slowly from the parking lot. His speed was normal as he drove along the main street, until he had passed the three traffic lights that were Northdale's pride.

Then, with the open road ahead, The Shadow pressed the accelerator to the floorboard and sent the coupe whipping through the night.

MEANWHILE, Thayner was driving his roadster at a leisurely speed along roads that Janice pointed out.

Dark had come sooner than they expected, for heavy clouds cut off the struggling moon. There were moments when the girl looked up hopefully; she felt sure that the clouds would clear and allow them moonlight on the trip home.

Then, snuggling close to Thayner, the girl watched the path of light ahead. The car was moving through a patch of woodland; the next turn was a few miles ahead.

"I feel very safe here, Carl," said Janice. "Very safe – and comfortable."

"In this car?" queried Thayner, in a tone of mild surprise. "It has brought me a lot of trouble, Janice."

"Only temporary trouble. Wasn't it worth it, Carl?"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"Finding you?" rejoined Thayner. "I'll say it was! I'd have gone through a hundred fights, like that one the other night, to get the reward that came my way. But I wouldn't want to drag you into trouble, Janice."

The girl smiled. Thayner saw it, and understood. She was thinking that there were sorts of trouble that she would enjoy if she could only be with Thayner. Drawing his right hand from the wheel, Thayner let his arm rest across Janice's shoulders.

His embrace was mild, almost brotherly. As his hand settled on the girl's arm, Janice was thrilled by the light tenderness of its touch. Perhaps Thayner was experienced in such niceties, but Janice did not care. She found that when she snuggled closer, Thayner's hand responded, still in its gentle style, and she became even happier.

"It's so peaceful tonight," said Janice, dreamily. "There can't be any trouble, Carl. No trouble anywhere in this wide world."

"I wish I could agree," returned Thayner, softly. "Unfortunately, I still remember tough-going, even in this county."

"But the troublemakers have gone. The sheriff said so –"

"He said it once before."

"This time, he knows," assured Janice. "He and his men have searched everywhere, even up in Rocky Cave. They have inquired at every farmhouse, and no one has seen a sign of the crooks. They can't possibly be around, Carl."

Thayner gave a grunt of agreement, as the roadster swung a curve. Janice lifted her head, then pointed.

"We're passing Kendry's farm," she said. "Turn right at the next crossroads, Carl."

The crossroads loomed. Remembering how he had misgauged the gateway at Seven Oaks, Thayner gave the car a sharp turn. This time, the move was the wrong one. Thayner was caught by an opposite situation. He made the turn easily enough, but promptly wished that he hadn't.

Piled in the car's path was a barricade of fence rails; boxes, and other assorted junk that formed an absolute obstacle.

Thayner tramped the brakes in time to prevent a crash, for the barricade was well back from the crossing. There was purpose in its position; it hadn't been visible from the corner. The ruse had pulled the roadster right into the trap.

MEN were springing from both sides of the barricade, with guns. Thayner had a revolver, one that he had wisely borrowed from Melridge's study, and he grabbed it as he shoved Janice out through the far door. Pointing the girl toward the crossroads, Thayner swung to aim at approaching crooks.

Just then, Janice screamed. Two other men had bobbed up from bushes beside the road, to seize her. As Thayner sprang in to aid, they choked his gun arm, but he managed to deliver worthwhile strokes. His battle couldn't last, however, and Janice, seeing the reason, gave a frantic warning cry.

Then men from the barricade had rounded the roadster and were heading for the strugglers. They weren't all who were coming into the fray. Flickering moonlight, bobbing flashlights showed half a dozen others at the

crossroads, coming in to cut off any flight.

Then – how it happened, Janice could scarcely guess – rescue came. Not in a human shape, but in the form of a zooming juggernaut – a fast-moving car that lunged like a great creature of the darkness from across the crossroads.

Lights out, the driver of that car had picked his final objective by the moon's feeble glow. Upon the mobsters before they realized it, he was bearing down like a monster of destruction.

Attackers heard the car's approaching roar and went into spinning dives for safety, popping their guns blindly at the rocketing thing that threatened their finish. They were ready to harry this arrival, to force him to a crash against the barricade.

Perhaps they had forgotten The Shadow. The supposed fakery committed by Trigg Ungrel had made them think that their archfoe was no longer in the terrain. But the fierce challenge that issued from the zooming car promptly disillusioned them.

It was a peal of mighty mirth, its mockery louder than the motor's roar, its taunts punctuated with the stabs of a gun that knifed introductory messages with tongues of flame.

The laugh of The Shadow, backed by the prowess of the famed fighter in black!

CHAPTER VIII. DEATH ON THE HIGHWAY

CRIME had found its crossroads a turning point where anything might happen. Crooks knew it, as The Shadow's car stopped with a swerving jerk, so sudden that the thugs fired short of it, into a blinding path that issued from its headlights when the driver pressed the switch.

The glare showed Janice, struggling bravely against a pair of brawny enemies. She was ripping free from hands that clutched her collar and sleeves, as they sought to choke her into silence and suppress her struggles. Thayner, meanwhile, was fighting with another pair, who had him backed against the embankment beside the road.

There were shouts from the remaining crooks, the voice of Clint Flenn booming louder than the rest. They were calling upon their pals to hurry; to help them settle their archfoe, The Shadow. Gunners who had fired in front of the quick-stopping car now turned their guns toward the driver's seat.

By then, The Shadow was gone. His tactics, however, differed from his normal form of battle. He had to gauge his work upon his own condition, remembering that one leg would buckle under strain; that he must depend upon a single gun, because of his weakened arm. In a way, necessity favored The Shadow.

As flashlights showed the vacant space behind the wheel, Clint Flenn shouted warnings. He expected The Shadow either to swoop down upon his main crew, or to go to the rescue of Janice and Thayner.

The Shadow did neither. He had gone as far as he capably could; to the front of his coupe. There, braced across the hood, he was just back of the shining headlights.

With the motor as a shield between himself and Clint's main crew, The Shadow stabbed well-aimed shots at spurting guns. The crooks didn't have strong shelter, like The Shadow. Their responding shots were too wild to find The Shadow's head and shoulders, the only marks available.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

As on a previous night, The Shadow was dealing deadly damage with his .45, though his present marksmanship was comparatively slow.

As wounded foemen howled, their companions went for shelter, dragging the cripples with them. Clint Flenn was smart enough to realize that the barricade would serve them as an entrenchment, so they went in that direction.

Cognizant of Clint's plans, The Shadow had purposely refrained from aiding Janice and Thayner. He knew that the thugs intended to kidnap the girl; that they considered Thayner, alive, to be more useful than dead. Therefore, the two were in no immediate danger. Under present circumstances, Clint wanted Thayner brought along with Janice.

Had Clint's four henchmen dragged their two prisoners to the barricade, they would have handicapped The Shadow, for his shots could spell doom to the captives as well as the crooks. But the four did otherwise, despite Clint's new shouts. The Shadow was baiting them. He was on their side of the car, where they thought they could get at him.

One pair hurled Thayner into a ditch. The other two tried to do the same with Janice. She broke away, thanks to a ripping of her dress. Her belt, of thin leather, snapped as a hand gave it a hard tug.

Tripping, Janice rolled into the ditch, and the two thugs thought that they had flung her there. Like the other pair, they wheeled to open fire on The Shadow.

A fresh gun answered their fusillade. Steady jabs seemed to issue from their own stream of bullets!

They ruined one of the headlamps; they battered the radiator, fender, and hood with red-hot lead. But their blind barrage did no damage to the human target that they sought. Only The Shadow's bullets were driving home.

One crook twirled; then another. Bullets exhausted, the remaining pair broke for cover, stumbling across their sprawling pals. All that saved them was the timely action of Clint Flenn. He fired at the other headlight, smashing it. Darkness enabled the other men to reach the barricade.

SIMPLE, but effective, strategy accounted for The Shadow's success against four frenzied fighters. The black-cloaked marksman had flattened himself along the running board when the barrage began. His gun was thrust between the wide front fender and the side of the hood, its muzzle projecting beneath the headlight.

Opponents had fired close, but not close enough. The nearest shot was the one that had smashed the headlight, but the metal structure of the lamp itself had stopped the bullet. The curved front of the fender had diverted other bullets.

Still, Clint and his crew were dangerous. The only way to offset the barricaded tribe was to take advantage of the cars, because the crooks had none at hand.

Though badly battered, The Shadow's coupe was still serviceable; he could use it for his own purposes. The roadster would do for Janice and Thayner to make their getaway.

Like The Shadow, Thayner recognized that fact. He shouted for Janice to get to the car. She called back that she was starting, and shots promptly spurted from the barricade, in the direction of the voices. At this stage, Clint preferred to blast the rescued victims, rather than let them get away.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Fortunately, those shots were wide in the darkness. There was a scramble as Thayner, up from the ditch, made a dive across the embankment. He still had his gun, and he opened fire from the brush, to cover Janice's flight.

Such shots were a give-away, but Clint's crew couldn't take advantage. The Shadow had reloaded, and was bombarding them anew over the front of his blacked-out car.

Thinking Janice safe, Thayner took to the woods, as Clint bellowed for some of his men to "go after the guy." Two of the crooks darted for the woods, from the far side of the barricade, but by then, Thayner had a start. The Shadow did not worry about him. The present problem was Janice.

Clint had heard Thayner's order to the girl. Should Janice reach the roadster and start it, she would promptly become a target for Clint's huddled marksmen. Thayner had overlooked the fact, but not The Shadow. He had a plan to insure Janice's safe flight.

Swinging from beside his car, The Shadow flung out an arm and caught Janice as she passed.

The girl started a shriek, which a gloved hand promptly suppressed. Weaponless, Janice clutched her dangling belt, tried to flay The Shadow with the puny weapon. She couldn't wrench free, for The Shadow clamped her arms behind her, instead of merely gripping her tattered dress. Then, at the tone of a whispered voice, Janice's wits returned.

She realized that this blocker could not be a foe; that it was he who had really brought rescue and borne the brunt of battle against her actual enemies.

To her mind flashed a recollection of that strange black-cloaked figure that she had seen upon the lawn at Seven Oaks. She remembered Thayner's hazy talk of gunfire at the gates; how the sheriff had spoken of some departing car at the time when Vulcan had given the deputies a going-over.

This being with the weird whisper was a friend; he was taking advantage of a lull in battle to offer Janice a sure means of escape. The Shadow spoke, referring to Clint's crew.

"They are waiting," he undertoned, "until you start the roadster. Whether or not I open fire, you will be the target."

A hopelessness swept Janice. She heard popping shots from the woods, far enough off to tell that Thayner was well away. She wondered if the same route would be best for her. But The Shadow deemed otherwise.

His whisper seemed tuned to the throb of the coupe's motor, which was still running, its idling note the only sound amid the new lull.

"Get to the roadster," said The Shadow. "But make no move to start it until you hear –"

His words ended. Close to Janice's ear came a suppressed semblance of a laugh; a shivery touch of mockery, even in its miniature echo. The girl understood.

When she heard that taunt – The Shadow's challenge – in full force, she was to make her departure in Thayner's car. The Shadow would do the rest; but how he would manage it, Janice did not guess.

UNDER The Shadow's nudge, Janice crept toward the roadster, carefully skirting away from its dimmed lights. The Shadow, meanwhile, was opening the door of his own car.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Silently, he swung himself into the coupe and settled behind the wheel. In the midst of a complete blackness, he slipped the lever noiselessly into gear.

One foot on the clutch, the other on the accelerator, The Shadow kept one hand upon the wheel. His other fist gripped an automatic, as he calculated the brief interval that Janice required to reach her goal.

Then, like an invisible thunderbolt, came The Shadow's promised stroke.

Vague moonlight showed the barricade, but gave no view of the enemies who crouched there, ready with their guns. How or in what spots they lurked did not concern The Shadow. He was thinking in larger terms.

His left foot released one pedal, as his right pressed the other. There was a roar as he launched the powerful coupe into a terrific lunge, straight for the center of the barricade!

At the same moment, The Shadow laughed. His fierce mockery accelerated even faster than the car. Higher, louder than the roar of the motor, it broke into a shivery crescendo, as the coupe juggernauted down upon the barrier like a mammoth bullet in itself. The wild break of The Shadow's taunt was a prophecy of the crash that came a second later.

Smearing the center of the barricade, the coupe smashed fence rails like toothpicks. The splintering rails acted like levers, that catapulted boxes, barrels, and other objects high into the air. Amid that splintering shower went the figures of scattering foemen.

A few were in the middle of the crash. They were flung like creatures of straw and bashed by the descending debris. The rest were staggered by the shock, for even the fringes of the barricade were hurled against embankments, where the wreckage poured back like receding waves.

Out of that mass came reeling figures of men bent only on flight, among them, Clint Flenn. They would have been helpless quarry for The Shadow, had he been able to spy them; but, like a powerful Samson, The Shadow had received the fruits of his self-made disaster.

The stout structure of the coupe saved The Shadow from destruction. The car's turret top was dented, its body twisted. Hurling forward despite his bracing efforts, The Shadow's head met the car top.

Sagged behind the wheel, he felt his senses swimming; his hand couldn't keep its grip upon the automatic. Like a sound from far away, The Shadow heard the weapon thud the ruined running board below the window.

There was another sound, actually more distant. It was the snort of the roadster, as Janice backed the car to the crossroads and hurriedly swung it about. She was starting back along the road to Seven Oaks, hoping to get aid.

Momentarily, though, the girl paused. She wasn't worried about Thayner; she felt that he had surely reached safety. Janice's concern was for The Shadow.

Then, from the ruins of the barricade, the girl heard a repetition of The Shadow's laugh. She didn't realize that the mirth was forced, mechanical. It seemed a call, telling her to follow orders and make a quick departure. Janice started away.

As the roadster's purr faded, The Shadow still thought that he could hear its throb. It dawned upon him gradually that the sound was wheezy, that it came from the motor of his own car. Bumper, fenders, radiator, had borne the shock. The car could still be driven.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Shoving into reverse, The Shadow backed the coupe in wobbly fashion. It zigzagged to the crossroads, made a somewhat lucky swing about. Its motor was banging; rims were clattering as they pressed flattened tires. Nevertheless, the car started forward when The Shadow jerked it into gear and took the direction opposite to Janice's.

There was a shout from the shattered barricade. Guns gave spasmodic bursts. Clint Flenn had seen the maneuver of The Shadow's crippled car and was trying to rally his bruised and battered crew, to attempt a pursuit. The idea was futile; the mobsters had no cars at hand, and they could hardly drag themselves together at Clint's call.

From the fading, wobbly clatter that dwindled off along the other road, Clint heard the trailing tone of a strained, yet triumphant, laugh.

A crippled battler was leaving. He had delivered rescue, and was bound for shelter of his own. Death on the highway had found men of crime. It was not for The Shadow!

CHAPTER IX. NEW TRAGEDY

TO Janice Melridge, as she sped along in the roadster, the highway was a mass of flowing paving that she no longer recognized. The first bend that she took nearly ditched the car. When Janice applied the brakes, the roadster skewed around in the middle of the road and halted, leaving her wilted and breathless.

She was only a half mile from the crossroads, but she felt safe, until she realized the car's bad position. In gingerly fashion, Janice worked the roadster straight, started its stalled motor and prepared for new flight.

Sounds from far back made her listen. She heard a metallic bang—bang, that gradually faded on the night air. She fancied, too, that she heard little bursts, like gunshots. It occurred to her that The Shadow must have taken his own course; that enemies were still around. It would be better for her to travel on.

Proof of that fact came when guns spoke from somewhere in the woods that flanked the road. They seemed off at an angle, and meant that prowling crooks could still be after Thayner. But with her first fright ended, Janice decided that the shots were good tokens. They meant that Thayner was still at large.

She had an urge to wait, and aid him. She had pressed the bright lights and they would guide him to the roadster. Then it struck her that the prowling marauders could see the lights, too, and that there were at least two of them, giving them a better chance of finding Janice first.

From the moment that thought gripped her, Janice imagined things. The whisper of the breeze, the creak of trees, became the approach of monstrous men intent upon capturing her, despite The Shadow's earlier effort.

Fright mingling with reason, Janice started on her way again, assuring herself that a quick return to Seven Oaks was the best course for herself and Carl. In addition, it could bring aid to The Shadow if he needed it.

The speedometer was climbing to fifty as Janice steadied for the next turn, a few tenths of a mile ahead. She could take it at this speed, for her hands were tighter on the wheel and she did not intend to slacken.

The curve was through the woods – a low embankment on one side. Janice wanted to get past it, for beyond, the road was straight.

As she struck the turn, her own shriek mingled with that of the brakes. Instinct ended Janice's wish for speed, as a man came lunging from the brush, right into her path.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Janice saw his flinging arms; if his feet had responded, he might have been able to save himself. But he couldn't clutch the bushes; instead, he stumbled.

Janice yanked the wheel as something heavy thudded the car front. One light went blank; but the other showed the man's whirling figure, tossed into a windmill sprawl. Then the figure was gone, and the car was reeling onward from ditch to ditch.

It was at least a hundred feet before Janice could stop it. The front wheels had climbed the embankment and the car was tilted at a sharp angle to the left. Slumping behind the wheel, Janice nearly fell out across the roadster's door.

In her daze, she heard a voice call. She thought it could be the man that she had struck; then knew it couldn't be. The voice was from the woods; Janice heard someone scrambling along through the brush.

It must be that the crooks were coming, but Janice did not care. Gunfire, the smashing of a barricade, seemed fair enough; but this latest tragedy was different.

The man from the embankment couldn't have stopped the roadster. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to halt the car. He might have been a hunted man, like Thayner. In fact – the thought horrified Janice – he could even have been Carl!

If only the poor chap hadn't stumbled! The whole thing was terrible, and Janice, unmindful of her own plight, broke into convulsive sobs. Then, her head was resting on a shoulder, she was sliding from the car, into strong arms that embraced her.

She could hardly believe that it was Carl's voice, saying: "Janice!" The whole thing seemed a flashback into the past, when they had been driving happily on their way to Cherry Tree Inn.

"What happened, Janice?" inquired Thayner, as he panted. "I heard the brakes, saw the lights jump, while I was in the woods. I didn't know the road was so near."

"I struck somebody," the girl sobbed. "A man who stumbled right in front of me. I must... must have killed him!"

"Probably one of those rascals who were hounding me through the woods," observed Thayner, bitterly. "It's just our luck that we should run into them again."

PLACING Janice upon a grassy knoll, Thayner fished in the roadster for a flashlight. His revolver was empty and he had no spare ammunition; nevertheless, he told Janice to wait while he went back and looked at the dead man on the road.

Warily, Thayner kept to the brush, and Janice felt anxious moments when his light temporarily disappeared. At last, it moved in sight again; it roved the center of the road and finally stopped.

After a long pause, Janice heard Thayner's guarded call, saw the flashlight move in beckoning fashion:

"Janice!"

The girl hurried back. As she neared Thayner, she saw the crumpled thing that lay at his feet and stifled a gasp:

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"I don't want to look, Carl –"

"I'd rather you did," said Thayner, soberly. "It's not bad, Janice."

"You mean he isn't dead?"

"I mean he is dead. Killed instantly, which was fortunate. The sight isn't horrible, though. The poor chap never knew what hit him."

The words "poor chap" impressed Janice. She stared into the light, as Thayner turned it. She saw the dead man. His figure was badly twisted, his head had a tilt that meant his neck was broken, and there were streaks of blood upon his face. But, as Thayner had said, he didn't look horrible.

He was more like a crushed bird, or some wild creature of the forest that had fallen into some unexpected trap. In a way, his face looked peaceful, as though resigned to the sudden stroke of fate.

As she stared, Janice knew why Thayner had summoned her. This man couldn't be one of the crowd who had laid the barricade at the crossroads.

His stubbly-bearded face, the square hand that lay palm-up across his chest, made Janice class him as a farmer. His clothes, too, fitted the part. They were rough and spoke of honest toil. As Thayner turned the flashlight, Janice saw a shotgun lying in the road beside the body.

The double-barreled weapon added to the farmer impression. Janice decided that the man must have flung it ahead of him when he tripped from the embankment. It indicated that he lived in the neighborhood; that sounds of the gunfire must have drawn him to the scene.

A terrible recollection flashed to Janice, as Thayner turned the light on the dead face again.

"I know who he is!" the girl gasped. "Joshua Kendry – the farmer who lives all alone out here! You remember – you must, Carl! – that I mentioned Kendry's farm."

Thayner nodded; he caught Janice as she swayed. The girl plucked her torn dress, felt the dangling belt, but couldn't seem to grasp it. She was sobbing again at the thought of this unnecessary death, when Thayner started her gently back to the car.

"What are we going to do about it?" Janice pleaded. "Can't you do something, Carl?"

"The best thing is to go back to Seven Oaks," returned Thayner, his tone worried. "We mustn't forget that our enemies, whoever they are, may still be prowling about."

"But we can't leave Kendry lying where he is. If those same men should find him –"

"They can't hurt him. His troubles are over, Janice. We must think of our own."

THAYNER took the wheel, with Janice beside him, and worked the roadster, one headlight working only, from its tilted position. Moonlight was reappearing as they retraced the route to Seven Oaks, but Janice's thoughts of romance were gone. She looked very forlorn as she shrank deep in the seat, keeping her eyes away from the windshield.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Mere sight of the road, rolling in beneath the wheels, brought back impressions of a helpless, sprawling figure unable to save itself from destruction. At moments, Janice's lips phrased words, always the same horrified statement:

"I killed him!"

The car was nearing Seven Oaks, when Thayner interrupted in an earnest tone.

"You mustn't keep saying that, Janice. You weren't responsible for what happened. Those men who tried to ambush us are the ones to blame. They forced you to drive the car at an uncontrolled speed, in order to escape them."

"Still, people will say that I was driving –"

"They will if you tell them," interposed Thayner. "But why tell them? By this time, those shots at the crossroads may have been reported. The sheriff will find evidence enough to blame Kendry's death on the ruffians who attacked us."

"But they didn't kill him!"

"They were actually responsible. They are murderers at heart. Sometimes it is difficult to prove guilt against such rascals. Another count charged against them will be helpful."

There was logic in Thayner's statement. Ordinarily, Janice would not have cared to shift blame from herself to anyone else. But this case, as Thayner argued it, was one wherein such a process was justified. As he swung the roadster between the gates of Seven Oaks, Thayner voiced an afterthought.

"I believe it was all a put-up job," he declared. "Those rogues were out for revenge, because I escaped them before. The trucker who told you about the Cherry Tree Inn was probably one of their band. They wanted us to go over that route tonight."

"That could be true, Carl!" exclaimed Janice. "I understand, now, why Vulcan growled when the fellow was around."

"I'll put the car in the garage," decided Thayner. "Let me talk to Dr. Heverly. You scamper in through the side door, Janice. Get upstairs and put on some other clothes."

Walking from the garage to the front door, Thayner brushed his clothes and made them presentable. Vulcan had been growling in his kennel; apparently, he hadn't recognized the car when it arrived. But Janice stopped to soothe the big dog while on her way to the side door. Hurrying upstairs, the girl changed her attire.

The process was a rapid one. Her ripped dress practically fell apart when she gave a tug at one shoulder. The belt was no longer dangling; it was gone. Ridding herself of muddied shoes and damaged stockings, Janice slid her feet into slippers, then put on a negligee. By the light of a dressing table lamp, she restored her make-up and fluffed her hair.

Strolling downstairs, she heard voices from the study, and approached. Her father was there with Heverly, and Thayner was telling them a credible yarn about finding the Cherry Tree Inn closed when they arrived there. Thayner turned to Janice as she entered the study.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"You're a great one!" he jollied. "You started me out to find a place that wasn't open after all. You forgot the road, and took us all over the county! Say, doc" – he turned to Heverly – "how do you get to Cherry Tree Inn, anyway?"

"Driving from here," mused Heverly, "I would take the road past Kendry's farm."

"Kendry's farm?" repeated Thayner. Then, to Janice: "We didn't go past that place, did we?"

The girl shook her head. Her response was truthful. They hadn't passed Kendry's farm. The entrance to the farm was just beyond the barricade.

"I'm sorry, Carl," said Janice, with a smile. "I really did get mixed tonight. What's more, we didn't get our dinner. I'll go out to the kitchen and cook up something."

AS Janice turned away, she noticed the portrait of her father's friend, Howard Loyden. Its face looked severe, but the girl fancied that she saw an understanding smile beneath the iron-gray mustache.

As she reached the hallway, she recalled another personality; that of a being in black, whose face she had not seen but whose whispered words still echoed in her mind.

She had found a true friend in the rescuer who had come from shadows and returned to them. He did not know of the accident that marred Janice's flight from the crossroads, but he would piece the facts when he heard of Kendry's death.

Would The Shadow approve the course that Janice had taken, at the advice of Carl Thayner?

The girl felt that The Shadow would. She was certain, too, that if she needed further aid, her cloaked friend would provide it. The thought comforted her.

Lulled by the recollection, Janice Melridge failed to foresee that crime's thrusts were not yet finished; that she would need The Shadow's help far more than she had tonight!

CHAPTER X. CLUES TO THE FUTURE

OTHER things were happening while Janice and Thayner made their return trip to Seven Oaks; events that were to have an important bearing upon the future. Elsewhere, persons had taken it upon themselves to cover certain details of the evening.

Driving his battered coupe back to Northdale, The Shadow stopped short of the town and worked the battered vehicle into an automobile graveyard near the outskirts. One of a few hundred ruined vehicles, the coupe would not be noticed in its new surroundings. Had The Shadow taken the car to the hotel parking lot, its condition would have been a give-away.

Bundling cloak and hat over his arm, The Shadow did some limping of his own, finally reaching his hotel room. He called Melridge's and spoke to Dr. Heverly; he learned that the physician was ready to leave Seven Oaks.

Getting into bed, The Shadow whispered a weary laugh as he settled his head into the pillows.

The fact that Heverly was leaving gave proof that Janice and Thayner had returned. Since Heverly promised to stop by and see Cranston, there would be a chance of piecing further facts tonight.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

OUT by the crossroads, occasional moonlight showed a frantic band at work. Clint Flenn and his crew had not fared as badly as might have been expected. They had been wary in their fray with The Shadow, and luck had also played a part.

It happened that the crooks hit hardest in the early fray had chosen the center of the barricade. It was Clint's doing, for he expected a flank attack and therefore put the strongest men on the fringes.

When The Shadow turned his car into a battering-ram and reduced the barrier to pulp, Clint's cripples were the ones who took the major shock.

As matters stood, Clint had to dispose of some bodies; but the living members of his outfit were in comparatively good shape, and Clint put most of them to work, disposing of the bodies and clearing up the ruined barricade, which they dumped in a cornfield.

The two who had chased Thayner returned, reporting that they had lost him. The news made Clint rush the workers.

"We've got to cover our tracks," decided Clint. "Make it look like nothing happened here. It will make Thayner and the dame look like saps, when they tell their tale to the sheriff.

"We'll snatch the doll later, and old yap sheriff will figure tonight's stunt was a build-up, with Thayner faking hero stuff to kid the dame. Only, we've got to be away before old yap comes along."

Having restored the scene to a peaceful look, Clint's crew went to Kendry's farmhouse, where their amateur medico, Doc, had patched some cripples. Glancing around, Clint demanded:

"Where's Kendry?"

There were shrugs in reply. Clint concentrated upon a sallow, squeamish crook whose chief distinction was a tiny mustache that looked like something he had tried to sniff, and failed.

"What about it, Mouser? You were here with Kendry."

Mouser nodded.

"Old Josh wanted to get in on the fun," he said. "He loaded up his shotgun, so I went along with him. We heard The Shadow's ha-ha before we got to the crossroads. I came over to help you, and old Josh went chasing after Thayner."

Clint gave a sneer.

"You mean Josh Kendry lammed," he said. "If any of the sheriff's bunch catch up with him, he'll say we moved in on him without his wanting it.

"Come on, all of you" – Clint swung to the crowd – "and fix up this joint like it was when we found it. We'll make a liar out of Kendry, too. Then we'll head to another place that I know about."

AT about the time when Clint and his tribe were leaving Kendry's farm, Dr. Heverly stopped at the Northdale Hotel, to visit his patient there. Heverly found Cranston weaker, and used the fact as an argument in favor of his earlier advice.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"You need rest, as I said," insisted Heverly. "What have you been doing – worrying yourself weary?"

"I suppose so," replied The Shadow, in a tired tone. "I've been thinking how much I would have enjoyed a trip to the Cherry Tree Inn."

"Better forget it," said Heverly, as he shook a thermometer. "The inn isn't open after all. Carl Thayner told me so, when he came back with Janice Melridge."

"At least, they had a pleasant ride."

"They didn't seem to think so. They took the wrong road, and had trouble finding the place. Thayner was hungry and Janice was tired, when they arrived home."

As Heverly left, he failed to hear the whispered laugh that came from Cranston's lips. The Shadow was rather pleased that neither Thayner nor Janice had reported the battle at the crossroads. Then, his low mirth ending, he began to probe for some hidden reason for their silence.

None was apparent until morning, when Dr. Heverly called. Finding his patient completely rested, the physician displayed a copy of the flimsy local newspaper. It had a large headline, telling of tragedy. There wasn't a mention of any battle at the crossroads. The news concerned an unfortunate farmer named Joshua Kendry, who had been killed and left on the road by a hit-and-run driver.

"I've seen the body," declared Heverly. "Kendry was certainly struck hard. Killed instantly."

"Any clues to the driver?" inquired The Shadow.

"A few," replied the doctor. "The sheriff gathered all the fragments of a broken lens from a headlamp. He found a chunk of the car's front bumper. Those ought to be enough to trace the car."

"But not necessarily the driver."

"There's other evidence," insisted Heverly. "A strip of leather, with a buckle, was found near the body. It might have belonged to Kendry, but the sheriff doubts it."

"Why?"

"It wasn't anything he'd use around the farm. It's a light strap, almost like a belt, which it may be."

Heverly spread the newspaper, showed the paragraph where the story was continued. The mentioned clues were listed, as Heverly had given them. Reading the account, after Heverly had gone, The Shadow learned that the various exhibits were under lock and key in the sheriff's office.

There had been too much crime around Northdale, according to Sheriff Rawley, and he intended to investigate the hit-and-run death of Kendry in a scientific way.

This was Saturday, and on Monday the sheriff expected a technical expert from New York. Such men had ways of remolding broken lenses and identifying odd parts of automobiles, to learn the make and model of the cars in question.

As for the strap, it would be dusted for fingerprints, its leather analyzed and traced to the manufacturer. By the time the expert was finished with the job, Northdale would know whose car killed Kendry and who had

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

dropped the strip of leather on the road.

The fact that Kendry was carrying a shotgun meant little to the sheriff. In this locality, it was usual for a farmer to take along such a weapon, particularly since highwaymen had recently been in the vicinity.

To The Shadow, of course, the whole case was plain. The car was Thayner's roadster; the strap, Janice's belt. As for Kendry, he deserved what he had received, for The Shadow knew that the farmer had been harboring Clint Flenn and the big-shot's band of outlaws.

It was easy, too, to account for the silence that Janice and Thayner were preserving. Almost in detail, The Shadow could picture their conversation on the trip back to Seven Oaks. He also saw how such silence might bring them trouble, because Clint Flenn had covered up his tracks.

Whether Clint knew of Kendry's death hardly mattered. He would probably have played his game the same. Looking through the newspaper, The Shadow found nothing that furnished a new lead to Clint. The only other story of any consequence concerned an association of businessmen in Northdale.

Alarmed by recent crimes, particularly the wild ride that crooks had taken along the main street, the businessmen had demanded special protection. Today was Saturday, and the merchants expected the usual week-end influx of farmers. Business was always good in Northdale on Saturday afternoon and evening.

The local bank closed at noon. Merchants were in the habit of holding funds for deposit on Monday morning. Fearing robberies, they wanted the sheriff to put deputies on duty, guarding the stores over the week end; a heavy order, since at least twenty men would be required.

In vain had Sheriff Rawley asked the bank to open in the evening. He had argued with the merchants, claiming that danger of new crime was past; but they would not listen. So the sheriff had finally announced that he would take charge of the funds himself and keep them in his office safe from Saturday midnight until Monday morning.

The Shadow estimated that the cash would total about five thousand dollars. As he folded the newspaper, he gazed from the hotel window.

Down the street, he saw the old-fashioned courthouse, set back behind rows of ancient elms. He knew the location of the sheriff's office, on the second floor of the secluded building.

Off beyond the town, The Shadow saw the road to Seven Oaks and the tiny mass of trees that surrounded the Melridge estate. In the distance, dim in the morning haze, were rocky hills, the probable habitat of Clint Flenn and his outlaw tribe, who could no longer stay at Kendry's.

There was a keen glint to The Shadow's eyes, as they pictured how that same scene would look after dark. Then, Northdale would be blanketed by night, a likely setting for crime. Also a proper surrounding for The Shadow, relentless foe to men of evil.

Clues from the past meant more to The Shadow than they did to the law. Those items, including the sheriff's plan to keep certain funds in his possession, were clues to the future.

The Shadow would not have to look for enemies tonight. They would come to him!

CHAPTER XI. MOVES AT MIDNIGHT

THAT Clint Flenn would keep posted on events in Northdale was a foregone conclusion to The Shadow.

Obviously, the crooks had planned their ambush the night before; therefore, they must have found out that Janice and Thayner were going to Cherry Tree Inn. It was probable, therefore, that Clint had somehow inspired the trip in question.

If Clint could learn what was going on at Seven Oaks, he could keep tabs on Northdale quite as easily. His band of outlaws were an assorted lot, and The Shadow had not seen all their faces.

To pick Clint's spy from the many strangers who came to town at Saturday afternoon was a task that The Shadow considered futile, particularly since he was banking on something else. The Shadow, therefore, simply spent the day in his hotel room, in accord with Dr. Heverly's advice.

It was near dusk when a car crept up a wooded road among the distant-hills, took to a turnout and followed a stream bed to a forest nook, where other cars were parked.

The man who climbed out was Mouser; other mobbies greeted their returning pal, and conducted him up a steep path to a ledge.

There was a crevice in the rocks: the entrance to Rocky Cave, where the sheriff had searched for the missing crooks while they were hiding out at Kendry's. Entering, Mouser found Clint Flenn in a rough-hewn cavern, surrounded by members of the mobster crew.

Kerosene lanterns provided illumination, but when Mouser handed Clint a copy of the Northdale newspaper, the leader carried it to a corner of the cave. There, a thin shaft of fading daylight penetrated from a higher crevice, much smaller than the normal entrance.

In fact, the upper slit was so narrow, that a man would have had trouble squeezing through. That fact, plus an eighteen-foot drop to the cave floor, rendered it useless.

Clint had his men keep a check on the crevice when they patrolled outside, but he regarded it as nothing more than a speaking tube, and the space below it served as a reading room, during daytime.

Holding the newspaper under the streak of daylight, Clint chuckled over the accounts of Kendry's death.

The light was fading as he finished reading it. Clint shoved the paper in his pocket and turned to the crew.

"The dame plowed Kendry under," he chuckled. "That got rid of him, and it's put her in a jam. Say – if she and Thayner told their story now, the sheriff would call it an alibi! A phony one, too!"

Inasmuch as Clint specialized in making phony alibis seem real, his pals agreed that he could tell when the case was the other way about. Their guffaws echoed loudly through the cavern, until Clint gave a sudden growl for silence.

"Maybe that's not so good," he argued. "If they put the arm on the doll, on a manslaughter charge, we'll have a long wait before we can snatch her. Say – I'd like to yank that evidence out of the sheriff's office before they get to work on it!"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"We could sell it to old man Melridge, as part of the ransom deal. Wouldn't that be slick, giving him his daughter back and fixing it so she wouldn't have to take the rap on the hit-and-run proposition? That would be service!"

Whatever doubts Clint's followers had held of their leader's merits, all were certainly dispelled by this new scheme. Trigg Ungrel had sown discontent among these outlaws, and it had revived since the flight from Kendry's farm. But Clint Flenn was winning back the loyalty he once received, and more.

"Get this, too." Clint wagged a finger, driving the point home. "The Feds won't be in on it. You can bet old Melridge won't call in Washington. We'll tell him, if he does, that we'll ship his darling daughter into town with the evidence against her."

Glancing at his watch, Clint decided that it was time for the crew to eat dinner, and get going. As he summed it, Northdale was an eight-o'clock town, dead as a cemetery by nine. It was Mouser who put an objection.

"Not on Saturday night," reminded Mouser. "The town keeps awake until midnight, or pretty near. What's more, the sheriff will be around his office until then."

"How come?"

"Take another gander at that bladder" – Mouser tapped the newspaper that poked from Clint's pocket – "and you'll see why."

When Clint read about the plan whereby the Northdale merchants were to place their funds in Rawley's custody, he thwacked Mouser's shoulders so hard, the frail crook nearly telescoped. Clint fairly shouted the news to the others.

"Two jobs at one whack!" he gloated. "The storekeepers are leaving their take with Rawley over tonight and Sunday. That means a sock of dough, along with the evidence against the Melridge dame. O.K., we'll wait until midnight."

HALFWAY between Rocky Cave and Northdale lay Seven Oaks. There, as dusk hovered over the Italian Garden, Janice Melridge and Carl Thayner were engaged in a worried conversation over the evidence that lay in the sheriff's office.

"I can't stand it much longer, Carl," said Janice. "Keeping your car hidden in the garage has worried me all day. If anyone should go in there –"

"They won't," inserted Thayner. "Not since you moved Vulcan's kennel over by the garage. He seems to recognize his duty. I tested him, and he growled before I came within forty feet."

"But what good will it do?" queried Janice. "By Monday, they'll have traced your car. They'll come here to question you."

"Very well." Thayner spoke emphatically. "I shall tell them that we ran into trouble at the crossroads; that I turned about and drove for Seven Oaks. How could I have seen Kendry –"

"How could you have seen him?"

"Certainly." Thayner's tone was very steady. "We two are the only persons who will ever know that you were driving the car. I intend to say that I was at the wheel, and I expect you to back my statement."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"But I couldn't, Carl –"

Janice's voice broke into sobs that she muffled on Thayner's shoulder. He was telling her that it would be all right; that their story would include stopping the car to look at the dead man, which would account for Janice's belt being on the road. But Janice couldn't listen.

"You'll go to prison, Carl!" she exclaimed, in a horrified tone. "Think of what that would mean!"

"I've been in worse places," declared Thayner, calmly. "Why should I mind a few years, Janice, if I know that you are waiting for me?"

The girl thought of many things to say, and tried to blurt them all at once. The burden of her words was that she should be held to blame and would have to bear the consequences.

"I couldn't make you a criminal, Carl," said Janice, finally. "It would simply prove that I am one, instead. We couldn't be happy, ever, on such a basis."

Thayner became thoughtful; finally, he nodded. In a slow tone, he declared:

"We must equalize it, then, Janice. I shall put myself in your class. Tonight, I shall go down and remove that evidence from the sheriff's office."

"You couldn't, Carl –"

"Why not?" queried Thayner. "If I am caught, I can admit the truth. But if I succeed, you will be clear."

Before Janice could reply, a car came wheeling into the drive. The girl motioned Thayner to the house, saying that they shouldn't be seen like a pair of conspirators. Thayner hurried away from the garden just as the car swung up by the garage.

Janice dashed out to warn Dr. Heverly not to go too near to Vulcan's kennel. The physician introduced a friend who had come with him, Lamont Cranston. While Janice was welcoming the visitor, Heverly went into the house to see Lucretia Melridge.

As Janice turned toward the house, Cranston started to light a cigarette. Apparently he didn't notice the direction that the girl had taken, for he started the other way. He was nearing the garage, when Janice saw him and rushed to overtake him.

"Look out, Mr. Cranston!" she exclaimed. "Don't get close to Vulcan!"

Cranston didn't seem to hear the warning. He was almost at the kennel. Janice shrieked as a great, gray mass loomed up to meet him.

A MOMENT later, the girl had stopped short in bewilderment.

Vulcan, the great man-eater, had reached the end of his chain with a great leap, which enabled him to land both paws on Cranston's shoulder. But he wasn't biting the stranger; he was nuzzling him, lapping Cranston's face affectionately with a tongue that swabbed like a Turkish sponge!

His arm embracing the Great Dane, Cranston settled Vulcan on his feet. Even then, the dog's back was table high, so Cranston let one arm rest on Vulcan's neck, while his hand stroked the dog's head.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Janice, totally amazed, saw Cranston place the cigarette to his lips. It wasn't lighted; she supposed that Vulcan's lappings had extinguished it.

As a matter of fact, Cranston didn't have a cigarette at all. The thing that Janice saw was the whistle that he had shown Heverly. It still didn't seem to work when he blew it; but Janice, by then, was watching Vulcan.

The big dog pricked his ears, looked attentively at Cranston. He regarded the stranger as an old friend, which was most curious, considering Vulcan's usual reluctance to get acquainted.

There was only one time that Janice could remember when Vulcan might have behaved this way. That was the time when she had seen The Shadow outside the mansion. At that, Janice wasn't sure that The Shadow had actually approached the kennel.

With a fond farewell pat to Vulcan, the remarkable Mr. Cranston accompanied Janice into the house. He was introduced to Thayner, who promptly noticed Janice's wide-eyed expression and showed concern himself. A mere flicker was Thayner's sole change of countenance, but The Shadow observed it.

Entering the study, The Shadow shook hands with Grover Melridge; then politely stepped aside, so Melridge could continue a conversation with Heverly.

From the doorway of the study, where he calmly lighted an actual cigarette, The Shadow could see Janice and Thayner. They were too concerned to notice him.

The girl was telling Thayner what had happened at the kennel. With a bland smile, Thayner showed his relief.

"So that was all it was," he declared. "I guess that Cranston is one of those doggy chaps, the kind that even Vulcan would like. I was afraid he had looked into the garage."

"No, he didn't," assured Janice. "But Carl, you can't mean that you're going to the sheriff's office tonight."

"I am," insisted Thayner. "If I can borrow Bob's car. I certainly can't use my own. I shall start before midnight, and remember – not a word to anyone! Promise."

Janice nodded a promise. The Shadow moved back into the study, as the two came to join those already there. He noticed Janice as she entered. When the girl's eyes went to Loyden's portrait, The Shadow's did the same.

There wasn't the slightest change of expression to show that the picture intrigued Lamont Cranston quite as much as it did Janice Melridge. When Bob Melridge arrived, a little later, The Shadow again found time to glance at the portrait.

It was later, when Cranston had left with Heverly, that Janice pleaded again with Thayner. Smilingly, he resisted her appeals; the most that he could promise was that if he should be caught, he would admit that Janice had been driving his car the night before.

"I've talked to Bob," said Thayner. "He's leaving his keys in the car, so that I can use it at any time. Don't worry, Janice. I won't start too early."

SOON afterward, Thayner was chatting with Melridge. Janice found Bob and drew him into the study. Before she could begin to speak, she saw him nod.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"There's something on your mind, sis," declared Bob. "I was going to ask you about it. Tell me about last night. Was it Thayner's car?"

Janice nodded.

"And you were driving?"

Another nod. Janice wasn't breaking her promise. She simply couldn't keep anything from Bob. They were twins; all their lives they had looked alike, talked alike, thought alike.

"What does Carl want to do about it?" queried Bob. "Take the blame?"

"Yes," rejoined Janice. "More than that, he's borrowing your car, so he can go down and steal the evidence from the sheriff's office."

"A good idea," returned Bob. "A stout fellow, Thayner. I like the chap."

"And I love him!" blurted Janice. "You can't let him –"

"Take my car?" interrupted Bob, quickly. He laughed, "Don't worry, sis."

Often, when Bob laughed lightly, Janice found it difficult to guess what was in his mind. Besides, Bob was glancing at Loyden's portrait, and Janice did the same. When she looked at the picture, it always occupied all her thoughts.

"Come on, Janice," suggested Bob. "Let's go out and chat with the others. I'll have to tell Carl that I'm using the car this evening, and that I may be getting home pretty late."

A great worry had dropped from Janice's mind. Bob went out soon afterward, and as the evening waned; Janice began to feel really tired. She went to bed before eleven. As on a previous night, she found herself listening for Vulcan's barks, when she was undressing near the window.

Janice could not hear Vulcan; nor could she see him, for his kennel was even farther around the corner of the house.

In a sense, it was fortunate that Janice's window did not open toward the garage. Had she seen the kennel, she would have been startled by the way a blotting darkness suddenly encroached upon it.

That darkness produced a muffled jangle from Vulcan's chain. What happened afterward was even more amazing. A tall, cloaked shape stalked across the lawn, the figure of The Shadow. At the heels of the mysterious visitor was Vulcan, freed of his chain.

More than an hour later, Janice awoke from a light sleep, to hear the distant clangs of the courthouse clock donging through the crisp night air. She counted the strokes; there were twelve. Confident that Bob would not fail her, Janice sighed and went back to sleep.

Midnight. A more important hour than even Janice realized. It was the time when moves were under way; when cross-purposes were at work. Men of crime were banking on that hour. It was a time that Carl Thayner regarded as important; as did Janice's brother, Bob.

Most important of all, midnight was The Shadow's hour. Yet even the black-cloaked master of the night might find his plans encumbered by the unforeseen!

CHAPTER XII. OUT OF THE DARK

THE midnight clangs of the town clock jarred the old courthouse and everything in it, including Sheriff Rawley. Rising from his desk, the sheriff poked a couple of sleepy deputies and told them to come along.

"Midnight was what I said," he announced, "and midnight was what I meant. 'Tain't Saturday night no longer; it's Sunday morning. If anybody else wants his money looked out for, he can lock it up himself. I've put over five thousand dollars where it's going to stay, so I've done my share of the bargain."

The sheriff gave a proud nudge toward a large, old-fashioned safe near the corner of his ample office. He was very proud of that antique, and regarded it as formidable. So it had been, in the days when safes were first invented. But Sheriff Rawley regarded anything as tough to open that couldn't be handled with a pair of pliers.

His rolltop desk was another example. It had a strong lock, and that was enough for the sheriff. There was a tin box lying on the desk; it bore a label with the word "Exhibits" written in red pencil.

Rawley left the exhibit box where it was and slammed the roll top, which locked with a satisfactory click.

After turning out the lights, the sheriff locked the office and pocketed the key. Anyone could unlock that same door with a skeleton key, and Rawley knew it, for he had used one when he lost his own key. But, as Rawley put it, nobody had any business monkeying around the courthouse, so locking the office was mostly a formality.

The office had windows, too, but, the sheriff never thought about them. One of those windows slid upward, as soon as Rawley had gone. A tiny flashlight blinked, as The Shadow swung across the sill.

He had made an easy climb from the ground below; but when he turned to the window again, his eyes were on the roof of an old horse shed that encroached within twenty feet of the courthouse.

The Shadow placed the soundless whistle to his lips. There was a muffled scamper from the shed roof and a thing half as big as the window came lurching through the space. Sheriff Rawley wouldn't have bothered to lock the door, had he seen those blazing eyes come in at him. He'd have kept going, right out to the main street.

But the sheriff wasn't on hand. Only The Shadow greeted Vulcan. With a guiding blink of his tiny flashlight, he pointed the dog to the space between the safe and the corner of the room. There, Vulcan settled on his haunches and began a patient wait.

Swinging outward, The Shadow drew the window down and dropped from the sill. Landing lightly on the ground, he skirted away from the courthouse. He was counting on his inside ally to start the proceedings as soon as anyone entered. There wasn't any need to worry about Vulcan. The big dog was posted to rout invaders.

No one would linger in the sheriff's office after a set-to with Vulcan. Outside, The Shadow had assigned himself to double duty. He intended to block off anyone who fled from the courthouse, and at the same time be ready to surprise incoming reserves.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

It wasn't long before The Shadow caught signs of a muffled glow within the courthouse. Someone was using a flashlight, rather clumsily. Its light leaked out like the glow of a firefly cupped loosely between two hands. It showed from the stairway windows and paused, finally, in the upper hall.

The Shadow was where he could watch one of the sheriff's windows. The light entered and began a series of prolonged blinks, a fact which intrigued The Shadow.

The arrival couldn't be Thayner. The Shadow was sure that Vulcan would growl before the guest of Seven Oaks even entered the office. Perhaps the dog would have been more lenient with certain of Clint's men, but he certainly wouldn't have let them cross the threshold.

Looking across the street, The Shadow saw a car pause, then move away. It was a local car; it bore a tin tag marked "Northdale." There was a chance that it carried some of Rawley's deputies; they might have noticed the light's last blink.

Matters weren't going as The Shadow wanted. He changed tactics and approached the courthouse, taking a rear route. All was silent and very black under a building's shelter. As he neared the rear door, The Shadow heard someone stumble; there was a clank as a dropped gun struck cement.

Another man promptly supplied a flashlight, a very dumb thing to do. But sometimes dumbness counted. It did on this occasion. A hoarse whisper voiced: "Douse that glim!" and the offender let his light swing about, as he tried to find the switch. It brought results that the owner didn't expect.

Between the light and the brick wall of the courthouse loomed a figure, silhouetted as plainly as a picture flashed on a screen. Before The Shadow could shift to darkness, a concert of rough voices lifted their battle cry:

"The Shadow!"

ALL depended upon split-second swiftness, which The Shadow supplied before the light actually reached him. His keen hearing had told him that he was in the midst of Clint Flenn's crew; the swing of the flashlight had come from an angle that he could not dodge.

In the uncertain moments while the flashlight veered, The Shadow had instinctively resolved upon another course; one that could take care of matters here and in the sheriff's office. His hands had gone to his cloak, to whip out a brace of automatics.

The guns were ready, as the crooks gave their shout. Big muzzles blasted; with their thunder, The Shadow issued a mocking peal of laughter that brought volleys of echoes from the courthouse wall. He wasn't aiming for the crooks; not even for the man who blazed the light. He wanted to scatter them, and the shots did.

Like scared rabbits, the outlaws scudded for shelter. As they rolled behind shrubbery and trees, they jabbed return shots with their guns, a course that they immediately regretted. Meeting The Shadow on his own terms was always poor policy, and this fight was on the cloaked fighter's terms, though his foemen did not know it.

He knew every niche of the oddly built courthouse; otherwise, he would not have acted as he did. His shots came while he was on the move, picking corners that he had looked over that very afternoon from his hotel window. Mobsters reeled as bullets clipped them. Their answering shots nicked chunks from bricks; nothing more.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Always, The Shadow's laugh resounded, its gibe increasing with every hit he scored. The crooks took to their heels despite Clint's bellows, leaving their wounded on the ground.

Swinging out from cover, The Shadow began firing in the open, so rapidly that the startled outlaws actually thought they were dealing with two fighters instead of one.

Cars were rolling up the main street, horns tooting raucously. Sheriff Rawley hadn't gone far from the courthouse, and the sounds of battle turned out his deputies faster than any other sort of alarm. The local men were good shots; they were harrying the crooks exactly as The Shadow wanted.

It pointed to a complete rout for Clint and his band. The Shadow's one task was to block off a few of the more wary, including Clint himself. Wisely, however, The Shadow took a quick look toward the courthouse and saw the thing he hoped would not happen.

The flashlight was on again, in the sheriff's office, indicating that the intruder hadn't made the departure that he should have. Sheriff Rawley saw the glimmer, as his yell proved, which was bad enough. Worse, Clint Flenn spotted it and gave a raucous order. Sheer desperation brought a response from Clint's crew.

While Clint and two others were smashing in through the rear door of the courthouse, which was away from The Shadow's angle, the rest of the outlaws rallied and turned the tide against the deputies.

Scared by a wild but earnest fire, the deputies abandoned their cars, and Rawley went to shelter with them. Their flight was away from the courthouse; they didn't know that Clint had entered.

With quick strides, The Shadow made for the brick-walled building. He was keeping to darkness, away from any door. As he moved, he drew the little whistle from his cloak. At this moment, it was more important than the gun that he had stowed away.

UPSTAIRS, a man was at the sheriff's desk, which he had pried apart with a chisel at one of the weaker sections.

He was huddled in darkness, the tin box tucked under his arm. His excited breathing told that he knew he was trapped; that he had made a bad mistake in his use of the flashlight.

He hadn't any gun; nothing but the tin box, which he gripped as though wondering if it would make an effective missile. He shifted to the window, found it closed. He yanked it open as footsteps-pounded from the stairs.

The door of the office was open; the intruder had left it that way, to hear if anyone approached the door.

Like a thing conjured from space, a great hulk launched from the corner of the room, went through the door and struck the invaders as they reached the top of the stairs.

The hulk was Vulcan; he came into the glare of flashlights with a long bound that carried him in midair. The huge animal's forepaws caught a pair of human foemen squarely in their faces.

They didn't have time to shoot, those startled thugs who served Clint Flenn. Nor was Vulcan able to stage his weapon-stealing trick.

The crooks didn't wait long enough to let him try it; they couldn't.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

They went toppling from step to step, their bounces increasing. Vulcan went along with them, worrying them as he would a pair of ham bones.

Only Clint managed to roll across the rail, as the whirling mass went past. Coming back he made a last dash up the stairs. At the top, he jabbed gun and flashlight into the sheriff's office. The glow showed a man wheeling from the window; his startled face met the light.

The man was Bob Melridge. His youthful features were set firmly, but they betrayed resignation. Seeing the box beneath Bob's arm, Clint gave a chuckle, which turned to a snarl when he saw that the safe was still shut. Deliberately, Clint took aim at Bob, expecting no intervention.

A taunt came from the window. It was The Shadow's laugh; inserted when Clint least expected it. Madly, the big-shot dived out through the door. He had reached the stairs, when a gun spoke from the office window. Then, too late, Clint realized how badly he had been bluffed.

The Shadow hadn't been in sight when he delivered that challenge to Clint. Scaling the wall, he had seen the direction of the flashlight and heard Clint's snarl, as telltale as a rattler's venomous warning.

With a stretch, The Shadow had thrust his head up to the sill, to voice the taunt before he could hope to back it up.

Clint had fallen for the ruse. Once in flight, he could not return, for by then, The Shadow's gun had come to action, speeding him on his way. Crooks in the dark had found The Shadow; still in the dark, they were seeking flight!

CHAPTER XIII. FRIENDS OF THE NIGHT

WITH guns still rattling outdoors, Bob Melridge couldn't realize that the way was clear. He was halfway between the window and the desk, huddling the box to his body, when The Shadow gripped his shoulder.

To Bob, that hand signified the strong arm of the law, apprehending him in crime. It took a hard shove from The Shadow to start him to the office door. From then on, things were speedier. Bob was half-tumbling down the stairs, still gripping the box, while The Shadow steered him on his way.

Near the bottom, Bob heard the front door rip open and instinctively dropped back. The Shadow sped ahead; sweeping his flashlight to dazzle the newcomers, he opened a quick fire.

His shots were high by inches, purposely. Sheriff Rawley was at the head of the invaders; the rest were deputies.

Those skimming shots scattered them immediately. Grabbing Bob, The Shadow thrust him out through the back door, firing a few departing shots to warn away pursuers. Once in the open, Bob knew which way to go. He made for his car, which was parked in a rear street.

Shots could be heard through Northdale. The firing was scattered, and confused by the roar of cars. The crooks were managing to pull themselves together, which meant that Clint must have caught up with them. There were spots where forms lay silent; they were the outlaws wounded by The Shadow. Their misery was over; they were dead.

Hoping for their pals to help them out, the crippled thugs had opened fire on the deputies and had been bombarded in return. Unable to shift, they had been flattened to stay. That, at least, would be a help to Clint.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

None of his bullet-riddled followers would ever talk.

Following Bob, The Shadow again brought the whistle into play. There was a rattle of a high board fence, as Vulcan grazed the top and bounded toward The Shadow; just as Bob was starting the car.

A snap of The Shadow's fingers sent Vulcan into the seat beside Bob. Then the car was away, its driver quite bewildered at sight of his canine passenger.

From the moment that the light had glimmered in the sheriff's office, The Shadow had known that the intruder must be Bob. Vulcan would never have remained quiet, had anyone else entered. Again, The Shadow was able to piece missing facts.

He knew exactly what had happened up at Seven Oaks after he had left. Janice had talked to Bob; impressed by Thayner's willingness to undertake self-sacrifice, Bob had decided to risk the task himself.

The Shadow had not wanted the tin box to go. It was better that the whole case should be cleared. It could have been, if Thayner had come for the box. But Bob's move altered matters. Once having the box in his possession, and finding himself under stress, Bob needed direct and immediate help.

In providing it, The Shadow had sent Bob on his way, even though it meant the escape of Clint and the remaining outlaws. Still, there was work ahead for The Shadow. More things were coming as a consequence of the courthouse fray, and he had to adopt a course that would suit the new conditions.

Silently, The Shadow blended into darkness and took a weaving course to the outskirts of the town. Deputies, driving wildly here and there, failed to see the black-cloaked figure that faded whenever their headlights swung in its direction.

SLEEPING lightly, Janice was awakened by the noise of Bob's car, as it came up from the drive. She looked from the window, expecting to see dawn. Then, excited, she hurriedly turned on a light and glanced at her wrist watch.

The time was only half past twelve!

Had Bob forgotten his promise to stay out late? Janice had to learn. Hastily finding slippers and negligee, she went downstairs. As she neared the hall, she saw Thayner, fully dressed, moving toward the side door. She gave a low call; he waited until she joined him.

"You can't stop me, Janice," said Thayner, with a smile, "so don't try. Remember your promise. Bob is back, and I'm starting out."

"Maybe Bob will object," argued Janice, desperately. "After all, you've no right to use his car."

"He said I could –"

"Of course! But you didn't tell him why you wanted it. If you trust me, you should trust Bob."

Thayner nodded, solemnly. His expression showed complete agreement. Linking his arm to Janice's, he said:

"Let's go out and meet Bob. I think that he will understand."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

They heard a growl as they walked toward the garage, where Bob was near his car. The growl came from the kennel; Bob straightened suddenly and hoarsed the name:

"Janice!"

"What is it, Bob?" the girl inquired, anxiously.

"Don't come any closer," rejoined Bob. "Wait where you are. Carl is with you, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I don't want Vulcan to bark." Bob was moving forward, as he spoke. "He's done enough tonight. He must have gotten loose and followed me. Here" – Bob gave a long breath – "here's your precious box!"

Janice couldn't realize what the box was, until she opened it and saw the contents when Bob supplied his flashlight. The girl spoke, dismayed.

"But, Bob! You shouldn't have done –"

"It was either myself or Carl," broke in Bob. "I had the car, so I took first whack at it. Anyway, we're all in this together. You'd better keep the box, Carl."

Bob's tone brought an anxious query from Thayner, who clapped his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Any trouble, Bob?"

"Trouble?" demanded Bob. "The town was full of it! I'd forgotten that cash in the sheriff's office. Some fellows came after it."

"Not the same crooks who were around before?"

"I don't know. Probably, I'd say. Anyhow, they were driven off, and I got out of it, thanks to Vulcan and –"

Bob hesitated, shaking his head. He rubbed his rumpled hair.

"The rest of it was like a dream," he declared. "I really don't know all that happened. But with so many flashlights all around, they may have spotted me. I'd better clear out."

With that, Bob headed into the house. The others followed; they went to the study, as a place where they could talk. There, with Loyden's portrait looking on, Thayner did his best to comfort Janice, but failed.

The girl couldn't be at ease while Bob was in trouble. She kept looking anxiously toward the door, until her brother reappeared, bringing a packed suitcase.

In his other hand, Bob was carrying a small-caliber revolver. Thayner opened a desk drawer and produced Melridge's gun, which was of larger caliber. In an easy tone, he queried:

"Would you prefer this one, Bob?"

"No. Mine will do." Bob's tone was firm. "Don't worry, Janice. I've chained Vulcan, just see that he doesn't get loose again. You'll hear from me, sis. Good-by, Carl."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

One arm around Janice's shoulder, Bob extended his other hand to Thayner. Then, picking up the bag and the gun, he stepped to the door, stopping only to point to the sheriff's box, which Thayner had placed upon the desk.

"Don't forget the box, Carl," said Bob. "Stow it where nobody will find it. Janice can probably pick a good place. The house is big enough to hide an elephant."

REACHING his car, Bob drove slowly past the mansion. He was anxious not to awaken anyone besides Carl and Janice, hence he kept to the shadowy side of the drive and passed beneath a porte-cochere that formed a roofed roadway at the front of the large house.

The car jolted very slightly at that spot but Bob did not guess the reason, until he reached the gates. Eyes fixed, Bob was about to turn away from Northdale, when a quiet voice spoke from beside him:

"Suppose we go to town instead!"

With a quick grab, Bob had his gun. A hand clamped his, took the weapon as if it were a lollipop. Frozen at the wheel, Bob stared toward his recent rescuer, The Shadow.

Until that moment, he had doubted the reality of the cloaked being who had come upon him like a specter. Bob had actually fancied that he had mistaken Vulcan for a human being amid all the turmoil.

As he saw The Shadow's burning eyes, heard the whispered voice that he remembered, Bob's whole mood changed. He was no longer desperate, covering his feelings by a show of nerve. He realized that The Shadow was a friend, who had fought for him like Vulcan had.

Relaxing, Bob turned his car toward Northdale. As they neared the town, silence greeted them, for all strife had ended there. All that while, Bob Melridge was hearing things that The Shadow told him; facts that brought new understanding.

Bob was to be a fugitive, but under proper auspices. He was to travel no farther than Northdale, which would be safe enough. Remembering his miraculous escape from the sheriff's office, Bob nodded his agreement.

Anywhere would be safe for those who obeyed The Shadow's orders. That, to Bob Melridge, was a certainty.

What came next, The Shadow could decide.

CHAPTER XIV. NIGHT OF MENACE

DURING the next two days, all Northdale was astir with rumor. The battle at the courthouse had left an indelible impression on the townsfolk.

Sheriff Rawley was complimented on his victory over invaders and his protection of the funds belonging to the local merchants. There wasn't a doubt that large-scale robbery had been the motive of the crooks.

The menace was ended. Dead members of Clint Flenn's band were identified as New York mobbies, like Trigg and Gumbo. Boastful deputies claimed that they had wiped out practically the entire crew. As a matter of fact, they hadn't even chopped Clint's gang in half, and the sheriff felt that their estimate was too high.

Nevertheless, Rawley was quite sure that the remnants had fled, this time to stay. It never occurred to him that they had become outlaws, of the old brigand type, and were ensconced and fortified in Rocky Cave.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

What bothered the sheriff most was the disappearance of the evidence in the Kendry case. But such minor problems as a hit-and-run accident were forgotten by the people of Northdale. So the sheriff simply kept mum on the subject.

Like the deputies, Rawley took it for granted that Bob's light had belonged to some advance member of the raiding band. As for Vulcan, no one except a few fleeing crooks had caught sight of the battling dog.

It was Monday noon when Mouser crept in through the mouth of Rocky Cave, bringing the latest news from Northdale in the form of a skimpy newspaper.

By the light from the upper crevice, Clint Flenn read the details of the midnight fray; then glanced over other items. He gave a chuckle that silenced grumbles from his battle-torn followers.

"Here it is," announced Clint. "Society news, they call it. Young Melridge has gone on a motor trip to Canada; he left Saturday afternoon. Baloney! We know where the kid went. He was the palooka up in the sheriff's office.

"I lamped his kisser just before The Shadow showed up. The kid had grabbed the box with the Kendry evidence. He's trying to help his sister beat the rap. He was kind of smart, bringing the big pooch with him. It was old Fido, and not The Shadow, who really got him out of his jam. But neither of them will matter; not with the way I figure things."

Tearing a piece of wrapping paper from a package of supplies that Mouser had bought, Clint spread the sheet upon a slab of rock and wrote a note. He read it aloud to his listening crew, who seemed to drink it in through wide-open mouths.

"Dear Carl," read Clint. "The crooks got me, after all. They thought I queered their job for them, up in the sheriff's office, but I explained different. What they want right now is ransom, and they're ready to talk reasonable terms.

"The fellow in charge is named Clint Flenn. He says if you come to Rocky Cave, he will talk confidential. His gang knows nothing about it, and all Clint wants is cash to pay them off and make up for his past losses. My father is wealthy enough to pay, and it will be better for all concerned. Bob."

While the outlaws stared at one another, Clint added a few lines to the note. He read them:

"P.S. Don't tell my sister about this. Clint says he isn't sore at her or you for the things that happened, and you can believe him. He will really make terms."

Folding the note, Clint wrote Carl Thayner's name on the outside. He handed it to Mouser.

"Get hold of that vegetable truck," ordered Clint, "and drive down to Seven Oaks, like you did the day when you told the dame about Cherry Tree Inn being open. Only, don't hand the note to the doll. Make sure that Thayner gets it, personally."

Mouser didn't like the assignment, and said so. He argued that Thayner might suspect that the note didn't come from Bob. Clint's answer was a repetition of his order, and he drew a gun to back it. Then:

"What diff does it make, Mouser?" he demanded. "This guy Thayner will have to play ball. He knows we can put a crimp in everything, by phoning a tip-off to the sheriff that it was Thayner's car that killed Kendry. All Rawley has to do is look in Melridge's garage and get evidence as good as what he lost."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

SHORTLY before three o'clock, Mouser reached the Melridge grounds and spied Thayner on the veranda. Turning the truck around, the squeamish crook muffled his face in his coat collar and pulled up near the porte-cochere. He wadded the note and flung it over the veranda rail, as he gruffed:

"For you, mister."

Driving fast for the gates, Mouser chuckled to himself as he veered away from Northdale. From now on, he felt safe. Clint Flenn had calmed all worries on the part of his outlaw crew. Rocky Cave was impregnable, so Clint said, and his men believed it.

Besides, Mouser was to stop at a remote railway station and pick up a batch of trigger-men that Clint had summoned from New York. No one would suspect that the gang had been amplified; and the cave would become an absolute trap, should the wrong person enter it.

Janice was out when Thayner received the message. He paced about the house, and finally went out into the garden. When Janice drove up from town, she looked for Carl, but postponed her quest when she heard excited talking in the study.

Peering past the edge of the door, Janice saw Grover Melridge at the desk. He was on his feet, wagging his hand at his wife, Lucretia, who was in her half-mad mood.

"You can't be hearing voices!" exclaimed Melridge. "It is impossible, Lucretia! Besides, you didn't tell us."

"I have heard voices." Lucretia's tone was as far away as her stare. "By day and by night. They told me to preserve an absolute silence."

"Such things are imaginary –"

"I heard his voice!" Lucretia spoke impressively, and Janice noted that she was staring at the portrait of Loyden. "I recognized it, and knew by the things he said –"

"Enough!" interrupted Melridge. "Go upstairs and rest, while I send for Dr. Heverly."

"It was his voice!" Lucretia shrieked. "He said that I must tell! The time is almost here! When he speaks again –"

Grover Melridge swooped past the desk and seized his wife. Fearing that he would choke her mother, Janice dashed into the room, to separate them. The servants arrived on the run: Jasper the butler, and the maid, Matilda.

Lucretia Melridge had become hysterical; the servants helped her upstairs, to the tune of her mad, wild laughter.

Grover Melridge went to the hallway, picked up the telephone and called Dr. Heverly. Thayner had come into the house, brought by the excitement, and Janice drew him out to the veranda. While she told him what had happened, Carl was unfolding a wadded sheet of rough paper.

"Strange, that mother's malady should have returned," expressed Janice. "We thought that it had passed. Then suddenly it burst upon her again. It is strange –"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"No more strange than this," interposed Carl, handing Janice the note. "Tell me, Janice, do you think that this could have come from Bob?"

Janice shook her head, emphatically. Thayner folded the note and tucked it in his pocket.

"I begin to understand it," he declared, slowly. "It is a trick to trap me."

"Why should they trap you? For revenge?"

Thayner shook his head, then stroked his sleek hair. His tone showed deep thought.

"They could easily hold me for ransom," he declared. "Your father would pay, should they tell him that you killed Kendry and that they intended to force me into signing a statement, as witness of the tragedy."

Grover Melridge was calling, worriedly, from the door. He wanted Janice to go upstairs and see how her mother was. The girl said that she would come; then, as her father went back into the house, she asked anxiously:

"What can you do, Carl?"

"Just one thing," replied Thayner. "I shall show this note to the sheriff. Fortunately, it doesn't give away the facts that we have hidden. The crooks will receive a real surprise tonight, when Rawley and his men come to Rocky Cave."

"But crooks will talk, if captured –"

"None will be captured," interrupted Carl, firmly. "They will be wiped out. One man certainly will die: this fellow Flenn, who appears to be their leader. He is the only one whose testimony could count."

JANICE went upstairs. Her mother had quieted, and the girl was still in the room with her when Dr. Heverly arrived. He was disturbed by Lucretia's condition, and said so, later, when he conferred with Janice and her father in the study.

"I think that Mrs. Melridge should go to the sanitarium," decided Heverly. "Tomorrow would be soon enough. I shall leave orders for an ambulance to come over here whenever you call. I am going to the sanitarium after dinner, and will come here later in the evening."

Leaving Seven Oaks, Heverly went to make his report to The Shadow. Of course, Heverly did not know that he was giving important information to the cloaked fighter who had dominated so many events in Northdale. Heverly merely thought that he was calling on a patient, Lamont Cranston.

Though customarily taciturn, Heverly chatted more than he realized, when under the persuasive influence of Cranston. Since Cranston already knew about Lucretia Melridge, the physician mentioned new developments in the border-line case.

"The treatment must change," declared Heverly, "along with the moods of the patient. That has been my theory, and it has produced results at the sanitarium. There are times when a demented person should be humored; on other occasions, argument seems to help them. When she comes to the sanitarium tomorrow, Mrs. Melridge will be under proper observation."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

When Heverly had gone, a door opened between Cranston's room and the next. Bob Melridge stepped into sight; he was staying at the hotel with Cranston, who had decided that he needed a two-room suite.

The Shadow had told Bob to contact Cranston, and the young man supposed that the hawk-faced stranger was simply another of The Shadow's friends.

"You're going out?" queried Bob, as he noticed Cranston's actions. "Do you think there may be trouble; that my mother has found out about the other night?"

"Something peculiar has happened," returned Cranston, calmly. "I think I shall contact our friend, The Shadow. Meanwhile, Bob, you need some rest. Perhaps you might try that mild sleeping dose that Heverly prescribed for me. Not too much of it, however. The Shadow may need both of us, later."

Dusk had begun to gather. Cranston's tall form was scarcely noticeable, as it crossed the parking lot beside the Northdale Hotel. Reaching a car, Cranston produced black garments that he had left there, and became The Shadow.

The car was Bob's, but it was a common model, and it now had the license plates belonging to the car that The Shadow had junked. Because of its New York licenses, everyone supposed that it was Cranston's car.

Picking secluded streets, The Shadow drove from town. Soon, his headlights were blazing a trail in the direction of Seven Oaks. From the statements of Dr. Heverly, The Shadow suspected that other developments had occurred at Melridge's, details that the physician did not know about.

This night promised strange consequences; events that might bring a complete showdown in matters of crime and things of mystery that had shrouded all past episodes. The Shadow intended to shape the future to its proper course.

Sometimes, tragedy could stalk, despite The Shadow's efforts to forestall it. The Shadow was to have proof of that very fact upon this night of menace.

CHAPTER XV. DEATH COMES HOME

THE curious whines of Vulcan disturbed Janice Melridge, as she waited on the veranda. Carl Thayner was still upstairs, getting ready for his evening excursion. Grover Melridge was in his study, and Lucretia had gone to sleep. All being peaceful, Janice decided to see what was wrong with Vulcan.

Even the servants had avoided the kennel lately. Only Bob and Janice seemed to have proper control over Vulcan, and with Bob away, the girl had taken the full duty. Tonight, especially, she wanted Vulcan to be quiet, because any noise might disturb her mother.

Janice could hardly see the kennel as she approached it. Oddly, Vulcan looked overlarge and seemed to loom like something black. His whines had ended; the sound that Janice suddenly heard was a whisper.

It was rather amazing, because Vulcan's paw pressed her arm; then she felt a hand clamp her other wrist. Its grip had firmness, but with a velvet smoothness.

The Shadow!

Already her rescuer, The Shadow was truly a friend, in Janice's estimate. The fact that he could manage Vulcan, proved it. Once Janice had believed that Vulcan's opinion as to people was infallible. She had

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

modified that view, because the dog was too choosy, but she still felt that Vulcan's acceptance of strangers could be regarded as an added test.

The Shadow's whispers were questions, though they sounded like commands. Without wasting time on preliminaries, he was seeking facts from Janice. Much to her surprise, the girl was giving them.

She was more troubled over the note that Thayner had received from Clint Flenn than she was about Lucretia's condition; which was a thing to be expected.

Thus, Janice found herself relating everything, realizing, as she spoke, that The Shadow had a right to know. She told of her accident after leaving the crossroads; how Bob had acquired the evidence that pointed to her guilt.

Finally, she gave the story of the note, repeating, almost verbatim, the message that Thayner was supposed to believe had come from Bob.

When Janice concluded her account, The Shadow put a question, which, quite oddly, related to the earliest link in the chain of circumstance.

"Tell me again about Kendry," insisted The Shadow. "How he stumbled, and how he tried to seize the bushes with his hands."

Janice repeated the details. She could see the thing as plainly as when it happened; in fact, she felt that the horrible sight would be forever etched in her memory. Her voice was strained when she finished. Calmly, The Shadow asked her about coming plans.

"I'm going to the sheriff's with Carl," said Janice. "I'll let him have my car, and then I'll look up Dr. Heverly. He can bring me back to Seven Oaks."

The Shadow started Janice toward the house. The hallway was empty. Pointing the girl inside, The Shadow whispered:

"Call the sanitarium. Ask Dr. Heverly to send the ambulance at once. Tell him that you believe your mother should go to the sanitarium this evening."

Janice made the phone call. Listening, The Shadow learned that Heverly was not at the sanitarium, but that he had left instructions regarding the ambulance. Though ordered for tomorrow, it would be dispatched to Seven Oaks within an hour.

Watching while Janice strolled the hall, The Shadow saw Thayner come downstairs. The two went out together, and The Shadow returned to Vulcan's kennel. When Janice and Thayner had driven away, The Shadow reviewed the facts that the girl had told him.

Among them was an interesting item. She and Thayner had put the box of evidence in a drawer of Melridge's desk; one that he always kept locked. He had lost the key, and Janice had found it. Instead of returning it to her father, she had decided to keep it a while, and use the special drawer in the meantime.

Glancing back from the gate, Janice scanned the darkness, which tonight lacked moonlight. She couldn't possibly have seen The Shadow, but she fancied that he must be on his way somewhere.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Her guess was right. All was silent; deserted, by Vulcan's kennel. The Shadow's own plans were completed, and he had gone his own route through the night.

FINDING Sheriff Rawley at his office, Thayner showed him the note and explained his theory. Janice sat in admiring silence at the way Carl handled the situation.

It was preposterous, Thayner declared, that crooks could have captured Bob, who had started for Canada on Saturday afternoon.

"They don't know that we had a telegram from Bob," declared Thayner, lying in what Janice considered an admirable style. "He's safe and sound. These outlaws are trying sheer bluff. They're sure that I won't show you this note, sheriff."

Rawley agreed, with a nod. He, too, was in an admiring mood. He appreciated Thayner's analysis.

"I'll gather a posse," declared the sheriff. "We'll close in on Rocky Cave and wipe out the gang."

"Not too quickly, sheriff," advised Thayner. "They may have pickets posted. Entrenched as they are, they will hold the odds, unless we use strategy. Suppose you keep your men at a distance, while I move in ahead."

"Into a certain trap?"

"Not at all," replied Thayner. "If I come alone, they will receive me, cordially. They won't try rough stuff until I've walked into the cave."

"And then?"

"I won't go into the cave," Thayner chuckled. "Supply me with a couple of guns, sheriff, and I'll be ready to start shooting the moment I see a false move or find myself getting into things too deeply. They'll come after me, of course —"

The sheriff didn't give Thayner a chance to finish. With an enthusiastic thwack, he slapped his desk so hard that the roll top rattled.

"They'll spread after you!" ejaculated Rawley. "And we'll close in on them! The first shots we hear will be the signal for our attack."

Thayner's smile proved that Rawley had grasped the full sense of the scheme. Announcing that he would go ahead in Janice's car, Thayner remained in the sheriff's office, to help him complete the arrangements. The sheriff was phoning deputies, when Janice left to look for Dr. Heverly.

She stopped first at the hotel, but Heverly wasn't there, though they expected him. From outside came the clang of the ambulance that Janice had ordered from the sanitarium. The girl gave a pleased smile, knowing that the ambulance was on its way to Seven Oaks.

Still watching for Heverly, Janice saw Thayner come from the courthouse and get into her car. The sheriff was with him; he waved good luck as Thayner drove away. Then Rawley began to talk to arriving deputies.

Worriment seized Janice, but she managed to choke it back. Murmuring Carl's name, she felt sure that he could take care of himself.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Behind that thought, Janice remembered The Shadow and was confident that the cloaked fighter would be present at Rocky Cave, to make sure that Thayner did not suffer harm.

At that moment, Janice had a real cause for worry, had she known it. In the hallway at Seven Oaks, Grover Melridge was answering a telephone call from the sanitarium.

"The ambulance?" he queried. "Why, I didn't think that it was coming until tomorrow – But, of course, if Dr. Heverly is sending it tonight – What's that?... Oh, I see. Some deputies stopped it outside of town, because they thought they might need it –"

"More trouble tonight?" Melridge gave a hopeless cluck. "Well, never mind the ambulance... Yes, Dr. Heverly can bring Mrs. Melridge over in his car. I'll give him the message when he arrives here... Yes, yes. I'm sure she will be well enough to go. The car may be better than the ambulance –"

It struck Melridge, as he left the telephone, that Janice could take her mother to the sanitarium. But Janice wasn't about when he looked for her. Both Jasper, the butler, and Matilda, a maid, thought that they had heard her car; but whether it came in or out, they weren't sure.

Nor could they agree how long ago they had heard it. Jasper said more than half an hour; Matilda said less. One thing was certain, however. Janice wasn't at home, and both servants knew that she had intended to go to Northdale with Thayner. So Melridge left the servants and went back into his study.

HALF across the threshold, Melridge stopped short. Lucretia was standing behind the desk beneath Loyden's portrait. Her manner was imperious, her face showed the youthful vigor that characterized her mental malady.

In her hand, Lucretia gripped Melridge's revolver. How she had obtained it, her husband did not know. He thought that he had left it locked in the desk.

"The time has come, Grover!" spoke Lucretia, in a low, tense voice. "The time for me to speak. The voice has told me! If you refuse to let me speak –"

"Loyden's voice?" interjected Melridge, quickly. "Did it come from the portrait?"

Lucretia turned to stare at Loyden's picture. Her lips tightened, as she shook her head.

"Not from the picture," she began. "The voice came from the void. It said that I must speak; that I should allow no one to stop me. The voice meant that you might try to stop me; that you would interfere –"

Interfere, Melridge did. He showed vigor of his own, as he lurched across the desk and grabbed the gun from Lucretia's hands. She tried to retain the weapon; it bounced to a corner of the room. Struggling, both went after it.

They tripped as they neared the door. A lamp overturned and shattered, leaving the room in darkness save for a vague dimness from the hall.

Melridge managed to gain the revolver, as Lucretia shrieked and seized his throat. Melridge's head slammed against the wall; his eyes saw flashes of red. His anger, at that moment, was as great as Lucretia's madness.

The gun went off; not once, but twice. Sagged back against the wall, Melridge opened his eyes and clutched for the weapon, as it was slipping from his fingers. A horror gripped him at thought of how he had let himself go berserk. Sheer instinct, perhaps, using the gun while it was in his hands. Still, he was to blame.

Where was Lucretia?

Trying to get to his feet, Melridge dropped the gun. With a groan, he pressed his hand to his head. He was slumping as he heard voices, along with the clatter of arriving feet. From the floor, he snatched the revolver, ready to use it again.

These could be the voices that Lucretia talked about! He wouldn't let them madden him, the way they had his wife!

Then hands were shaking Melridge. Another light was on, to replace the broken lamp. The arrivals were Jasper and Matilda. Melridge recognized them, but couldn't understand their portrayal of horror. Their faces looked like those of persons he had seen while coming out of ether, after an operation.

The servants were staring at the floor. Glancing in the same direction, Melridge shared their horror. Sprawled before him was Lucretia, dead.

Her dressing gown was dyed with crimson, from the two bullets that had penetrated her heart. Those shots from Melridge's gun had fulfilled the prophecy that Lucretia had made on a night that seemed very long ago.

Death had come to Seven Oaks; doom to the woman who had foreseen it. Stiffening, Melridge thought that he could hear a distant sound that might have been the banshee's wail. Then, out of a mental whirl, he became himself again.

Grover Melridge seemed to shrink, as he placed the revolver on his desk. Turning to the servants, he said in a hollow, saddened voice:

"I killed her. Call the sheriff."

CHAPTER XVI. WITHIN THE SNARE

CROOKS were crouched about the neighborhood of Rocky Cave. Clint Flenn, sneaking back and forth among them, kept exhorting his outlaws to the task that lay ahead.

"Treat Thayner easy," he told them. "Let him get right up to the mouth of the cave. Leave it open. All the better, if he gets inside."

Creeping up the slope, Clint found a lone guard near the narrow upper crevice, told him to speak the word if there were any signs of Thayner. That done, Clint returned to the cave itself.

The interior blackness was total. Clint flashed a light about, picking spots where his men were posted. They were around the edges of the cavern, partially entrenched by chunks of rock. There were other spots nearer the center of the cave, but Clint had them all covered by his men. He sat down on a stack of boxes containing canned goods and gave his final order.

"If Thayner gets in here," said Clint, "let him fool around. Don't pop out on him until he gets too close. I'll do the talking, when I'm ready."

Posting himself in a good spot, Clint waited. The whole hillside seemed to push its silence down into the cavern, which Clint had changed from an impregnable fortress into an absolute trap.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

People hereabouts knew all about Rocky Cave, for it was a favorite picnic ground during other seasons. But the cave would become more famous after Clint was through with it. Tonight's visitors would find out why.

Outside the cavern, the guards kept duty, occasionally giving low-voiced reports to the man up by the little fissure. He didn't bother to answer, as all reports were routine. No sign, yet, of Thayner.

Clint hadn't discounted the chance that Thayner might do more than merely visit the cave. Therefore, Clint was set for whatever might occur. He had one plan, if Thayner came alone; another, if the sleek prey chose to bring companions.

Many men would give themselves away, and the guards would therewith give an alarm. But if Thayner kept men in the offing – as Clint knew the visitor might – the trap would do the rest.

Everything was perfectly set to coax Thayner into a snare from which there would be no return, except at Clint's say—so. Clint had tested the trap, by firing shots inside the cave, and outlaws, listening outside, had barely heard them.

Maybe Thayner would try something if he ran into pickets, as greeters. But he wasn't going to meet the pickets. He was going to find the mouth of the cave wide open. By the time he figured himself a fly, and Clint the spider, it would be too late for Thayner to do anything about it.

As minutes passed, sounds occurred near the cave mouth, so slight that the surrounding guards did not hear them. One picket spoke to the crook up by the fissure, saying that everything was still the same. Soon afterward, the sounds went in that direction.

The man above heard them. He thought for a moment that a prowler was near; then, hearing sounds from the opposite direction, he decided that two men were about, hence they were his companions and not Thayner.

Then, as the sounds came closer, he was struck by the thought that the pickets weren't supposed to be up where he was.

Something else struck him, at almost the same moment, before he could voice word to men below, either outside or in the cave. The thing that struck him was the butt of a .45 that came through the dark, with the swish of a cloaked sleeve trailing it. The guard's skull took the blow. He collapsed.

ROLLING the fellow to one side, The Shadow shifted in the darkness, finding the narrow crevice. Then, discovering how tight a squeeze it was, he descended to the cavern's usual entrance and crept through. Once inside, he began to use his flashlight.

It wasn't The Shadow's usual flashlight; it was a larger one, the sort that Thayner would probably use. The Shadow's actions were slow and a trifle clumsy. He brandished the light in what seemed a worried fashion, and the crooks found it easy to bob below the level of the roving glare.

They didn't realize that they were being spotted during the sweeps; although The Shadow did no more than glimpse them. They thought that Thayner was wondering why no one was about. As the flashlight blundered toward a rocky portion of the floor, Clint Flenn poked up from his own position.

Thayner, so Clint decided, was right where he should be – close to the supply boxes. They certainly told the visitor that the cave was occupied, if nothing else did. Clint gave a quick call for lights. They came, half a dozen of them.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

With the lights were shouts from startled thugs, as they saw the figure of The Shadow. They had guns, but before they could use them, the cloaked arrival performed their own trick of bobbing into cover. He chose the lumpy floor near the center of the cave. It didn't offer shelter from the flanks, but The Shadow attended to that detail.

As he dropped, he hooked the supply boxes with his arm, tumbling them endwise. They landed at an angle, filling one space that Clint had considered a sure path of fire, should crooks need to use it.

One man was stationed at the rear of the cave, but rocks intervened. To make his fire sure, he would have had to rise from cover.

The fellow wouldn't risk it with The Shadow; not unless a second gun was ready to join his. There was a second gun, from the other flank. Mouser was the man who gripped it, and the thug with the little mustache was never squeamish when he had a revolver in his fist.

But The Shadow was taking care of that flank. He had a gun muzzle pointing at Mouser, indicating that the mustached sharpshooter would start the battle with his own death, if he did so much as budge his gun an inch upward.

Perhaps The Shadow's position was more precarious than crooks recognized. The Shadow saw to it that they did not lessen their opinion of his strength. From the barricade that he had chosen, the black-cloaked avenger delivered a powerful laugh of challenge that was magnified by the confines of the cavern.

Echoes resounded from the very spots where foemen crouched, as though they, not the rocky walls, were joining in the mirth that The Shadow provided at their expense.

Startled, the crouching men stared at each other. Even Clint wheeled in alarm, thinking that his whole tribe had become a covey of lesser Shadows leagued with crime's arch-foe!

Then shudders seized the mobsters. It was worse that these echoes should be provided by The Shadow, than by their own pals. It was as if the laugh had come among them; that The Shadow himself was at every man's elbow!

There was this about The Shadow's challenge. Normally, when he surprised men with his taunt, it numbed them momentarily; sometimes longer. In heat of battle, The Shadow's gibes made crooks excited and caused them to fire blindly; or wildly, which was a great factor in The Shadow's victories.

But there were times when the amazing features of a setting produced unpredictable results. This was one such time; wherein The Shadow, trapped, had turned the tide upon his trappers. Their very thoughts were jolted; they couldn't act as sane men.

Chance was that they would fling their guns away; come creeping, whining, with arms lifted, Clint Flenn in the lead. Such behavior on the part of enemies had been part of The Shadow's experience.

Conversely, they could go the opposite limit, becoming demons who would fight to death. Once the fever gripped a few of them, it would spread to all.

Though The Shadow could not tell beforehand which thing would result, he was able to divine the symptoms. For a full quarter minute, crooks were on the verge of the most abject surrender imaginable. One gesture from Clint – and he actually began it, at one moment – they would have declared The Shadow to be the trapper and themselves the trapped.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

CROOKS would have lived, had they chosen that course. The Shadow would have preferred to have them go to prisons, where they could circulate details of his victory, a triumph so astounding that it would do more to reform convicts than years of prison sentences.

But Clint did not complete the gesture. His strained mind took a pendulum swing. From the way that Clint went taut, The Shadow knew that the reverse was coming: battle, as brutal and unreasoning as that which ignorant savages would give. It had to come; so The Shadow urged it.

Resting one gun on the rock beside his hand, The Shadow drew an object into sight. Crooks saw the thing and recognized it as a whistle. It went to The Shadow's lips; they saw the effort that he made. But the whistle didn't blow!

Clint gave an insane howl that echoed through the cave as gloating irony, in response to The Shadow's earlier laugh. Shrieking similar glee, the outlaws sprang from shelter in a body, ready to bring disaster to their black-clad foe. As they rose, so did The Shadow.

He had dropped the whistle; he had both guns ready and he gestured the first at Mouser, then aimed it rearward. The gun spoke as Mouser ducked, still thinking it was covering him. At the same instant, the man at the rear of the cave did a tumble as he lurched into sight, his own gun beginning an aim, which it failed to keep.

The Shadow's other .45 beat Clint and the rest to the shot, but couldn't stop them. They were firing, too, as The Shadow blazed away. He was shifting hurriedly, keeping shelter, drawing them in a body, so they couldn't flank him. He was making for a side portion of the cave, where thugs were sure to box him despite his fire.

Only the aid of another fighter could have served The Shadow in that scheme of strategy. Such couldn't come, crooks thought, for, by this time, the mouth of the cavern was sealed. There wasn't a way whereby a human helper could have joined The Shadow's cause.

He wasn't depending upon such assistance. The attack that joined The Shadow's was provided by a creature quite able to join the combat; a fighter who had heard the signal, though crooks had not.

A great thing squeezed itself through the crevice in the cave roof, launched itself into a twenty-foot spring upon the crooks who were cornering The Shadow below.

Clint and an exultant crook beside him were flattened by the weight of the great beast that struck them crosswise. Vulcan had squeezed through the crevice, and expanded himself into a mammoth battering-ram that overtook the outlaws with the speed and force of a projectile.

Sprawling crooks went rolling, as guns popped in futile fashion. The rest were stumbling over Clint and the other man in front. Like the snare, battle had turned against the crew that had devised it.

Triumph was to be The Shadow's. His fierce laugh told it, and with that mighty burst of mirth came the approval of another fighter – the baying voice of the great dog, Vulcan!

CHAPTER XVII. THE ROUNDUP

IN the matter of an instant, The Shadow and Vulcan had turned battle to their favor, but the fight was not yet finished. There was no stopping Clint and his tribe, once they had gone berserk, except by keeping up the struggle.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Crooks were shooting desperately, and it took remarkable efforts to offset them. The Shadow's guns were jabbing needed shots at aiming men. His stabs stopped those who were still on their feet, while Vulcan took care of the sprawled foemen.

In his tricky fashion, the dog snatched revolvers before the gunmen could use them. As he disposed of each gun with a shake of his big head, Vulcan went after another.

The dog's neat tosses were landing the weapons at the feet of his present master, The Shadow. As the disarmed men tried to escape, Vulcan pawed them back where they belonged. He was ready to chew them, if they made more trouble. Already mauled, they were ready to surrender, when Clint Flenn made a sudden break.

Lucky enough to slip past Vulcan, and chancing to scoop up a gun which a wounded marksman had dropped, Clint made for the mouth of the cave, blazing wild shots as he went. The Shadow was after him, so was Vulcan, but Clint's luck persisted.

Gunners were coming in from the cave mouth, attracted by the muffled shooting. Clint yelled for them to get The Shadow, and they tried. They couldn't see that cloaked fighter; hence their shots were wild, for they had all the cave wherein to aim. In their turn they were cooped, caught in their tracks, when The Shadow returned the fire.

Two other men went with Clint; they were the only ones still in action. Vulcan rolled one over and over; then went after the other, who happened to be Mouser. The dog caught the squeamish crook by the belt and shook him like an oversized rat.

When Mouser's pal found a gun and tried to shoot at Vulcan, The Shadow paused, in passing, and slugged the crook before the fellow could pull the trigger.

That settled matters in the cave. Clint had fled, followed by those of the reserves who still could run, after having tasted the fury of The Shadow's fire. Speeding out into the darkness, The Shadow spotted fugitives by the noise they made and opened a fresh fire.

Wisely, The Shadow had conserved what bullets he could, as was testified by his slugging tactics against the last man who tried to finish Vulcan. He knew that his shots would bring a response.

Clint yelled that there was still a chance to trap The Shadow, and his remaining men believed their leader.

They were the new mobbies that Mouser had collected on his tour in the truck. They had the shelter of darkness, the wide hillside where they could dodge. It was The Shadow who was boxed, and they believed that they could get him. He had made a bad slip, so they thought, in resuming battle before he was fully in the clear.

His challenging laugh was absent, which spoke of desperation on The Shadow's part. Mobsters not only turned and fired; they began to close in warily, counting upon their numbers to turn the tide. They didn't suspect that The Shadow was now playing a part allotted to Thayner, the man who had not yet arrived; that this gunfire was intended as a signal.

The crooks, themselves, were bringing disaster their way. From far down the hillside, the sheriff and his deputies were hurrying up. They didn't need flashlights; the spurts of revolvers guided them. The noise they made was drowned by the echoes of the fray.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

When the closing cordon suddenly revealed itself, it did so at close range. The sheriff's men charged, a yelling pack, four to every crook.

Scuffles ended with the groans of suppressed outlaws; there were a few mad scrambles down the slope. Flashlights were sweeping toward the cave mouth, when The Shadow turned toward the heights above. He had blown the whistle once more, and Vulcan was with him. They were gone, when deputies invaded the cave to gather in Mouser and the rest.

FROM his vantage point, The Shadow watched the blink of lights down the hillside; saw them waver, and return. There were occasional spurts of guns, telling that Clint and a few desperate outlaws were reversing their course, under pressure from the deputies.

Lights converged from several angles; The Shadow noted one that hurried up the slope. Then, as he shifted along the higher level, he reached the meeting point. The brilliance of many lights revealed the climax.

Deputies were piling upon the panting crooks. One man, most vicious of the lot, was still trying to get free. The Shadow held him covered, but had no need to fire. The fellow was brandishing an empty gun, as was proven by his useless tugs at the trigger. The last outlaw was Clint Flenn.

A few deputies fired, frantically. Others warded them back and leaped for Clint, hoping to capture him alive.

Slugging blindly, Clint tore free, staggered toward the first open path he saw. More deputies came angling in to cut him off, as a flashlight burned squarely from the path that Clint had taken.

With a dodge, Clint foolishly aimed his gun. He was tugging away, at the unresponsive trigger, when the man with the light fired a straight-aimed shot.

Without a moan, Clint curled, a bullet in his heart. As deputies reached him, the marksman joined them. The arrival was Carl Thayner, and the sheriff approached to bestow congratulations.

"A great job!" complimented Rawley. "How you got away from them was the best part of it. We thought surely that we'd find you dead in the cave."

Thayner's expression showed bewilderment, which The Shadow understood. The sheriff supposed that it was the result of a haphazard flight that Thayner had taken to get clear. Finally, Thayner stroked his hair and smiled. He didn't accept the congratulations in full.

"I wasn't in it, like I wanted to be," he declared. "But, anyway, I got Clint Flenn!"

"In the cave?" queried Rawley.

"No; here." Thayner paused, as he pointed to the figure on the ground. "I'd say this fellow was Clint Flenn, wouldn't you, sheriff?... He looks like the leader of the crowd."

The sheriff took a look at Clint's face and nodded a partial agreement. Deputies were bringing up some captured crooks. Rawley stopped them and asked the prisoners to identify the dead man. Some wouldn't talk, but finally Mouser, who was among the group, admitted that it was Clint Flenn.

The Shadow was turning away along the hillside, when he heard the sheriff say:

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"Take those fellows down the hill. Put the wounded in the ambulance that you brought from Northdale. Lucky you thought of bringing it along. It's coming in handy."

At the word "ambulance," The Shadow made a sudden shift, that brought a responsive growl from Vulcan. The Great Dane thought that the move meant new battle, and Vulcan was more than ready to fight again at The Shadow's side. All men with guns were alike to Vulcan; he was trained to take their toys away. He was about to take a great lunge at the deputies, when The Shadow clutched his collar and silenced him with a quick whisper.

As a procession of lights went down the hill, The Shadow followed, bringing Vulcan along. He could see the lights of a car scudding in along a road and felt sure that it was bringing unwelcome news.

Again, The Shadow was just beyond the fringe of gleaming flashlights, when Sheriff Rawley reached the road where the ambulance stood, with other cars. Just then, the speeding car arrived.

A man leaped out and spoke hastily to the sheriff. His words couldn't be heard, but surrounding deputies stood silent, guessing that some new trouble had occurred. The sheriff turned to the group and gruffed the news. His voice was loud enough to reach The Shadow.

"Go back to town," he told them. "But some of you stick around, in case I want you. Mr. Thayner and I will drive over to Seven Oaks. They've had trouble there." He turned to Thayner and added, solemnly: "It sounds like murder."

"Murder!" exclaimed Thayner. Then, with a gulp: "Not... not Janice Melridge?"

"No," replied Rawley. "Mrs. Melridge was the victim. Her husband killed her. He says he's ready to confess. We'll learn the details when we reach there."

Cars pulled away, one by one. The ambulance went with them, loaded with the wounded. Others, like Mouser, were taken away in cars. Rawley and Thayner drove off together. Soon, the scene was deserted, silent.

By then, The Shadow had moved off through the woods. He reached Bob's car, parked on an abandoned road. With Vulcan beside him, The Shadow drove away. Low, meditative, his grim laugh brought a whine from Vulcan.

This was no laugh of triumph. It was a mirthless tone, of regret. While The Shadow was winning victory at Rocky Cave, crime had struck at Seven Oaks.

Crime which The Shadow had supposed could not happen, because of his measures to prevent it. The damage done, his only course was vengeance upon the murderer!

CHAPTER XVIII. CRIMES CONFESSED

GROVER MELRIDGE sat behind his desk, facing the stern eyes of Sheriff Rawley. There were others in the room – the two servants who had heard the fatal shots, as well as persons intimately concerned with the case. One was Dr. Heverly; another, Janice Melridge. They had arrived soon after the crime, and sent word for the sheriff.

Carl Thayner, of course, was present. He had come with the sheriff, and Thayner's arrival had eased Janice's strain. Finding her mother dead and her father a self-admitted killer, had been a double shock for the girl.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

She had been bewildered until Carl arrived, but the fact that he was still alive seemed to break the chain of misfortune.

Janice had already heard her father's story. With Carl's arm steadying her, she listened again while he recounted it, simply and patiently. He told of the argument; how Lucretia had produced the gun.

He said that he hoped people would believe him when he declared that his original intention had been merely to take the weapon from his wife's unsafe hands.

"But I cannot condone my crime," added Melridge, solemnly. "It was murder, and my stress was no excuse. When I managed to get the gun – when I was jarred in the struggle – I simply did the wrong thing.

"I'm not sure I even saw Lucretia. I can't even remember in which hand I held the gun. I was like another person; yet I must still have been myself. My own shots actually roused me; and when the lights came –"

He broke off, burying his face in his hands. As Janice shuddered, Thayner whispered encouragement. He told her that her father could make a plea of insanity. Melridge overheard it and raised his head.

"Insanity?" he queried. "That can never be my plea. It would do for Lucretia's actions. She was not herself. But I have no excuse. I killed her in cold blood. I saw her body" – he pointed, graphically – "lying on that very floor. He who kills shall pay the penalty! I am ready."

Janice looked to Loyden's portrait. It seemed severe tonight, as though it approved of Melridge's confession. Again, the girl shivered. She felt that her mother's death was an accident, not murder; but she was not the person to judge. Memory of another tragedy – the death of Joshua Kendry – was too fresh in her own mind.

There was another witness to the scene in the study. The Shadow was standing in the gloomy hall. He saw that Melridge's story was finished; time, therefore, was short. Stepping to the telephone, which was well away from the study, The Shadow made a call.

His tone was low, whispered close to the mouthpiece, as he spoke to Bob Melridge at the hotel.

When The Shadow returned to the study door, he heard Grover Melridge asking a request of Rawley, to which the sheriff acceded. Melridge wanted to give some things to Janice, before he went to jail. He produced a key and reached toward the desk drawers.

Fortunately, it wasn't a key to the bottom drawer. There was only one such key, and Janice had it. She was worried, however, when Melridge produced a box, until she saw that it was made of wood, not metal. It wasn't the box that contained the evidence of the highway tragedy.

Handing the box to Janice, Melridge spoke.

"This is a birthday gift," he said. "You are not to open it until next month, when you are twenty-one. It is for Bob, as well as yourself. I wish" – Melridge's eyes were troubled – "that I could intrust it to Bob, along with you. I hope it will be safe until he returns."

Janice turned and gave the box to Thayner, with the query:

"Will you keep it, Carl?"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

As Thayner nodded, Melridge beamed approval. He knew of the romance that had blossomed between Janice and this new friend.

"I wish you both happiness," said Melridge. "Look out for her, Carl. I am glad that you are here. This is an important trust."

THE SHADOW had drawn away again. He was back at the telephone; his voice, unheard by those who were listening to Melridge, was gruff, unusually like the tone of Sheriff Rawley.

Melridge returned to his desk. Janice gave a worried glance toward Thayner. She knew that it might be quite a while before Bob returned.

Thayner assured her that all would be well; that trouble would blow over. The only other person who heard that assurance was The Shadow. He was close to the door again.

The sheriff was producing handcuffs, apologetically affixing them to Melridge's wrists. He said it was a formality, but he had to do it. Janice's gaze was troubled, but her father smiled in her direction.

"Don't worry," he said, "and don't think too harshly of me, Janice. You will understand some things, later. Enough to know that while my act was inexcusable, I still had a certain trust in mind."

A car was pulling up in front of Seven Oaks. The Shadow watched the big door; when it opened, he gave a beckoning motion and drew quickly away from the study door. He was gone when Bob Melridge arrived and crossed the threshold, blocking his father and the sheriff.

There was a determination on Bob's face that Janice had never seen before. Somehow, it steeled her, too. She wanted to voice approval, when Bob demanded why the sheriff was arresting his father. The sheriff gave the reason, and Melridge added statements from his own confession.

"If my father has confessed his guilt," said Bob, suddenly subdued, "I should do the same." He turned to his sister. "Give me the key, Janice."

"What key?" asked Janice hastily. "What can you mean, Bob?"

"The key to the bottom drawer of the desk," replied Bob, "where you put the metal box. I know all about it, Janice."

Perplexed, the girl turned to Thayner. Bob voiced a plea at the same time.

"You'll help me, won't you, Carl?" he queried. "You'll let me admit what I've done. How I stole, to cover up a previous deed that I committed."

There was a gasp from Janice. She felt Thayner's hand tighten on her arm, to steady her. Slowly, Thayner looked from brother to sister. Finally, his eyes centered on Bob.

"You're a fine fellow, Bob," said Thayner. "Willing to make every sacrifice. But I shouldn't let you do –"

"You will let me, though?" Bob's query was eager. "For Janice's sake – so that her conscience can be clear?"

"It won't be clear," began Janice. "If you do this, Bob –"

"No one has a better right," interposed Bob. "I want you to be happy, Janice, when you go away with Carl."

The girl looked at Thayner. He was nodding, slowly. As Janice still hesitated, he said soothingly:

"Let Bob have the key."

Janice found the key in a pocket of her dress. She sobbed as she let it fall into her brother's hand.

To Sheriff Rawley, this new drama was a riddle that heightened at every stage. Apparently, Bob wanted to confess something, but how that had any bearing, he couldn't guess.

Not until Bob opened the drawer. Then, when the light glimmered on a metal box that bore a label, Rawley understood. Planking the box on the desk, Bob opened it.

"These were from Thayner's car," said Bob. "It's out in the garage. Go look at it, sheriff, if you don't believe it. But Carl wasn't driving the car when it hit Kendry. This belt belongs to Janice. She dropped it in the car, and it fell out on the road. But she wasn't driving, either.

"I was driving the car, sheriff. I struck Kendry and killed him. That's why I took the box from your office. I didn't want other people to be blamed for something they didn't do. They were foolish enough to want me to avoid blame, too. So I took the box."

BOB thrust his hands forward, but Rawley did not have another pair of handcuffs. He said he'd take Bob with him without using them. But Bob was insistent.

"If my father needs them," he argued, "so do I. But father is more to blame for what happened here than I was, for Kendry's death. Both cases have their circumstances, sheriff."

"They're different," argued Rawley. "Just how, a jury will have to decide."

"Things can be decided now," declared Bob, firmly. "You need more evidence, sheriff. Wait a few minutes and it will be here."

The sheriff waited half a minute, then suddenly became impatient. He told both to come along; that he'd handle the formalities. He was the law, and would prove it. During Rawley's harangue, Bob looked troubled.

Then came the sound of more cars – new arrivals stamping in through the front door. Relaxing, Bob laughed in a style that was actually happy. The Shadow hadn't failed him.

As if in answer, Bob heard a whispered mirth that crept in vaguely from darkened doorway across the hall. He knew the token, and all it signified. It told of startling things to come.

The laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIX. DEATH'S DOUBLE TALE

THE arrivals were deputies, bringing five prisoners, men who had been captured at Rocky Cave. While Sheriff Rawley stood half stupefied, his men herded the captives into the study and grouped them in a corner, under the points of guns. Then Rawley found his voice.

"Why did you bring these men here?" he demanded. "At whose order?"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"Your order, sheriff," said a deputy. "At least, that's what we were told down at the courthouse."

"Get them out of here!"

"Wait!" Bob was facing Rawley. "I said there would be new evidence. Ask them about Kendry."

"What about Kendry?"

"They can answer," returned Bob. "Ask them."

The sheriff wheeled on the group. One man looked weaker than the rest; ready to talk without persuasion. The man was Mouser; his mouth looked as droopy as the half-finished cigarette that hung from his down-turned lips.

"What about Kendry?" repeated the sheriff. "Answer me, if you know what's good for you."

"He was with us," replied Mouser. "Working with the mob. Clint told me to grease the guy; so I did. We were using his farm as a hide-out."

The meaning of the thing drilled home to Rawley. He demanded more details, and Mouser gave them. The captured thug told how Kendry had started out with the shotgun, to help with the ambush at the crossroads. Nudging a thumb at Thayner and Janice, Mouser added:

"We were after them."

"Which means that either of them had a right to run him down," argued Bob. "He was armed, and bent on murder. I was just stalling, awhile ago, sheriff. It's Janice's turn to talk."

Talk, Janice did. She told her story in detail. As he heard it, Rawley shrugged at first; then reached to the box of exhibits and dumped the contents into the wastebasket. He summed up the case in satisfactory fashion.

"What we did with guns tonight," declared Rawley, "you did with a car that time, Miss Melridge. We went after murderers, and got them. All you deserve is a medal."

He swung to Bob.

"I can't arrest you, either," he decided. "If you hadn't gotten into my office, we wouldn't have seen the light that brought us there in time to rout the crooks. Only, I'd like to know why you took the evidence, instead of talking to me."

Bob's tongue was in his cheek, as he glanced toward Janice. Then, methodically, he gave his reason; one that he hadn't had before, and which Janice therefore guessed had been suggested by their mutual friend, The Shadow.

"You were hot after the wrong person, sheriff," said Bob: "You wanted a hit-and-run driver, when you should have been looking for outlaws. I figured that Kendry was in it, but I knew I couldn't prove it until you captured some crooks and made them talk."

"So I took the evidence and kept it, until you got on the right track. You made a swell clean-up tonight, and the time was ripe. If you want an apology, sheriff, I'll be glad to make it. You have my thanks, already."

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

The sheriff clapped Bob on the shoulder. Then, stiffening, he turned to Melridge.

"Sorry," said Rawley, gruffly, "but we two will have to go along."

UNCONSCIOUSLY, the group had clustered toward the center of the study. No one was near the door; the only persons looking in that direction happened to be the prisoners. Mouser suddenly became squeamish, and his nervousness spread to the rest.

Blackness was streaking in across the threshold – a foreboding patch that looked like a huge silhouette. It reminded crooks too much of a formidable enemy: The Shadow.

Looking up, Mouser saw the figure that was coming through the doorway and gave a shriek.

All turned. They saw the tall form in black. The Shadow stood with folded arms; his burning gaze surveyed the entire group. There wasn't a solitary move, not even from Sheriff Rawley, when the grim avenger approached and placed his hand upon the shoulder of Grover Melridge.

Both Bob and Janice noticed that their father faced The Shadow without fear; a fact that pleased them. Somehow, they couldn't blame him for their mother's death. They knew that Melridge, more than anyone, had suffered from the shock of that tragedy.

"You were mistaken in one instance, sheriff," spoke The Shadow, in a grim whisper that made the captive thugs quake. "Perhaps there is error in another."

The sheriff cleared his throat with a gruff cough. Who this stranger was, did not matter. He was willing to debate the point. He began:

"Grover Melridge has confessed to –"

"As his son did," interposed The Shadow. "He has described a crime that he did not commit. His own testimony proves it."

It was Melridge's turn to stand amazed, as The Shadow turned to him.

"Your wife spoke of voices," declared The Shadow. "Perhaps, for once, those voices were real."

The Shadow's eyes turned toward Heverly. The doctor was suddenly prompted to give testimony.

"They might have been!" Heverly exclaimed. "Her condition had changed so, Melridge. She liked to talk of voices that she thought she heard; but she had mentioned none for several days. The voices that she told you of, particularly those today, must have made a different impression."

Centering upon Melridge, The Shadow caught a change of the gray-haired man's expression. Steadily, The Shadow made a half-finished statement:

"She mentioned a particular voice she'd heard –"

"She did!" exclaimed Melridge. "She said that she heard his voice. She meant" – he hesitated, then looked to the wall – "she meant the voice of Howard Loyden!"

"She threatened to tell –"

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"Yes, as she had before. Tonight, she meant it more than ever. There were things –"

"Contained in the box that you gave your daughter."

Hunch by hunch, The Shadow was picking up Melridge's story, carrying it further along. Both Bob and Janice were amazed; so, for that matter, was Melridge. The presence of The Shadow seemed to grip him like a spell.

"I can say no more," began Melridge, hastily. "Nothing more. It could do no good."

"You have said enough," declared The Shadow. "Let us examine your confession further. Your wife had a gun. How did she get it?"

"I don't know," admitted Melridge. "The fact really puzzled me. The gun belonged here, in my study. Why anyone should have taken it; I can't understand."

There was a slight gasp from Janice. She suppressed it grimly, as Melridge continued.

"Unless someone left it where she could find it," he said. "At any rate, she had the gun. I took it from her, as we struggled. We struck the lamp –"

MELRIDGE was pointing to the corner, near the door, where the lamp lay. It was a tall floor lamp with a heavy base, but with a single sweep, The Shadow set it upright.

He had been looking at that lamp before. He gave the lamp a hard shove with his foot. It slid, weightily, but did not overturn.

"Like this" – finishing the first action, The Shadow jolted the lamp with his shoulders – "or like this?"

"I don't know," stated Melridge. "It's odd that the lamp won't upset. It seems as though those pushes merely pressed it closer to the wall."

The Shadow had stepped through the doorway. All that they saw was his hand, as it swung inward. Catching the lamp with his fist, The Shadow overturned it from the wall. It fell into the exact position where it had been before.

A sudden light came to Melridge's eyes, but The Shadow ignored him. Again inside the doorway, the cloaked investigator turned to Janice.

"You saw Kendry with both arms flinging," reminded The Shadow. "But there was a shotgun with Kendry's body when Thayner found it. Perhaps Kendry did not stumble from the road bank. It is more probable, that he had lost his gun in a struggle; that he was half helpless when someone pushed him into the car's path.

"Just as someone" – The Shadow swung again to Melridge – "pushed the lamp over, from the doorway, and came into the struggle amid the darkness. Someone who bashed you hard against the wall, picked up your gun and quickly fired the death shots –"

As if to illustrate the action, The Shadow wheeled about. His gloved hand, quick as a whippet's start, whisked an automatic from his cloak and aimed it, not at an imaginary form, but directly at a living, scheming man.

The rapid move was timely. The other man was also on the draw. But The Shadow's automatic had him covered before he could tug a revolver from his pocket. Letting the weapon slide back again, the helpless man let his hands come to his shoulders.

This time, Janice Melridge did not gasp. She already understood. The man with the upraised hands was Carl Thayner, a man of murder who had used friendship as a disguise for deeds of crime.

CHAPTER XX. THE THING FROM THE PAST

FROM a medley of conflicting thoughts, Janice could think of only one thing: Vulcan. She remembered her old belief in the dog's judgment of humans. It had been proven, more than ever, after she began to doubt it. Of all who dwelt within this household, only one had failed to welcome the friendly stranger, Carl Thayner.

Vulcan had repeatedly shown his distaste for the new guest. Perhaps The Shadow had observed it on his visits to Seven Oaks. Certainly, The Shadow had mistrusted Thayner. That was why he had ordered the ambulance tonight! Fitting closely was the fact that The Shadow and Vulcan were themselves friends.

Janice's thoughts went to the wooden box that had tumbled from Thayner's arms when his hands came up. The box was lying on the floor, and it told a story of its own.

Thayner wanted the box!

Why?

He could have stolen it earlier, if he wanted it. Why had he waited, and committed crimes in the meanwhile? Looking at The Shadow, Janice suddenly divined the answer, as his gaze briefly met her own.

For some reason, Thayner had needed Janice, as well as the box. That was why he had sought to ruin completely other members of the family.

Craftily, Thayner had taken advantage of every opportunity. He had made Janice think that she killed Kendry. Subtly, he had talked Bob into going to the courthouse, to steal the box. He had foreseen – as he proved tonight – that he expected Bob to take the blame for the tragedy on the road, as well.

Those voices that Lucretia had heard!

Still an opportunist, Thayner had provided them, particularly this afternoon, after he had received Clint's message. He had talked in terms that Lucretia Melridge understood, probably speaking outside her room. He had placed the gun where she could get it.

Maybe he hadn't cared which of the two died: Grover Melridge or Lucretia. He wanted one dead, the other put away, either in prison or an asylum. All because he wanted Janice to be dependent upon no one but himself. Knowing that she trusted him, the mysterious box would thereby become his trophy!

A laugh ended the chill silence. Its tone was shuddery. The Shadow was voicing other facts, reminding Thayner of the night that he had come to Seven Oaks. The Shadow asked why Thayner had turned his car between the gates, even before crooks arrived.

"You were coming here," declared The Shadow, when Thayner remained silent, "to introduce yourself and gain the good will of the household. Whatever your original plan of entry, luck gave you a better one. You entered as a helpless wayfarer, robbed on the highway, which created the very sympathy you wanted.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

"You did not expect Clint Flenn to overtake you." The Shadow was drawing closer to Thayner. "But Clint expected more money than was in your bag. A great deal more – perhaps as much as fifty thousand dollars!"

Turning, The Shadow faced Mouser and the other crooks. The facts that Thayner wouldn't admit were easily recognized by them. They gulped the thoughts that flashed to their minds.

"The dough that Nick Bargo had, before the Feds caught up with him!"

"Say – this guy Thayner was the real double–crosser! He got the dough!"

"And Clint Flenn knew it! That's why he wanted to get Thayner!"

DURING those outbursts, Grover Melridge was standing stolidly beside his desk. Turning, he raised his handcuffed hands and took Loyden's portrait from the wall. His face was solemn as he faced the listeners, who knew, from that moment, that the greatest of Thayner's crimes was to be exposed.

"Howard Loyden was my best friend," declared Melridge. "He died of a broken heart, after his wife, Clara, left him for another man. Who that man was, Loyden never knew. But he placed his two children in my custody.

"Yes, Bob and Janice, Howard Loyden was your father. I often wondered" – he glanced toward The Shadow – "why no one detected the family resemblance. But I was not to tell you until you were twenty–one. Lucretia and I raised you as our own children.

"When Lucretia's mind wandered, the secret troubled her. That was the thing I did not want her to tell. I feel that I can state those facts, at present, because Loyden gave me the privilege on one condition. If I should ever find the man responsible for his wife's desertion."

Approaching Thayner, Melridge held the portrait face to face with him. The stern eyes of Loyden seemed to come to life; their gaze made Thayner wince.

He was the culprit, and he could no longer hide it. He, alone, could have spoken facts concerning Howard Loyden to Lucretia Melridge.

"You had only one regret," accused Melridge. "You wanted to steal Loyden's money, along with his wife. You did not get the money, so you waited. You came here, seeking to gain the fortune that Loyden left, by acquiring his daughter.

"You were a young man, Thayner, much younger than Clara Loyden. That much, I should have known. You still look young, much younger than you are. You used the same smooth policy to win Janice's trust that you employed in urging her mother to leave her father."

Janice no longer had a lot of trust in Thayner, as Melridge saw, when he glanced toward his foster daughter. The girl's eyes were ablaze with accusations of her own, and Bob was drawing to her side, his fists clenched.

Together, they were ready to seize Thayner and choke him into something that the sheriff would have to carry out.

His smugness seemed gone. His handsome face looked coarse. Indeed, Thayner had a pitiful expression, seemingly his last play for sympathy, as he cowered. But even in that pose, he had design. His huddle carried him momentarily from the path of The Shadow's aim.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Like a flash, Thayner shot into action. He grabbed the portrait from Melridge and slashed it at his accuser's head. As Melridge dodged, Bob and Janice sprang in. Whirling them between himself and The Shadow, Thayner yanked his revolver. He yelled to Mouser and the other crooks.

"There's still a lot left of Nick's fifty grand! Come with me, all of you –"

Mobsters surged. They struck The Shadow, as Janice and Bob dived away to let the cloaked fighter get a shot at Thayner. The Shadow fired as Thayner dived through the doorway. Attackers reached The Shadow at that moment; his jarred aim went high.

Then, as the quickest way of reaching Thayner, The Shadow demonstrated how he could settle crooks. They were armed, for they had snatched guns from astonished deputies while making the drive, but weapons did those thugs no good. The Shadow sledged with two guns of his own.

His blows felled a pair of enemies, and he sagged with the sprawling crooks. The others, shooting, found targets coming at them, not The Shadow but their pals, lurched forward by the fading fighter in black. Accompanying a strident laugh, The Shadow's gun spoke, aimed for two crooks who had missed him.

As they floundered forward, The Shadow dived between them, bowling the last of the five prisoners to the floor. By then, the sheriff and the deputies were in it, for they had acted almost as quickly as the crooks. They took prompt charge of the overwhelmed outlaws, while The Shadow was speeding out through the hall.

THE roar of a motor told that Thayner was starting away in a deputy's car. Bob's car was out by the garage and he was hurrying for it, when The Shadow overtook him. As Bob jerked the car about, The Shadow stooped beside Vulcan's kennel. Then, with a spring, he was in with Bob.

They whizzed under the porte-cochere. Thayner had rounded the first curve in the drive. It would take a hard chase to overtake him, for they were forced to follow the same winding course to the gates. Once outside, there was a good chance that the murderer might get clear, for Bob's car was none too speedy.

As the car neared the final bend, Bob heard The Shadow's laugh, strangely whispered. Gazing ahead, Bob saw a blot flash into the glare of his lights. Then he recognized it as Vulcan.

The big dog didn't have to stay to the drive when The Shadow released him. Speedy as well as powerful, he was taking cross-cut to the outside road.

Ahead, Thayner wheeled his car through the gateway, taking the sharp turn in proper fashion. He was pressing his foot to the accelerator, laughing as the sound of Bob's motor came from well back in the woods. Thayner scarcely heard the crackle of the brush beside him.

Things from the past meant nothing to this man of crime. He had lost Janice's fortune, which he had hoped would include Bob's share, as represented by bank books and other documents in the oblong box. He regretted that loss; but not his crimes.

Yet there was one thing from his recent past that he was to remember, though not for very long. It came upon him like a mighty cyclone, hurling in from space. It was a living hulk that cleared a wide ditch in one prodigious leap, landing with all paws upon the man it wanted.

Struggling to keep his car on the move, Thayner was also fighting with his nemesis, Vulcan.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

It was a wild struggle between dog and man. During the madcap battle, the car roared onward, with Thayner's arm crooked through the wheel. He had his gun and was using it, but to no avail.

He knew Vulcan's trick of snatching guns and managed to twist the weapon about; but before Thayner could fire, Vulcan made amends for not getting the gun with a bite.

With a swoop of his big paw, the dog hit the revolver aside, sending Thayner's bullets to the roadway. Then Vulcan took a real hold, not on Thayner's gun but on his neck. Again the gun hand was coming up; once more, Vulcan downed it.

The road veered toward a ravine crossed by a slender bridge. Choking, tortured by the clutch of Vulcan's fangs, Thayner managed to see the bridge rail, but not the roadway that went with it. He picked the wrong side, just as another car came spurting on his trail.

Too late to stop the climax, The Shadow and Bob Melridge witnessed its fulfillment. Thayner's speedy roadster looked as much alive as the figures that were struggling within it. It acted almost with a pause, as it took the wrong side of the abutment and hurtled off.

As the car dipped forward, Thayner was carried to his doom, but in the same instant, Vulcan's great frame launched through space. Huge forepaws followed a twenty-foot arc and shot across the bridge rail.

Momentarily; Vulcan dangled there; then the crash of the car on rocks, some fifty feet below gave inspiration to the fighting beast. His hind legs fairly clawed the bridge rail and propelled him upward, forward, over to solid safety.

AS Bob halted the car, Vulcan came panting toward him and sprang into the seat. That was when Bob first noticed that The Shadow was gone. Waiting, Bob watched a tiny flashlight, twinkling down the sides of the ravine.

It stopped beside Thayner's smashed car. Bob saw it sweep, as he listened to the dull thunder of the creek down in the gorge. Then, like a knell floating up from some abandoned tomb, came a peal of mirthless laughter.

That tone was a token of final triumph. It told what Bob Melridge – or Bob Loyden – expected. It meant that Carl Thayner had met with the inevitable. The murderer had failed to survive the tremendous crash. His crimes had ended; they were sealed by death.

There was more to The Shadow's strangely trailing laugh, as Bob recognized when he heard it fade and saw the tiny light no longer. Choosing his own route through the ravine, The Shadow had departed. His laugh was a token of farewell.

It would be Bob's duty to carry the word back to Seven Oaks and tell them that the curse of the past was gone. Janice would be waiting for that word, as would Dr. Heverly, the man she had forgotten while under Thayner's spell.

They would all remember their friend, The Shadow. Realizing it, Bob turned to Vulcan. He saw the dog's head raise, watched the curious tilt of Vulcan's ears. Then Bob recalled a mysterious whistle that Janice had mentioned.

Pitched to a tune that no human ear could hear, that whistle had served The Shadow when he needed his ally, Vulcan. A dog's ear was tuned to that high tone, and Vulcan was hearing it now.

CRIME AT SEVEN OAKS

Perhaps he hadn't understood The Shadow's laugh to be a farewell. But he recognized the whistle trill that Bob could not hear.

The Shadow!

THE END