

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. THE SHOP OF BELA SINGH.

THE East Side streets looked sinister as Barbara Brinby viewed them from the windows of the cab. Perhaps they were darker than usual, this night, because of the foggish drizzle that muffled the street lamps. The rain, too, could account for the absence of people on the sidewalks.

The cab swung into an avenue. Lighted stores, though they were grimy and tawdry, made Barbara feel more at home. There were people here, too, shambling along with coats muffled about their necks. The rumble of an elevated train added to Barbara's confidence.

This seemed the real New York again; but the glimpse did not last long. The cab took a westbound street. It was rolling into a deserted district where muggy gloom produced the illusion of menacing lurkers.

The cab was moving slowly, the driver craning from the window to notice the house numbers. They had nearly reached their destination; and Barbara was glad that the trip was about to end. That cabby had certainly taken a roundabout course to get here, picking bumpy streets and avenues that Barbara had never seen before.

She didn't like the driver's appearance, either. Perhaps that was why she had become nervous during the ride.

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Barbara was seeing his face again, as he leaned from the window. It was a ratty face, with eyes that squinted.

Usually, Barbara took a good look at a cab driver before entering his taxi; but, to-night, there hadn't been much time for that.

She had hailed this cab in Chinatown, where taxis were few. The rain, too, had hurried her.

The cab stopped with a screechy jolt. The driver stared at the front of a little shop, set just below the level of the street.

The shop occupied the basement of a building that had once been a residence but which now looked abandoned, save for that bottom floor. The shop's windows showed a dull glow; enough for the squinty taxi driver to make out the name that was painted above it.

"'Bela Singh'," he read, in a growly voice. "'Oriental Curios.' Guess this is the joint you want, lady."

Alighting, the taxi man opened the door. As he did, he glanced up and down the street, his rattish eyes peering hard through the drizzle. Barbara noticed it as she stepped to the curb. She started to open her hand bag, to find her change purse.

That hand bag was a large one, with platinum adornments. It had a large bulge inside it. The cabby noted it; but let his eyes shift quickly. Peering along the street again, he ignored Barbara's attempt to pay him.

"Want me to wait, don't you, lady?" The man's tone was less growly. It carried a note of concern. Barbara was struck by the recollection that, after all, this driver had brought her to her destination. His glances along the street certainly showed that he would be quick to spot skulking persons. He was husky; the sort of fellow who could handle trouble-makers.

It might not be easy to find another cab in this remote neighborhood. Barbara did not intend to remain long at Bela Singh's. She told the cabby to wait.

"O. K., lady."

The cabby was lighting a cigarette as he made the comment. He waited until Barbara had entered the curio shop. Flicking his match away, he dimmed the lights in his cab and started on foot toward the next corner, where he had noted a small cigar store, the only other shop in this block.

MEANWHILE, Barbara Brinby had forgotten all about that cab driver.

A tiny bell had tingled her entry past the portals of Bela Singh's shop. Once inside, Barbara found herself transported into a fragment of the Orient. Spread curtains had welcomed her farther, to a room where incense burned; where rare, carved furniture was in abundance.

Thick rugs spread the floor, so plentiful that they overlapped. High tables and shelves were stocked with odd creations in brass; strange lamps, tall vases and squatty lota bowls. Carved figures of ivory looked like pygmies among larger statuettes of gold and silver. Those metal images of Hindu gods had eyes of precious stones that looked alive.

There were curtains all about, their folds so heavy that Barbara could not see where they divided, until two hands parted them. From the far wall of the room, a tall man stepped into view.

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He wore American clothes; but his darkish features proclaimed him as a Hindu. In keeping with his native custom, he wore an ornamental turban, tastefully decorated with gems.

There was something about the Hindu's calm face that marked him as a man more important than an ordinary curio dealer. What impressed Barbara most was the contour of those features. Their perfect mold made the man look more European than Oriental. But the darkness of his skin was deep.

He was certainly a Hindu. That was why Barbara asked: "You are Bela Singh?"

"That is my name." Bela Singh's tone was musical; his bow was graceful. "I am at your service, mem-sahib."

Bela Singh watched Barbara look around the shop. He had evidently seen others lost in rapture at the lavishness of this Oriental room, for his face showed no surprise. But the steadiness of his gaze evidenced that he had gained an interest in his visitor, and with good reason.

Barbara Brinby was a girl with rare charm. She looked at her best in fine surroundings. Though her street attire was plain and somewhat rain-soaked, it detracted in no way from her beauty.

Light-skinned, with hair of a perfect brown that matched her eyes, Barbara always gained attention. But there was something deeper than her facial attraction. Barbara had the poise and confidence of a modern business woman.

Keen men had recognized that this alluring brunette could be their equal when it came to wits. Bela Singh was one such man.

Perhaps it was to test Barbara's nerve that the Hindu stepped past her and calmly closed the curtains through which the girl had entered. When he faced the girl again, Bela Singh observed no concern on her part.

The qualms that Barbara had felt during that lone taxi ride had vanished when she entered the curio shop. Once sure of her surroundings, Barbara never knew fear.

The girl's open gaze brought another bow from Bela Singh. His salaam was a tribute of admiration. In his calm-toned way, the Hindu became a man of business. He moved one hand to indicate the room and all it contained, as he spoke:

"There is much of Oriental art to choose from. All that you see here is for sale."

"I haven't come to buy anything," returned Barbara. "Instead, I have brought something—"

She paused. Bela Singh's eyes were on the hand bag. His head was shaking, very slowly.

"We buy nothing here, mem-sahib. All of our goods are imported from India."

Barbara smiled.

"I know that," she said. "I learned it in Chinatown, where they told me about you. They said that your shop was the only one where real items of Hindu art could be appraised. So I brought this—"

BARBARA finished her statement by opening the hand bag. From it, she produced a squatty statuette, five inches high. It was the image of a seated Buddha; but it differed from any of the statuettes that Bela Singh had on display.

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The Buddha that Barbara had brought was the workmanship of a jewel-cutter, not of a goldsmith. It was carved from a single piece of flawless crystal.

Bela Singh's deep-hued eyes centered upon the transparent Buddha. His gaze was mystical, as though it sought some vision in the crystal. His expression did not change. Only his complete motionlessness indicated that sight of that Buddha of crystal had produced an effect upon him.

Had Barbara Brinby ever met the man before, she would have recognized that Bela Singh was swayed by the Crystal Buddha. But this was her first meeting with the Hindu. His eyes deceived her when they raised. Bela Singh's tone was almost indifferent, when he asked:

"Does this Buddha belong to you?"

"No," replied Barbara. "It belongs—or did belong—to a friend of mine. In a way, it still belongs to a friend."

Barbara watched Bela Singh as she spoke. She wasn't sure why he had asked the question. In his turn, Bela Singh caught the first flash of suspicion that had come to Barbara's brown eyes. The Hindu met that situation.

"The owner does not interest me," said Bela Singh. His melodious tone was a convincing one. "I did not wish to disappoint you, that was all. I cannot buy the Buddha."

"But if you can tell me its value—"

"You have spoken to Chinese merchants. They would know its worth."

"They named prices; but they weren't sure of them. All insisted that this was a Hindu Buddha, not a Chinese. Every one advised me to bring the Buddha to you."

Bela Singh reached for the statuette. It glistened as it lay upon his hand. His darkish palm showed clearly through the crystal. Steadily, Bela Singh studied the object for a full minute; then gave his verdict.

"If your friend should decide to sell this Buddha," spoke Bela Singh, "he should ask a price of one thousand dollars. As a fine-cut crystal, it is worth that amount; no more."

He returned the Buddha to Barbara. The girl smiled as she replaced it in her hand bag.

"Thank you, Bela Singh," she said, gratefully. "If there is a charge for the appraisal—"

"There is no charge."

Bowing, Bela Singh turned to the outer curtains. He lifted them for Barbara to pass through. He watched the girl as she walked to the shop door. Just as she turned the knob, Bela Singh let the curtain fall.

FROM that instant, Bela Singh's slow motion ceased. With hurried strides, the Hindu crossed the room; whipping aside the far curtain, he sped through a second room that was stocked with curios like the first.

He clapped his hands as he neared an obscure door. Two darkish faces popped into view.

The men were Hindus, like Bela Singh, but of a lesser caste. Their faces were ugly; their pose showed none of the dignity that marked their master. The pair evidently understood little English, for Bela Singh babbled rapidly in their native tongue, gesticulating as he spoke. His graphic expressions referred to Barbara Brinby.

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Bela Singh had spied the dim lights of the taxi waiting on the front street. It was headed westward, the proper direction on the one-way street; and that natural situation brought prompt nods from the two Hindus.

They scrambled toward a rear door; Bela Singh watched them take a passage that led to the rear street.

Listening, Bela Singh heard a motor start from the street in back. A car was being turned about, as Bela Singh had ordered. His followers were going to buck traffic on the east-bound street, in order to reach the next avenue as soon as Barbara's cab.

Calmly, the Hindu paced to the front room of his curio shop. His eyes gleamed as they studied the curtains through which Barbara had gone. His gaze lowered to his hand which closed, half-cupped. His hand moved up and down, as though weighing an imaginary Buddha.

For the first time, Bela Singh's lips formed a smile. Though the price that the Hindu had named might be the value of the curio that Barbara had shown him, that Crystal Buddha meant much more than one thousand dollars, to Bela Singh.

CHAPTER II. IN CENTRAL PARK.

WHILE Bela Singh was ordering his Hindu servants upon a hurried chase, Barbara Brinby was meeting with delay. The cab was waiting for her; but when she opened the door, she noticed that the driver was absent.

Wondering where the cabby had gone, Barbara looked about. She saw the fellow come shuffling toward her, flicking away a cigarette. He gave an ugly grimace that was his attempt at a smile.

"Sorry, lady," said the cabby. "I was just down at the corner, getting cigarettes."

He displayed a pack of cigarettes as he spoke. That proof of his story was superfluous to Barbara, for she hadn't doubted the man's statement. It made her wonder about the cab driver's reliability.

Giving an address, Barbara settled back in the rear seat. During that first block, she studied the driver's photograph, which was displayed in the frame that held his cab license. His name was Luke Malkett, and his picture looked like a rogues' gallery photo.

Peering toward the front of the cab, Barbara could see beady eyes staring in the mirror. Malkett was watching her in ratty fashion; his manner was another test for Barbara's nerve. She met the situation with a firm smile. Barbara decided that she had the explanation for her past qualms. Outside dangers had been imaginary. The real threat was this sneaky cab driver.

Malkett had spotted the hand bag. He didn't know what was in it, but he wanted the contents. Maybe he would try to get the Crystal Buddha, along with whatever else the bag held. Barbara would be ready when he tried it. There was something in the bag that the fellow wouldn't like.

Waiting until the cab was on the avenue, Barbara opened the bag and cautiously pulled out a tiny pearl-handled revolver.

Barbara had a permit for that gun; she always carried the weapon when occasion demanded. Tucking the revolver in a fold of her dress, she began to look from the window. At times, she managed a sidelong glance to the driver's mirror.

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During the previous ride, Barbara had looked frequently through the rear window. She avoided that policy, at present, because she figured that trouble could come from Malkett only. That was why she failed to notice the dark coupe that trailed the cab. That car had come in from the street in back of Bela Singh's.

Barbara smiled when they swung into the next avenue. The cab had been going slowly, almost uncertainly; but it hadn't stopped. Probably, Malkett had given up his half-baked plan. When Barbara saw him peer nervously from his window, she decided that he was looking for policemen, glad that he had tried nothing lawless.

Instead, the cabby was looking for another car; and he saw it. The machine was a touring car, that had just stopped at the curb beyond an elevated station. Malkett let his left hand stick out as he took another corner. His hand wigwagged a signal.

The touring car started. It followed close behind the cab, coming in ahead of the coupe that was keeping a discreet distance to the rear.

THE cab had reached a crosstown street in the Sixties. It rolled westward across Fifth Avenue and entered Central Park. Barbara had given a West Side address; hence the trip through the park was a logical one.

Malkett, however, seemed to have his own pet way of getting to the West Side. He took odd turns that veered the cab from the course that Barbara expected.

That made the girl look back. They were on a curving slope; despite the drizzle, she could see other cars behind them. There were several; and sight of the procession gave Barbara confidence.

Among the automobiles, she saw a long, decrepit touring car that didn't look presentable; but behind it was a sleek limousine that certainly belonged to a wealthy owner. The rest of the cars looked good, including a coupe that was well in the rear.

With all these cars in line, the scene seemed safe. The cab's speed was increasing, as if Malkett had given up all intentions of rough stuff. He was passing other cars; ahead, Barbara could see the high lights of big apartment houses banked on the west side of the park. They'd be out of this maze in a few more minutes, she thought.

Then came a jounce that warned her of immediate danger.

The cab had veered into a poorly paved drive. It took a sharp downward turn. From the side window, Barbara glimpsed the drive that they had left. She saw cars that they had passed; all were keeping straight ahead.

The lights vanished, blocked by trees. Brakes screeched, as Malkett brought the cab to a jerky stop.

"Sorry, lady." The cabby was peering through the windshield. "Guess I missed my way in the rain. 'Wait'll I turn around."

Before he could reach for the gear lever, Barbara stopped him. She pressed the revolver muzzle against Malkett's ear. The cabby winced as he recognized the touch of cold metal. Firmly, Barbara told him:

"Yes, you will turn around! Exactly as I order it! You can explain your mistake afterward, when we meet an officer!"

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A flood of light made Barbara turn about. Another car had arrived on this isolated drive; it was the touring car that had cut in to trail the taxi. Barbara couldn't make out the car's shape, but she recognized that its arrival meant new menace.

She gave a little gasp. That served as a signal for Malkett. With a shifty twist, the cabby shoved open the door on the left and did a dive for the mud. As he came up in the light, he tugged a revolver of his own. His voice was a hoarse screech:

"The moll's got a gat!"

Malkett was aiming as he shouted. Bravely, Barbara jabbed shots before he could fire at the window. She didn't score a hit; but the cabby ducked.

Immediately, guns roared a barrage, to cover him. Half a dozen thugs had alighted from the touring car, to fire at the cab. Instinctively, Barbara dropped to the floor, while bullets riddled the rear window above her.

Backed by guns, Malkett staged a prompt move. The cabby jumped for the door; yanked it open and made a lucky grab for Barbara. The girl came rolling out, clutching the tiny gun in her right hand, clinging to the hand bag with her left.

Outspread thugs waited, while Malkett raised his arm to slug his gun for the girl's head.

A gun spoke from the blanketing drizzle. The shot came from a spot just past the touring car. It was a tongue of flame from total darkness; as timely as it was perfect.

That sizzling bullet whistled two inches wide of Barbara's neck, to find Malkett's body as its target. It withered the crooked cabby instantly. His gun hand dropped as his body sagged.

AMAZED, Barbara watched the fellow slump; next, she looked in the direction from which the shot had come.

A peal of uncanny mirth quivered the foggy air. Barbara saw the outspread attackers turn in consternation. She heard the savage oaths that their lips uttered. She viewed the reason for their sudden swing.

They had recognized the mocking challenge of a superfoe; a being whose form was suddenly outlined by the touring car's lights. He was clad in a cloak of black; his head was topped by a slouch hat.

For the instant, Barbara thought that this incredible rescuer had materialized from space. A moment later, she spied the means of his arrival.

He had come from the magnificent limousine that she had seen on the paved driveway. That big car had slithered up behind the touring car. The chauffeur had doused the lights as he arrived. The cloaked fighter had fired that first shot from the running board.

With Malkett finished, this strange challenger had dropped his hidden tactics. With his fierce, taunting laugh, he had sprung forward, that enemies might recognize him by sight as well as sound.

There wasn't any question of identity in the mind of thugs. Barbara heard their whiny voices utter the avenger's name:

"The Shadow!"

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Hard with that cry came the blast of guns. Pumping with one automatic, The Shadow drew another, to open double fire. Answering shots were puny. Scattered crooks were trying to dive as they fired.

It seemed to Barbara that her rescuer must bear a charm against those leaden missiles, until she saw the scene about the touring car. The Shadow was clipping gunmen as rapidly as they aimed. That was the secret of his immunity.

A few went staggering wildly into the darkness. The others, after they sprawled, came to hands and knees, making limping efforts to regain the touring car.

One thug was at the wheel. He jerked the car forward, as the others piled in. The car veered wide of the abandoned taxi, swinging to the side away from Barbara. The girl expected The Shadow to wing the driver; instead, he simply blasted shots that spurred the fleeing crooks to greater haste.

The tail-light of the touring car twinkled out of sight, jouncing as it took a bend in the bumpy road.

More swiftness from The Shadow. On her feet, Barbara hadn't time to turn around before The Shadow was beside her. So was the limousine.

Guns away, The Shadow swung open the door with one hand, enveloped Barbara with his other cloaked arm. Still holding her revolver and her hand bag, the girl was drawn into the car, to find herself beside The Shadow.

A whispered voice spoke through a speaking tube. The limousine started slowly forward. Then, from lips that Barbara could not see, came a tone that carried command, rather than question: The Shadow was inquiring the details of Barbara's adventure.

The girl gave them, spasmodically; but her words were incomplete. She said that she had gone to Bela Singh's; but did not state her purpose there. That wasn't deceit on Barbara's part. She thought the Crystal Buddha unimportant. Her summary was that Malkett thought she carried money; that he must have called the crooks to stage a stick-up.

BARBARA'S story ended abruptly, before the limousine had gone more than a few hundred yards. As the big car jogged from the rough road, Barbara began to express her thanks, speaking to the darkness where she had heard The Shadow's voice.

"I owe you a lot," said Barbara, her tone expressing complete understanding. "I wondered why you risked coming into the light. I realize that it was to divert the attack. You let those gunmen go, too, because chance shots might have reached me—"

Barbara stopped short. The limousine had reached the broad, straight stretch of Central Park West, where the massive apartments flanked one side, the park the other. Despite the mist, the lights were sufficient to show the interior of the car.

The seat beside Barbara was empty. Somehow, The Shadow had mysteriously vanished, after Barbara's brief story was told. As the girl gaped, she noticed that the car had stopped. The chauffeur was waiting, attentively, for new orders.

Through the speaking tube, Barbara gave the address where she wanted to go. The huge car started forward. Deep in the cushions, Barbara tried to recall those brief minutes when The Shadow had traveled with her.

She remembered that when she finished her brief details, he had spoken a request for future silence. That was wise, Barbara agreed. It would be better to keep this story from others, who would not believe it. The adventure was ended; she was safe. After all, she had told all the facts that might have interested The Shadow.

So Barbara thought; and she doubted that she would see her mysterious rescuer again. There, Barbara was wrong. The future was to bring The Shadow into new affairs that would concern her greatly.

The reason for those coming events was in Barbara's own possession. The Crystal Buddha was to lead The Shadow on strange and devious trails.

CHAPTER III. MEN OF THE DARK.

A TINY light was flickering along the muddy road that the limousine had left. This unpaved stretch in Central Park was forming The Shadow's return path to Malkett's abandoned cab. The Shadow had a definite purpose for going back to the battleground. He wanted to dispose of any evidence revealing that Barbara Brinby had been there.

The simple story that the girl had given fitted with facts that The Shadow knew. A relentless foe to men of crime, The Shadow kept careful check on events in the underworld. Frequently, when criminals moved out on foray, The Shadow was prompt to frustrate them.

The Shadow had many agents. Some of them were located in underworld haunts, where they kept tabs on crooked doings. Their reports were promptly forwarded to The Shadow, through a contact man named Burbank. Such communication had brought The Shadow into action to-night.

Scummy crooks who had headquarters at an old garage, had received a tip-off to a stick-up. That call had come from Malkett—although The Shadow hadn't known its source until he witnessed Barbara's plight. He had learned where the mob was to await the tipster; so his limousine had been on hand when the touring car picked up the taxi's trail.

Barbara had mentioned Bela Singh's. The Shadow knew the Hindu art dealer's good repute. That made it plain that the trouble was sponsored entirely by Malkett, who had obviously made his phone call while Barbara was at Bela Singh's.

All was quiet at Malkett's cab, when The Shadow reached it. The rat-faced cabby lay dead, as he deserved; for the blow that he had started for Barbara's head had been a murderous one.

There had been a hard-pitched battle on this spot, with plenty of gunshots; but, as yet, the police had not located it. The road curved through a little dell; that explained why the reports of guns might not have been heard. The Shadow, however, had the theory that the battle in Central Park could not pass unreported.

The likely answer was that persons had given vague accounts of muffled gunfire. That would produce investigation. It would not be long before the law uncovered the abandoned taxicab.

The police could form their own theories regarding all that had occurred. If they needed facts, The Shadow would supply them; but he would reserve any that included the name of Barbara Brinby.

The Shadow had not asked the girl her name. One of his agents was acting as the limousine's chauffeur, and would learn all that was necessary. When he flashed his tiny light on the floor of the cab, The Shadow

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learned part of Barbara's name, at least. There was a calling card lying there, its printed side up.

The Shadow read the card:

ROBERT BRINBY

ATTORNEY AT LAW

Selgrade Building New York

THE SHADOW had never heard of Robert Brinby, which was not surprising, for many attorneys remain obscure in New York. The card, however, was a link to the girl that The Shadow had rescued. It happened that Robert Brinby was Barbara's father, as The Shadow was to learn, later. For the present, he was interested solely in disposing of the card, in order to protect Barbara.

The card had obviously dropped from Barbara's bag when she drew out her revolver. Since the girl was an innocent factor in all that had occurred, this evidence, if found by the police, would merely subject her to unnecessary annoyance.

That was why The Shadow reached one hand to pluck the calling card from the cab floor. Something else caused him to stop before his fingers found the object they wanted.

There was a creepy slosh in the darkness. It came from the rear of the cab, near the side where The Shadow had opened the door. Instantly, The Shadow's light went out. He let the card lie where it was, while he retired in the darkness.

The Shadow reached a spot almost beside the driver's door. Completely obscured, he waited there, to learn more of the soft-footed prowler who was moving so stealthily through the muck.

The sounds stopped completely. There was a slender chance that the approacher had caught the glimmer of The Shadow's light; another chance, less likely, that he had heard the cloaked investigator move away. Whatever the case, the fellow must have suspicioned something; for he remained motionless.

The Shadow weighed the possibilities. Either the man had stopped near the back of the cab and was waiting there, almost in reach; or he had managed to sneak from that position. The latter possibility was plausible; for it was only a chance slosh that had given The Shadow an inkling of the fellow's approach.

While The Shadow waited for some new token of a lurker, a betraying sound came. It was from the other side of the cab. Some one in the darkness was opening the far door. That supported The Shadow's theory that the fellow had shifted to a new position. Gradually, The Shadow eased toward the door on his own side.

He was there when a flashlight gleamed from the other side. It gave a view of the entire floor. A hissed intake of breath told that the man had spotted the card that bore the name of Robert Brinby. A moment later, a free hand crept into the light.

That hand was dark; but its color seemed blended deep into the skin. That, with the shape of the hand and its nails, gave The Shadow the news that the man was a Hindu.

THE hand picked up the card and started to withdraw from the light. Before the white pasteboard disappeared, The Shadow provided silent action.

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His left hand drove forward, its gloved fingers clamped the Hindu's right wrist. With a simultaneous twist, The Shadow bent the man's hand upward. The spreading glare of the light showed the Hindu's face. Its expression was one of ugly surprise.

Fingers still clutched the calling card; they started to release it, but became motionless. The Shadow's right hand was responsible for that. From his cloak, he had drawn an automatic, to thrust the muzzle into the light.

Amazed, the Hindu heard sinister whispered tones that voiced a language which he knew. For a moment, he looked less ugly; then suspicion tinged his jet-black eyes. White teeth gritted between his open lips. The Hindu did not intend to talk. His eyes were scornful as they glared into the looming gun.

The Shadow's left hand tightened. Its finger pressure brought a wince; even the stoical Hindu could not stand that expert taste of torture. He started to babble, breathlessly; but his teeth chattered, rendering his first words incoherent. He didn't get far enough with his talk to tell The Shadow anything.

The interruption came from behind The Shadow; it was supplied so stealthily that it almost caught the cloaked avenger unawares. The Shadow had missed a guess. There were two Hindus; not one.

The fellow that he gripped was not the prowler that he had first heard. The other had waited at the back of the car. Guessing that his teammate was in trouble, the reserve Hindu was on the job.

He had crept up in back of The Shadow. His eager fingers had moved for a knife; then he had changed his mind. He had seen the threat of The Shadow's gun; had known that a stab might not stop a spontaneous shot. The Hindu was grabbing for the automatic. That shift of tactics was all that saved The Shadow.

In coming inward, the Hindu jarred the open door. The Shadow gave an instant twist, just as hands grabbed to wrench his gun away.

The Hindus were treated to a double lesson in quick defense. Dropping his gun before the Hindu could get it, The Shadow shot his hand upward and backward, to clamp the neck above the gripping hands. At the same instant, he hauled the other Hindu in from the door. Flattening, The Shadow somersaulted one man forward while he pinned the other beneath him.

The cramped space of the cab favored the Hindus. In the open, The Shadow's method would have worked to full effect. Inside the cab, it succeeded with the man underneath; but not with the Hindu that The Shadow tried to fling.

The pitch ended abruptly. The tumbling Hindu spiraled on the backseat, twisting from The Shadow's hold.

This time, he yanked his knife. Before The Shadow could stop his thrust, the blade was on its way. The light from the floor gave the Hindu the visibility he needed; but it was gone before he could complete the stroke.

The Shadow simply twisted, releasing at the same time the cramped hand of the lower Hindu. The light flopped. In the sudden darkness, the man with the knife lost the opportunity to guide the finish of his thrust.

The blade sliced the folds of The Shadow's cloak; it struck the front wall of the cab and was sprung from the hand that drove it.

WEAPONLESS, The Shadow grappled with the unarmed Hindus. To put the struggle on an even basis, The Shadow lunged for an open door. He bowled one Hindu ahead of him; the other, clutching tightly, came along with them.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

A gun threat was the way to quell the Hindus. The Shadow had another automatic under his cloak; and he knew that the dark men would respect it if they saw it. That was why The Shadow broke away; took a long dive from the side of the road.

As he rolled down a slippery slope, he was reaching for his gun and his flashlight, intending to cover the Hindus and let them realize it.

By springing in The Shadow's direction, they would be coming into trouble; and The Shadow expected them to make that false move. All that deterred them was the distant wail of a police siren, coming up from a road below.

Instead of driving toward The Shadow's waiting gun muzzle, the Hindus bolted through the darkness. They were tearing along the road, away from the siren's sound. A bushy embankment took them from The Shadow's range. As he came to his feet, The Shadow heard the grind of an automobile starter. The Hindus had reached their car.

Springing to the cab, The Shadow looked for the calling card. It was gone; the Hindu must have managed to shove it in a pocket as he struggled. From the cab floor, The Shadow took the other Hindu's knife, and reclaimed his own automatic. Just as he started from the side of the cab, a patrol car hit the bend below.

Bright lights gave an evasive view of The Shadow as he headed for the darkness beside the road. There were shouts; guns began to talk. A siren shrieked from a lower road; flashlights glimmered from below, in response to those above. Cutting in another direction, The Shadow heard more shouts.

Police had arrived in plenty; they were already beating the ground, even before the patrol car had spotted the cab with Mallett's body beside it. The Shadow had been sighted, although unrecognized. Seeking a path that offered an outlet, The Shadow ran into an obstacle that would have permanently halted any other venturer.

A huge rock blocked his course; its surface was a sheer, rough wall, ten feet high. The Shadow could hear the calls of searchers on the other side. Behind him, he spied the flickering of lights, heading toward him through the trees.

Digging his fingers into the crevices, The Shadow gained a toe-hold with his soft-tipped shoes. He moved upward against the rock's surface with the skill of a beetle, using speed to offset the chances of a fall. His hands came over the top of the rock; he rolled flat upon its broad summit.

Lying there, The Shadow remained unsuspected when the police arrived. None of the officers supposed that a fugitive could have scaled that rock in the few seconds that had been available. The hunt continued on the ground below, while The Shadow waited. He was in no hurry to depart.

A trail would be waiting later. Barbara had told The Shadow that she had visited Bela Singh. The meeting with Hindu prowlers made it obvious who had sent them on the girl's trail.

Before this night ended, The Shadow would make a visit of his own, to the abode of Bela Singh.

CHAPTER IV. DIVIDED WEALTH.

THERE was a reason why that calling card had dropped from Barbara's hand bag. To-night, the girl had gone on business that concerned her father; she had carried the card in readiness, in case she chose to introduce herself. Barbara's present destination was one where her father awaited her.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

The attorney was an elderly man; stoop-shouldered. Seated at a table, his head was bowed from habit, so that viewers saw more of his baldish pate than his withery face. The room where Brinby sat seemed suited to him; for it was the living room of an old, almost-forgotten mansion that belonged to the years when Brinby had been in his prime.

The place, however, was not the lawyer's own home. It was the one-time residence of a deceased client, James Plaistead, who had been Brinby's closest friend.

Seated about the table were three men, who meant little to Brinby. They were the only living relatives of James Plaistead. They had come to claim their shares of the estate; and all three, in Brinby's estimation, were persons who deserved none of the wealth that would soon be theirs.

Eldest of the three was Lester Kurnz, a man in his middle forties. He was the only one for whom Brinby felt a slight liking. Lester had come into some money when young; and had always done well in business. He had remained a bachelor.

Lester Kurnz was successful, and knew it. His square-set face, with steady eyes and the straight nose between, was evidence of his determination. Lester was taciturn, and generally spoke very little. He was a hard man, though, to persuade through argument.

The second of the trio held Brinby's utmost contempt. He was Sidney Brelen, a man of thirty-five, who lived on an income that his father had left him. Sidney squandered money as fast as he received it, and he showed the results of dissipation.

Sidney's forehead sloped; his face was chinless. His lips had a habit of opening in fishlike fashion, to reveal teeth as yellowish as his jaundiced skin. His eyes were tiny, and they usually shifted. When they did center upon any one, they showed a scheming gleam that was almost malicious.

The last man was Rex Lancott. He wasn't more than twenty-five, but looked at least thirty. Brinby had seldom met Rex, because the young man had the wanderlust. He had just come back from South America and had landed almost broke. Rex wasn't the sort who liked to settle down. That was the chief thing that Brinby held against him.

Otherwise, Rex was satisfactory. His well-formed face was friendly and frank. His forehead was wide, which showed him to be a thinker, even though his ideas were those of adventure rather than commercial success.

Rex had a sense of humor; his bluish eyes told that with their twinkle. He was also unconventional; his clothes were not pressed and his hair was uncombed. Those points didn't help him with Brinby, for the lawyer had a mania for neatness.

WHILE Brinby dawdled over papers, peering occasionally above his gold-rimmed spectacles, the heirs began to show impatience in individual ways. It was Lester Kurnz who put the suggestion that they get to business.

"We are ready, Mr. Brinby," spoke Lester, in short-dipped tones. "You brought us here to tell us about the Plaistead estate, which, I understand, is to be divided equally among the three of us. Am I correct?"

Brinby nodded. It was Sidney Brelen who made the next remark. With a contemptuous grin, the sallow man looked about the room, eyeing antiques and curios that filled it.

"This stuff goes with it, I suppose," voiced Sidney. "How much do you figure all this junk is worth, Brinby?"

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

The lawyer consulted a list.

"Nine thousand seven hundred and thirty-three dollars," he declared. "Perhaps it will bring a round ten thousand."

Sidney's shrewd eyes showed surprise.

"Pretty good," he commented. "I guess some of those Persian rugs are more valuable than they look. The same with those Chinese vases. And that thing, over there--what do you call it?"

"A narghile," supplied Rex Lancott. "It's a water-pipe; the favorite tobacco-smoking device of the Orient. Tell me, Mr. Brinby, did Uncle Jim collect all of these?"

"He did," acknowledged Brinby, in a tired tone. "He was very proud of his collection. Every souvenir that he obtained was the gift of some important person. Princes, rajahs, colonial governors--all were friends of James Plaistead."

The news brought a look of appreciation from Rex Lancott. The reaction on Sidney Brellen was different; his toothy smile showed that he was thinking of the ten thousand dollars that the collection would bring.

Lester Kurnz was entirely indifferent. He felt that the matter of the curios had been settled. He wanted to know about the rest of the estate.

"How much is this house worth?" inquired Lester. "And what else is there? Let us have the total, Mr. Brinby."

"Curio collection, ten thousand," read Brinby. "House, thirty-five thousand. Stocks and other investments, fifteen thousand. Total, sixty thousand dollars."

"Which makes twenty thousand dollars for each of us," summed Lester, "on the basis of an equal division--"

"Not necessarily," put in Brinby. "We must wait until my daughter arrives."

"What does Barbara have to do with it?"

"She has the Crystal Buddha."

BEFORE Brinby could explain that cryptic remark, there was a ring of the doorbell. Sidney went to answer it, while Lester looked from the window. While he stared outside, he commented:

"Here is Barbara, now."

When Sidney returned, Barbara was with him. Brinby introduced his daughter to Rex, who was the only one of the three heirs that she had never met. Sidney, more polite than usual, looked concerned as he spoke to Barbara:

"What's happened to you, Babs? You're all muddied."

"Blame it on the stupid taxi driver," laughed Barbara. "He lost his way in Central Park and finally stopped on a bridle path or some such outlandish place. It was right near the edge of the park, so I walked out."

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

"And took another cab?"

"Of course! Nobody was riding on the bridle path, so I couldn't borrow a horse."

The quip annoyed Sidney; but it brought a smile from Rex. Lester appeared totally disinterested in Barbara's problems. He turned to Brinby, to question:

"Come, Mr. Brinby. What about the Crystal Buddha?"

"Here it is"—Barbara brought it from the hand bag and stood the Buddha on the table. "I've learned its positive value, dad. I guess I went to a lot of trouble, going to Chinatown and other places, because it's worth just what your own jeweler told you. One thousand dollars."

Brinby looked perplexed. He stroked his chin; then referred to the terms of the Plaistead will. At last, he, spoke, looking from one heir to another.

"If one of you should prefer the Crystal Buddha," said the lawyer, "he may have it instead of his share of the total estate."

The three showed the same perplexity as Brinby. The lawyer picked up the Buddha and held it in the light.

"Those are the terms," he declared. "If any heir takes the Buddha, he must forfeit all other claim. Unless the other heirs agree to let him have his normal share of the estate."

"What a ridiculous provision," asserted Lester Kurnz. "I suggest, Mr. Brinby, that you put the Buddha with the other curios and sell it with the lot."

Brinby nodded his agreement. Lester had made the practical suggestion. As a matter of form, Brinby turned to Sidney Brellen, with the question:

"Is that agreeable to you, Mr. Brellen?"

"Of course," returned Sidney. He took the Buddha as he spoke. "If this thing was made of bronze, I'd think our lamented uncle might have filled it with jewels, as reward for the person who was crazy enough to take it.

"But it's crystal. You can see through it, like a window. Even a diamond couldn't be hidden inside it. Since it's only worth a thousand bucks, whoever takes it loses nineteen thousand. Not me. I'm not crazy!"

Sidney thumped the Buddha on the table. Brinby turned to Rex Lancott and remarked, as a matter of course:

"I suppose that you, also, refuse the Buddha."

Rex's lips had opened; they closed with a sudden firmness. He reached to the table, picked up the Buddha and studied it. He did not express the thoughts that were in his mind; but his face showed changes of expression; that ended in a smile.

"You are wrong, Mr. Brinby," said Rex, coolly. "I think the offer is a good one. I'll take this Crystal Buddha."

ROBERT BRINBY gaped. Lester Kurnz showed a slight smile, as he thought of the ten thousand dollars that would be his added share. Sidney Brellen stared in his fishlike fashion; then gave a grin of his own. He, too, had realized that he would come in for half of Rex's share.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

"An unwise decision," began Brinby. "If you wish to change it, young man, I will—"

"He has made his decision," interposed Lester, crisply. "Let him keep the Buddha!"

"Sure thing," added Sidney. "Lester and I insist on it."

Brinby had an objection. Again, he rubbed his chin.

"The estate is not fully settled," reminded the lawyer. "I must arrange for the sale of this property, and the curios. There may be certain technicalities—"

"Not if I keep the Buddha," insisted Rex. "That cuts me out of it. Don't worry; I won't sell the Buddha. What's more, I'll be a sport about it." There was mild sarcasm in Rex's tone; it was most apparent when he added: "If either Lester or Sidney wants it to go into the estate again, I'll agree that it can go there."

Brinby took the statement solemnly; it helped him from his predicament. Both Lester and Sidney caught Rex's jest. Lester gave one of his noncommittal smiles, while Sidney indulged in a raucous laugh. Methodically, Brinby prepared a statement which he asked the heirs to sign. It was to the effect that the Buddha belonged to Rex but that Lester and Sidney could demand its return to the estate, prior to the final settlement.

The three heirs signed. Lester turned to Barbara.

"I brought your father here, in my car," he reminded. "I shall be glad to take you both to your home."

Barbara wasn't anxious to go with Lester; but her father promptly accepted the invitation, so she had no other choice. Meanwhile, Sidney was clapping Rex on the back.

"Thanks a lot," chatted Sidney. "I guess that goes for Lester, too. You've handed us both ten thousand bucks we didn't expect to get. I tell you what, Rex; since Lester's busy, I'll do the honors. I'll give you a swell dinner and show you all the night spots. Bring Kid Buddha with you"—Sidney tapped the statue that Rex held—"and we'll let him in on the good time!"

Though he disliked Sidney, Rex accepted the invitation. It was the first pleasing demonstration that either of his cousins had made. Rex wanted to see the night spots, and Sidney probably knew them. One thing Rex felt he could depend upon: Sidney would be in his best mood to-night.

They went to the hallway for their coats and hats. There, as Rex was pocketing the Crystal Buddha, he found himself faced by Barbara. The girl had come to the hall ahead of her father and Lester. She was serious as she questioned:

"Why did you take the Buddha?"

"Just for the fun of it, I guess," replied Rex. Then, meeting Barbara's eyes, he shook his head. "No, that wasn't it."

"It was on account of your uncle?"

Rex nodded. He was a bit amazed by Barbara's keen intuition. She had understood what none of the others had even begun to guess.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

"I like you for it," said Barbara, in a warm tone. "I hope we shall see each other again."

"I hope so, too."

As Barbara turned away, Rex realized his own past thoughts. He had only seen James Plaistead a few times, but he had liked his old uncle. The idea of selling off the old man's beloved possessions, to divide up paltry dollars, was something that had rubbed his grain. That was why he had claimed the Crystal Buddha; and he intended to keep it.

At least one of his Uncle Jim's possessions—the one the old man cherished most—would be kept by some one who appreciated it. Probably James Plaistead had hoped that some heir would remember him for more than his money. If so, his wish was realized.

Rex went out with Sidney. Eyes watched their departure, from the window. Those eyes were Barbara's; they were pleased, like the smile of her lips. Barbara felt herself lucky to have met so real a person as Rex Lancott. She intended definitely to meet him again.

Such speculations made her remember others whom she had met to-night. She recalled Bela Singh, that strange impassive Hindu. More vivid was her recollection of The Shadow, mysterious being of blackness. Oddly, she wondered what would happen if those two should meet.

Barbara's thought was tinged with prophecy, though she did not know it. Already such an encounter was in the making. There would be strange results when The Shadow met Bela Singh.

Those results, in turn, would have a definite bearing upon the Crystal Buddha and the future luck, good or ill, that would follow Rex Lancott, its present owner.

CHAPTER V. ROOM OF FANTASY.

ALL was silent at Bela Singh's, when The Shadow reached there. Moreover, the shop was entirely dark, indicating that its proprietor had retired for the night. A metal gate was closed in front of the street door; a logical protection in this rather disreputable neighborhood.

Viewing the house front from the drizzly darkness, The Shadow was not convinced that this surface appearance represented the actual situation at Bela Singh's. The two Hindus had certainly returned here to report; and Bela Singh was smart enough to know that they might have provided a trail.

Hindus were scarce in New York; there were only a few districts that they inhabited. This neighborhood was one.

Moreover, Bela Singh was the only Hindu of importance in the restricted quarter. He was the first man who would be approached by any investigator; for inquiry, if nothing more.

Chances were that Bela Singh was on watch, ready in case of intruders. To stage a surprise visit was a problem for The Shadow; but it was the sort of task at which he was long experienced.

Instead of attempting entry by the front gate, The Shadow rounded the block and took a look at the rear of the building. He found the passage that the Hindus had taken when they followed Barbara. Moving through the passage, The Shadow reached the wall. Edging along the side of the house, he came to an extension that joined it with the building next door.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

That blocking wall went to the top of the first story. It was the simplest place to scale, particularly at the corner where it connected with the house wall. The bricks were slippery but The Shadow made the ascent, thanks to the patches where crumbled mortar allowed finger grips and toe-holds.

The top of the wall marked the beginning of a roof that ran through to the front street. As The Shadow moved forward, he came upon a promising discovery. His flashlight showed two gratings, one for each house. They topped air shafts that ran down into the basements.

Closer inspection offset The Shadow's find.

The house next to Bela Singh's had a normal air shaft, that The Shadow estimated to be sixteen feet in depth. Bela Singh's had only half that drop. It was blocked on the first-floor level, obviously to prevent the very thing The Shadow wanted: direct entry to Bela Singh's basement headquarters.

The grating above the air shaft was loose; but that indicated that the barrier at the first-floor level was solid. Instead of wasting time by a descent, The Shadow made a rapid entry through a second-floor window; progressed to the ground floor.

A rapid search showed no stairway leading down into the basement. Apparently, such stairs had been solidly walled; for The Shadow found no hollow spots when he tapped the likely spots.

During that inspection, however, he became more convinced that there must be some weakness to Bela Singh's lair.

MOVING through cobwebbed rooms and hallways, The Shadow studied the floor. He came to one place where the boards were newer. There, he began a series of probing taps.

He was rewarded with a hollowish echo to one thump. Cautious though The Shadow's test was, a sound seemed to answer from below.

His ear close to the flooring, The Shadow heard more sounds beneath. The noises were scraping; men were moving boxes in the basement. They hadn't heard the soft raps from the first floor. As The Shadow listened, the sounds moved away.

Immediately, The Shadow began to jimmy the floor boards at the weak spot. A chunk of wood gave with a muffled snap. Dim light glowed through from below.

The Shadow had uncovered a square opening which had once held a hot-air register, above a furnace pipe. The furnace had been removed to make more space for Bela Singh's storerooms. The floor had been boarded well enough to conceal the opening; but it did not have the double thickness that existed elsewhere. It was the weak spot that The Shadow had sought.

Scrapes from the basement were more distant. The Shadow was free to operate. In half a dozen minutes, he had enough floor boards ripped away. Dropping through, he landed lightly upon the basement floor.

There was wooden flooring all over the stone basement; for Bela Singh had spent money preparing his curio shop. The place, however, was quite different from a few hours ago; in fact, Barbara Brinby would not have recognized it had she been here to view it.

Bela Singh's curio rooms were totally devoid of their Oriental merchandise. Big boxes and packing cases stood all about, nailed shut for shipment.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Bela Singh was leaving, taking his goods with him. From somewhere at the rear of the floor, The Shadow could hear the thuds of muffled hammers, as the Hindu's workers closed another batch of crates.

Moving to the rear of the central room, The Shadow saw the two Hindus who had battled him in the park. Bela Singh was not with them. Sliding away unnoticed, The Shadow saw a heavy, metal-sheathed door that stood at the far side of the basement. That could be the room where Bela Singh kept his most valuable goods; it might be the place where the curio dealer was, at present.

Approaching the metal door, The Shadow drew an automatic. He tried the barrier with his free hand; it slid open, smoothly, almost at his touch.

INSTANTLY, The Shadow was across the threshold. On the far side of the small, square-walled room he saw Bela Singh, seated at a low, carved table.

The Hindu looked up when The Shadow entered. There was a narrowing of Bela Singh's eyes when he saw the door sliding shut again. The Shadow intended to talk with Bela Singh without interference of the Hindu's servants.

With sweeping glance, The Shadow took in the entire setting, along with Bela Singh.

This room was the heart of the curio shop. As The Shadow supposed, it housed Bela Singh's best treasures. The walls were painted a silvery gray; once they had been fronted with Oriental screens, but those were folded and stacked for packing. There were tables at the sides of the room; one held a cluster of vases, the other had a flat floor plaque that supported a mass of metal cobras.

Like the plaque, the snakes were made of silver. They were life-size, and their realistic appearance undoubtedly added to the value of the ornament. That did not interest The Shadow, for the present. He was noting other features of the room.

The floor had a solid carpet, a rich maroon in hue. Near the center was a rectangular rug, laid diagonally over the carpet. Beyond that was Bela Singh's own table, where an incense burner sent up slow coils of purplish smoke, to give the atmosphere a heavy, musklike odor.

There were curtains directly behind Bela Singh's chair, their color the same deep hue as the carpet. The Shadow held that spot covered, along with Bela Singh. Any stir of the drapes would warn him if a hidden person tried to move into the room.

Bela Singh was placing finger rings in a jewel box, when he saw The Shadow. The Hindu stopped his task abruptly; but his dark eyes showed no fear. Instead, Bela Singh allowed the flicker of a smile upon his solemn lips.

"I have been expecting you," spoke Bela Singh. He arose, to deliver a profound bow. "You have come concerning the young lady who visited here to-night."

Artfully, Bela Singh made no mention of the Crystal Buddha. His sharp eyes watched to see the effect that his words had upon The Shadow. Bela Singh learned nothing from The Shadow's gaze. Burning eyes beneath the slouch hat were more penetrating than Bela Singh's.

"She brought the Crystal Buddha."

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Bela Singh spoke again, with a shrug that indicated resignation. "That is all that I can tell you. Why the Buddha should interest me is another matter." Solemnly, Bela Singh shook his head. "One that no threat will force me to explain."

THE SHADOW was moving closer. Bela Singh's voice was unperturbed; but his manner was mildly restless. He moved his hand to the table, to shut the open jewel case.

The move was subtle; but not quite clever enough. The Shadow saw a slight motion of Bela Singh's thumb, that the Hindu tried to perform under cover of his fingers.

The sharp click of the jewel box was answered by a muffled snap, somewhere near the table. The sound was scarcely audible; nevertheless, The Shadow suspected a trap. He issued a whispered laugh as he stopped short of the oblong rug that marked the center of the carpeted room.

Such a rug, laid squarely on a bare floor, would have had all the earmarks of a trapdoor waiting to precipitate The Shadow to some sub-cellar, should he step on it. This rug seemed placed at a chance angle; it had a carpet beneath it.

Those features did not deceive The Shadow. He could picture a trap set at the diagonal; a cut in the carpet to match a break in the rug.

Bela Singh showed a flicker of disappointment when The Shadow halted. He noticed a tightening of The Shadow's gun hand. With a look of resignation, the Hindu raised his arms; he came from behind his table. Facing The Shadow across the angled rug, Bela Singh spoke the biting reminder:

"You have come here without invitation. You entered here by force!"

"To seek those who used force against me," interposed The Shadow, his words a strange monotone. "Since they are in your service, it is you who must answer for their actions."

"Yet you threaten me with death—"

Bela Singh was looking toward The Shadow's gun. The cloaked invader gestured the weapon toward the rug. The Shadow's words carried mockery:

"You also have a death threat, Bela Singh."

The Hindu smiled.

"You suspect a trap?" he purred. "You are mistaken. The floor is quite solid. Yet if it held a trap, it would exist simply for my own protection."

While Bela Singh was speaking, The Shadow put away his automatic; folded his arms. With a bow, the Hindu folded his own arms. Although they appeared on equal basis, the Hindu knew that The Shadow could reproduce that gun at split-second notice.

That was why Bela Singh parried.

"You wish to learn about the Crystal Buddha"—again, Bela Singh was mistakenly believing that The Shadow had seen the actual object—"but I repeat: I can tell you nothing."

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Watching the Hindu's fixed eyes, The Shadow felt a slight unsteadiness. His own burning gaze seemed outmatched by Bela Singh's. The Shadow's lips gave a whispered laugh. If Bela Singh thought that he could gain hypnotic control over The Shadow, he had made a wrong guess.

The flash of The Shadow's eyes must have told as much as the laugh, for Bela Singh turned his gaze away.

Yet The Shadow still felt the wavering sensation; Bela Singh noted it, by a sidelong glance. The Hindu took a step forward. He observed The Shadow's hand tighten on its cloaked gun. Bela Singh spread his own arms. The Shadow's hand relaxed.

"I am beaten," acknowledged Bela Singh. "I shall tell you all. But first, I wish to assure you that this room holds no pitfall. The floor beneath this rug"—the Hindu gestured downward; took a short step forward—"is solid, as I shall prove."

BELA SINGH sped an upward glance. The Shadow's hand gripped its gun. At the same instant, Bela Singh's forward step finished on the rug. The Hindu's weight produced a rapid result that The Shadow was unable to forestall. Bela Singh's denial of a trap was false. There was one, and it worked like a flash.

Before The Shadow's eyes, the rug split downward. Bela Singh dropped with it, plunging from a spot where he was actually within The Shadow's reach. A metal chute received the falling Hindu; the split trap sprang up in place before The Shadow could whip forth his gun, or make a grab for the man who had so suddenly tricked him.

Unable to lure The Shadow into that pitfall, Bela Singh had reversed the game. Using the floor trap for his own exit, the cunning Hindu was gone.

The Shadow stood alone in a room where fantasy was soon to reign.

CHAPTER VI. THE THAKUR SPEAR.

THE SHADOW stood nonplused, as near bewilderment as he had ever been. He found himself half crouched above the closed rug, gripping a .45 that he had produced as a useless threat. Why The Shadow had pulled the gun, he didn't know. He had no desire to shoot Bela Singh, unless the fellow had made an unexpected attack.

To The Shadow came the sudden thought that his course was to follow Bela Singh. The Shadow sprang upon the rug. The trap refused to budge. It had locked automatically when it came up in place.

Turning about, The Shadow started for the door. He stumbled; caught himself in a fashion that seemed lazy. The wavery sensation that he had previously felt was stronger; it made his actions seem slow. That accounted for Bela Singh's escape. Normally, the Hindu could not have made the plunge before The Shadow caught him.

Bela Singh had expected to see The Shadow waver. He had timed his flight until he spied the first signs of the coming effect.

There was a slight outside sound as The Shadow reached the door. The barrier refused to slide under his pressure. From somewhere below, Bela Singh had pressed a switch, to cut off that last outlet. The Shadow's chance to overtake Bela Singh was ended.

The Hindu's craft had worked.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Whatever the method by which he had restricted The Shadow's efficiency, Bela Singh had known that the effect would come on slowly. The Shadow had begun to realize it; had Bela Singh remained, The Shadow could easily have taken him into camp, forcing him to march from this room where some horror was gaining grip.

Bela Singh had not waited long enough for that to happen. In devising this snare, he had foreseen all possibilities. Somewhere below, he was gloating over the predicament in which he had left The Shadow. Events were proving that Bela Singh had reason to feel pleased.

When The Shadow turned from the sealed door, he staggered. The full effect of the terror chamber was upon him.

Skidding sideways, The Shadow steadied when he reached the table on the left. Looking downward, he saw a horrendous sight. The silver cobras were rising from their metal plaque; raising their shining hoods to strike. To The Shadow's ears came the fantastic illusion of hissing serpents.

Instinctively, The Shadow whipped away, aiming his automatic toward the menacing snakes. While they weaved and raised, they did not leave their pedestal; hence The Shadow did not fire. He could hardly have pulled the trigger, had he needed it; for his lurch was carrying him farther from the serpents than he expected.

Off balance, The Shadow crashed against the table on the other side of the room.

Metal vases bounced to wall and floor, striking with a clangor that was magnified in The Shadow's ears. The whole room reverberated with that clatter; every wave of echoes was prolonged. It seemed minutes while the din persisted; and, all the while, The Shadow was slowly falling to his hands and knees.

WHEN he recovered, The Shadow was facing the curtains beyond the table where he had first seen Bela Singh. The Shadow gave a blink that seemed like a painfully slow closing of his eyelids. He sensed motion beyond the table, and he kept watching it.

Perhaps it was the coiling smoke of the incense burner that produced the wavery effect. That thought struck The Shadow's numbing brain; then slowly left it. He was concentrated on the curtains, watching every inch of them. The drapes had a stir of their own.

Who was behind them? Bela Singh?

With a wrenching effort, The Shadow began a forward creep, intending to reach those curtains and surprise the person behind them. Laboriously, he passed Bela Singh's table and grasped the drapes.

Like a figure in a slow-motion picture, The Shadow raised himself to his feet. With his free hand, he yanked the curtains, in an effort that seemed oddly hesitant. When he finally completed the pull, The Shadow met with the result that had occurred at the cobra table. He lost his balance; went staggering backward.

All that stopped his fall was Bela Singh's table. It was heavy enough to steady The Shadow's weight. Staring at the opened curtains, The Shadow saw a squarish niche in the wall. Occupying that space was a bizarre figure that offered immediate challenge.

The threatening foe was a Hindu rajput—a knight clad in armor. The warrior's brownish face was leering beneath the raised visor of his helmet. His sword was sheathed, hanging at his side; but in his right hand the rajput held a long Thakur spear, that pointed to the very top of the niche.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

The spearhead was large; a full six inches in length. It was thin, and shaped like an inverted letter V. As a writhe came to the lips of the rajput, the warrior's bronze-gloved hand began to rattle the big spear. To The Shadow's fanciful gaze, that meant that the rajput intended to begin a thrust.

The Shadow's forefinger found the automatic's trigger. His first shot was low; it struck the Hindu armor. The next bullet was higher, aimed for the vicious face. As the slug clanged, the helmet visor dropped down over the warrior's face. The Shadow supplied another bullet. It dented the bronze visor.

The rajput did not budge, except to make a motion of his arms. Again, the spear was looming; but, this time, The Shadow did not have the ability to watch it. He was doing a slow, backward dive over Bela Singh's table. The recoil of his automatic was responsible. It had thrown The Shadow off balance, over the low support.

TABLE and all rolled with The Shadow. As he sprawled lazily, he saw Bela Singh's jewel box drop lightly beside him. The incense burner fell without a jar; its cover tilted; black, burning powder flaked the maroon carpet.

Rolling sideways, The Shadow came into the weave of spreading smoke. For the first time, he was close enough to scent a peculiar odor that had been muffled by other perfumes.

The smell resembled burning hashish. That drug was responsible for The Shadow's fantasy. Hashish, with its power to slow the functions of the mind; to give grotesque motion and realism to objects that had no life!

Like the silver cobras, the armored rajput was a piece of statuary. Small wonder that The Shadow's bullet had glanced from the brownish face. Those features, like the helmet, armor and spear, were all of solid bronze!

Bela Singh's immunity to the drugged incense was no mystery. The Hindu had probably used hashish to the point where only a large quantity of the drug could overpower him. Bela Singh, accustomed to the soporific atmosphere of this room, had remained entirely capable of action, while The Shadow's faculties had dwindled. Eventually, The Shadow would go under.

That thought drilled through The Shadow's brain. He felt a rallying of strength; but recognized it could not last long. At present, he had an objective; one that came to him with a recollection of the past.

The Shadow had recognized the niche where the rajput statue stood. It was the bottom of the air shaft that led up to the second floor. The ceiling of the niche was the horizontal barrier that The Shadow had seen from the top of the air shaft.

Mechanically, The Shadow arose and approached the rajput statue. With all his summoned strength, he gripped the figure's shoulders, drew himself up to the ceiling just above the figure's big-headed spear.

There, in the painted molding, The Shadow saw heavy bolts. The barrier had been bolted, not nailed, in order that Bela Singh could remove it when he vacated these premises.

The Shadow's fingers faltered when he tried to tug the bolts. He pressed the muzzle of his automatic against the molding and blasted one shot; then another. The ceiling loosened; the whole affair crackled loose, to clatter upon the head of the statue.

THE whiff of moist air that came down the air shaft spelled salvation to The Shadow; but he did not breathe it long. He lost his grip upon the metal rajput; as he slipped, his cloak caught on the big spear. The Shadow tumbled downward, his cloak ripping away as he went.

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Ignoring the cloak that now shrouded the statue, The Shadow managed another climb. Cloakless, he flung his hands inside the air shaft; raised himself upon the statue's shoulders. The inner walls of the shaft were smooth; The Shadow couldn't get the grip he needed.

Clear air was giving him an odd reaction, bringing a dizziness as an after-effect of the drug. Safety, full escape, lay eight feet above his head; but he needed a way to reach it.

One hand slipped. Steadying with the other, The Shadow felt his loosened hand strike the Thakur spear. He grabbed that weapon, gave an upward tug. The spear was loose; passing through the warrior's fist, it rested in a socket of the pedestal, beside the rajput's foot.

The spear came upward as The Shadow tugged. Thrusting it up the air shaft, he rallied for an important task.

Pushed high, the bronze spear wobbled from side to side until its huge head touched the grating. The Shadow gave twisting thrusts; the spearhead went through. Another twist; the broad head was turned sideways.

It harpooned the grating and hung there.

Gripping the spear, The Shadow pulled himself up hand over hand. He needed a final impetus. He pushed upward with his feet.

The rajput statue swayed. As The Shadow left it, the life-size figure went plunging forward from its niche, to land on the floor of Bela Singh's den.

The spear was twisting when The Shadow reached the top. He dug his fingers into a crumbled space among the bricks at one side of the grating. Swinging bricks at one side of the grating Swinging his feet across, he wedged himself diagonally in the narrow air shaft. His other hand joined the first. His shoulders jogged the Thakur spear; it went clattering down to join the rajput statue.

The spear was no longer needed. Braced, The Shadow buckled the grating upward with his shoulders. The loose grille yielded. Thrusting an arm through, The Shadow found an outside hold. He let his feet dangle; with a last effort, he hauled himself through to the roof.

Resting, The Shadow tightened his grip and produced the final pull. As he rolled flat on the roof the grating slammed into place.

The countereffect of the drizzly air left The Shadow groggy. His strength was gone with his self-rescue. He lay beneath the pattering rain, dimly conscious of time's passing. Unless emergency forced it, The Shadow intended no move until his drugged condition was gone.

DURING those passing minutes, the door of Bela Singh's den slid open. Bela Singh himself gazed from the threshold; he saw a prone, cloaked figure on the floor beside his table.

Beckoning to his two servitors, Bela Singh entered. He whipped away the cloak that covered the flattened form. His eyes changed when he saw the bronze shape beneath.

Instead of The Shadow, Bela Singh had uncovered his metal rajput. Stepping to the niche, he found the square boarding that had once been the ceiling. Bela Singh looked up the air shaft, saw, dimly, the closed grating.

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Instantly, the usually cool Hindu showed excitement. Bela Singh pictured The Shadow at large, planning some counterthrust. His eyes narrowed cunningly, when he remembered that the hashish would produce a later dizziness. His hope was that The Shadow, once free, had been forced to take shelter while he recovered.

In babbled Hindustani, Bela Singh ordered his followers to clear this last room of its curios.

They lugged out the statue, The Shadow's cloak with it. They took along the Thakur spear, the cobra plaque and the tables. Bela Singh gathered up the vases and the jewel case. Then came the screens; with them, the carpet and the rug. The whole room was emptied, its goods shoved in waiting crates, all in a dozen minutes.

A truck had arrived on the rear street. Bela Singh supervised while husky truckmen helped his Hindus load the stuff aboard. The truck pulled away, the Hindus with it. Only Bela Singh remained on the rear street—watchful, listening for any approaching sounds. At last, he hurried away to a parking lot where the two Hindus had left their coupe.

From the roof, The Shadow heard the truck's departure; it came as a muffled throbbing sound amid a slow-waking dream. Disjointed minutes followed; thirty of them had passed before The Shadow found himself rousing, less dizzy than before.

Slowly, carefully, The Shadow reentered the old house and descended to the basement, using the hole that he had broken in the ground floor. All lights were out; his flashlight blazed the path by which he inspected the deserted place. The horror room was empty; all crates and boxes were gone.

The Shadow's laugh brought hollow echoes from the walls of that abandoned abode. Though Bela Singh had vanished, there would be ways to find the Hindu's trail. The Shadow had agents who could produce a sustained, effective search through all Manhattan.

Meanwhile, The Shadow would concern himself with a quest upon which Bela Singh had unwittingly started him.

The Shadow intended to ferret out all facts regarding the Crystal Buddha.

CHAPTER VII. BARBARA HEEDS ADVICE.

BARBARA BRINBY received a reminder of her evening's adventure when she read the newspapers, the next day. The police were investigating the Central Park gunfray; they already had theories regarding it.

Malkett, the dead taxi driver, had a prison record. It was learned that he had been lately seen in the company of small-time crooks. The police decided that Malkett had double-crossed some pals; that hoodlums had trailed him to get even. Presumably, the taxi driver had tried to escape when he saw his cab followed. The killers had caught him on the lonely road; and put him on the spot.

As a result, the police were looking for the crew that had been in the touring car.

More than ever, Barbara saw the need for silence regarding her experience.

The Shadow had kept her clear from notoriety; she felt that she was returning the service that her rescuer had given.

Barbara had very little time to speculate on matters of the past. She was busy at her father's law office during

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the day. It was Barbara's plan to take up law as her profession. She had completed four years of college and intended to begin her law course in the Fall.

Meanwhile, she was gaining experience and proving useful in the office; for her father's health had been poor, and he needed the assistance of some one dependable.

In fact, it was Barbara's capability in confidential matters that had caused Robert Brinby to entrust her with the task of determining the value of the Crystal Buddha.

There were various callers at the office, to-day; among them some strangers. A few seemed rather hazy about what they wanted, but Barbara did not particularly notice it. Her father's secretary attended to visitors.

None of the Plaistead heirs appeared during the day; but, late in the afternoon, Robert Brinby received a call that he regarded as important. He summoned Barbara to tell her about it.

"I have heard from a man named Kent Allard," he stated. "You have probably heard of him, Barbara."

"The famous aviator, who spent so many years in Guatemala?"

"That is the man. He did not state his business; but I fancy that it is something important."

A telephone call interrupted the lawyer. After he had spoken over the wire, Brinby became troubled.

"A directors meeting," he declared. "At five-thirty--the very time I promised to meet Allard."

"You will have to notify him, father. You can't miss the meeting."

"Of course not. But I do not know where to reach Allard. I have the answer, Barbara. You must meet him instead."

The thought thrilled Barbara. She agreed; her father told her that Kent Allard would be at the Hotel Metrolite at half past five. Brinby was to inquire for him in the lounge. Barbara could do the same.

PROMPTLY at five-thirty, Barbara reached the Metrolite. She was conducted to a table in the lounge, where a tall man arose to meet her. Barbara introduced herself to Kent Allard; she found herself shaking hands with a person of remarkable personality.

There was a hawklike appearance in Allard's long, thin features. His lips were thin, and formed a straightened line. His eyes had a steadiness that seemed to grip Barbara's gaze and hold it. Intuitively, she fancied that she had met Allard somewhere before.

Her thoughts flashing back to last night, Barbara remembered Bela Singh and The Shadow. She felt that Allard should be classed with them; although she saw no connection. It never occurred to her, however, that Allard was actually one of those two that she had met.

If she had been told that Allard was Bela Singh, she would regard it as fantastic. Had she been told that he was The Shadow, she would have considered it almost as unlikely. Yet Barbara was actually facing The Shadow for the second time.

On this occasion, The Shadow was appearing in his real personality--one that no one had ever identified. For years, Allard had maintained the pretense that he was in Guatemala, stranded with a tribe of Xinca Indians.

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He had done that so that dwellers in the underworld would never gain an inkling to his actual identity.

All the years that Allard had been absent, The Shadow had warred incessantly against crime. When the time arrived when it was safe for him to resume his own personality, Allard had openly returned to New York, to be greeted by great fanfare. Since then, he had kept his guise as secure as ever before.

To-day, The Shadow had arranged this meeting with Barbara. Agents had visited Brinby's office; had learned that Barbara handled many of her father's affairs. After telephoning as Allard, The Shadow had arranged the directors meeting that had taken Brinby elsewhere.

In a quiet, steady tone, Allard introduced the subject of the meeting. With his first words, Barbara was electrified.

"Last night," he stated, "I called on a curio dealer named Bela Singh. He mentioned your father, and suggested that I communicate with him."

"But—but what about?" stammered Barbara, her own calmness gone. "How could Bela Singh—how could he have known my father?"

"I do not know. Bela Singh merely had a card that bore your father's name and address."

Allard's eyes were steady. They read Barbara's thoughts. The girl remembered the card that she had carried in her hand bag. She supposed that she had dropped it when she brought out the Buddha, to show to Bela Singh.

Barbara's lips smiled relief. She felt glad that she had lost the card at Bela Singh's; not in the taxicab. The actual occurrence did not strike her.

"Bela Singh spoke of a Crystal Buddha," came Allard's next statement. "He dropped the subject later, acting as though he had made a mistake in discussing it. I might have thought no more of it, but for something that I learned to-day."

"Something you learned to-day?" Barbara was breathless, fearful that it concerned her adventure in the taxi. Then, with a remarkable display of self-control, she smiled the inquiry: "What did you learn to-day, Mr. Allard?"

"That Bela Singh has vanished. He—his servants—his shop full of curios—Allard snapped his fingers—"gone, like that!"

BARBARA was glad that the talk had shifted definitely to Bela Singh. Since the Hindu was involved, she decided that she could seek the connection with the Crystal Buddha. She asked Allard what explanation he could give. He replied, smilingly, that he would have to know more about the Buddha.

That was safe ground. Barbara told the facts concerning the Buddha. She named Bela Singh's estimate as to its value; then described the scene at the old Plaistead mansion. Allard's eyes showed a glow, when he heard how Rex Lancott had accepted the Buddha instead of twenty thousand dollars.

"Perhaps," remarked Allard, easily, "the Buddha may have some special value that Bela Singh did not mention. He is anxious to learn more regarding it."

"But why?" queried Barbara. "He did not question me."

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"Only because you admitted that you did not own it."

Barbara had mentioned that to Allard. It struck her that he had raised a vital point.

"Moreover"—Allard's tone was steady—"you were followed here this afternoon."

Barbara's eyes showed interest, rather than alarm. She saw Allard's gaze shift toward the door; she looked in that direction. A man edged from view. He was an American, not a Hindu; but Barbara recognized that he could be some one who had contact with Bela Singh.

"We must bring back Bela Singh," advised Allard. "To do so, it is necessary to let him learn who owns the Buddha. He probably supposes that you mistrust him; that is why he has made no direct inquiry."

Barbara nodded as she heard Allard's logic.

"Rex is coming out to the house this evening," declared the girl. "We live on Long Island, father and I—"

"Where is Rex, at present?"

"Living at the Hotel Wesley. He will come direct from there."

That satisfied Allard. He remarked that he would have a friend contact Rex; that he would call Barbara later and let her know how matters went. That pleased Barbara; she knew that Allard was a man who loved adventure. His interest in the case would be to Rex's welfare.

"It does not matter if any one follows you," concluded Allard, as he arose. "Provided you make no mention of Rex. When you see Rex, say nothing unless he speaks of the Buddha."

"That's just as well," agreed Barbara. "Particularly as I have to meet the other heirs occasionally. Would it be all right"—she smiled at her own trust of Allard—"if I called Sidney Brelen from here?"

"Quite all right! Sidney does not own the Buddha."

"You see," explained Barbara, "Sidney expects me to have dinner with him. But I already promised to dine with Lester Kurnz. So I must call Sidney; but that is all that I shall tell him."

They walked to the lobby. There, Barbara went to the telephone booths, to consult a Manhattan directory. Allard strolled calmly to the street. Once past the revolving doors, he turned about. Sheltering darkness obscured him from view within. His eyes showed the burn of The Shadow's.

BARBARA had entered a phone booth. The Shadow saw a man sidle over and enter the one next to it. The fellow was Bela Singh's spy; of that, The Shadow was sure. It did not matter; Barbara was safe.

There would be no use to trail the spy. The Shadow had found a surer way to bring Bela Singh from seclusion. When the Hindu contacted Rex Lancott, owner of the Buddha, The Shadow intended to be there.

Straight lips whispered an almost inaudible laugh, as The Shadow stepped aboard a cab. In Barbara, The Shadow had found a capable and willing ally; Rex would prove the same, from Barbara's description of him. Soon, it seemed, The Shadow would be solving the mystery of the Crystal Buddha, in spite of Bela Singh.

That, unfortunately, was not to be. Already, a chance turn of circumstances were twisting The Shadow's plan into a futile move!

CHAPTER VIII. BELA SINGH'S RETURN.

THERE was no answer to Barbara's telephone call. When she came from the booth, she checked Sidney's number in the telephone book, which lay open at the proper page.

Those actions aided the spy who was watching her. He had peered into her booth when she dialed; after she left the lobby, he pounced upon the telephone book.

Checking numbers, he noted Sidney's name; also the address, that of an apartment in Greenwich Village. Sliding into a telephone booth, the spy relayed a call to Bela Singh.

While Barbara was looking for a taxi, a sporty roadster drove up in front of the hotel. Sidney was driving the car; he honked the horn and beckoned for Barbara to join him.

Once in the car, Barbara told Sidney that she had a date with Lester. Sidney, in turn, explained that he had called Barbara's office, to learn that she was at the Metrolite.

"You won't have to meet Lester for an hour," said Sidney. "How about driving around a while?"

Barbara agreed. As they headed southward, Sidney laughed.

"I had a good time with Rex, last night," he said. "He's a great guy! Thinks I'm a great guy, too! He ought to; I'm saving him a lot of rent money."

"Rent money?"

"Sure! You know that swell apartment I wanted? The one on Fifty-fifth Street? I've rented it, all furnished, like my old place in the Village; I moved most of my personal stuff, today."

"Rex is moving in with you?"

"No. I'm letting him have the old place. We're driving there, right now, to pick up some packages that I left."

Barbara happened to know that Sidney's old lease had only a few months to run. The rent wasn't high; for Sidney's income had been somewhat depleted during the past year, because of debts he owed.

With the prospect of thirty thousand dollars in the near future, he had decided to spread himself in a new apartment. All that Rex had acquired was a place that Sidney would have left anyway.

Dusk was thick when they reached the Village. Sidney had driven slowly, hoping to delay Barbara's meeting with Lester. He had to turn on the headlights to guide the car through the maze that represented the Greenwich Village section of New York; for there were curved streets where houses completely blocked off the fading daylight.

When the roadster stopped in front of Sidney's place, Barbara was impressed by a sense of isolation. It seemed as though this block was an area in itself, entirely away from Manhattan.

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The houses, mostly four and five-story structures, looked grimy in the dusk. Street lights were feeble; and some of the passers-by looked shambly and suspicious. Others, more presentable in appearance, walked swiftly, as though anxious to get away from the oppressive seclusion.

Sidney gave a short laugh when he saw a girl scurry into the entrance of a squatty apartment house across the street from his own.

"Lots of them get the jitters around here," he told Barbara, "but it's all imagination. Nothing ever happens. You'll be safe in the car. It's better than a trip upstairs in that crazy automatic elevator."

From the sidewalk, he added an amendment to his statement:

"There's just a chance somebody might bother you. If they do, buzz for my apartment. You won't have to worry, though. I'll only be a few minutes."

SIDNEY's apartment was on the third floor, at the back. While he was unlocking the door, a tenant came from another apartment and went downstairs in the tiny automatic elevator.

Inside, Sidney turned on the lights of his small living room. He started for a closet where he had stowed the bundles that he wanted.

Sidney halted at the end of three steps. On the mantel was an object that attracted attention by its glitter. Sidney blinked at sight of Rex's prize possession, the Crystal Buddha.

A BIT puzzled, he went over and took the little idol from the mantel. As he weighed it in his hand, he happened to see a suitcase shoved beneath a couch; he also saw some new magazines lying on a table. They explained why the Buddha was here.

Rex had visited the apartment, to leave one of his bags. Probably, the janitor had admitted him.

The fact that Rex had put the Buddha on the mantel brought a grin to Sidney's lips. An odd chap, Rex, letting himself out of twenty thousand dollars, then putting the cause of it on open view. Sidney figured that the Buddha ought to be a headache to Rex; not something to give him pride.

With that thought, Sidney turned to replace the crystal idol.

Soft footsteps from the bedroom brought Sidney full about. The grin froze when he faced an intruder who stood watching him with folded arms. The stranger was a Hindu, of a remarkably placid countenance. He was attired in ordinary street clothes; but on his head, he wore a small, jewel-bedecked turban.

As Sidney stared at the man's darkish face, he was impressed by the strange steadiness of the Hindu's eyes.

If Sidney had heard of Bela Singh, his wits would have left him. His ignorance of the Hindu's identity produced a different result. Sidney recalled some odd pranks that his Village friends had played. Bringing in a Hindu to bid him farewell was the sort of stunt that they would choose.

Shaking away from Bela Singh's stare, Sidney increased his grin, satisfied that the visitor was staging a masquerade.

It was Bela Singh's voice that riveted him again. In musical tone, the Hindu inquired:

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"You are Sidney Brellen?"

Sidney met the dark eyes. He hesitated; then gulped an admission of his identity. He saw Bela Singh's eyes steady on the crystal image. The next question came:

"The Buddha is your property?"

By the time the words were uttered, Sidney recognized that they lacked malice. Whatever the Hindu intended, it might prove profitable. Sidney had thought of the Buddha in terms of one thousand dollars, ever since last night. He suddenly suspected that it might be worth more than that amount.

Even with thirty thousand dollars due him, Sidney was not averse to making a few hundred. It struck him that Bela Singh wanted to buy the Buddha. If he could get a higher offer than a thousand dollars, Sidney might make it profitable.

Sooner or later, Rex might be forced to sell it. When that time came. Sidney saw himself as the prompt purchaser; if he knew where it would bring a greater sum.

"SURE, it's mine!" voiced Sidney. "It means a lot to me, this Buddha. That's why I'm keeping it."

He shifted his eyes to the Buddha as he spoke. Bela Singh missed the shrewdness that showed in Sidney's gaze. The Hindu had already checked on Sidney's name by the card in the apartment lobby. He had seen the Buddha here before Sidney arrived.

"If I were sure," purred Bela Singh, "that you are actually Sidney Brellen, I would—"

Bela Singh paused as Sidney chuckled. The sallow man put the Buddha on the mantel; then brought out identification cards that he showed to Bela Singh. Once sure of himself, Sidney possessed unusual sang-froid. He displayed it on this occasion.

"This is funny," he grunted. "You bust into my apartment and expect me to tell you who I am. I ought to be asking who you are!"

"My name is Bela Singh," was the reply. "Accept my apologies for entering here. Perhaps you suspect that I came to take the Crystal Buddha. Such is not so."

The words were spoken in a tone that convinced Sidney of their sincerity. That, in itself, was a tribute to Bela Singh; for Sidney possessed a highly suspicious nature. Bela Singh had detected that much, and was doing his best to acquire Sidney's confidence. That was one reason why Bela Singh failed to analyze the craftiness that Sidney possessed.

"Don't worry about it being stolen," assured Sidney, wisely. "I came back here to get the Buddha. I'm putting it in a safe-deposit vault. I don't intend to sell it"—Sidney was shaking his head—"because it meant a lot to my old uncle, James Plaistead."

Sidney was taking a tip from remarks that he had heard Rex make to Barbara, the night before. Bela Singh responded with a courteous bow. Sidney reached for the Buddha, put it in his pocket; as he turned, he added:

"But any time you want to drop around, you're welcome. However, I won't be at this apartment. Here; this is my new address."

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Sidney wrote it on a sheet of paper. Bela Singh took the address; then produced a small sealed envelope that was stamped with a red wax seal. He made a deep salaam and handed Sidney the envelope, with the comment:

"For you, the owner of the Crystal Buddha. Place the Buddha in safety, as you have intended. Meanwhile, have no fear. You will be protected."

BEFORE Sidney could start to open the envelope, as Bela Singh expected him to do, there was a frantic buzz from the door. Sidney realized that Barbara must have experienced trouble outside. It would be unwise to keep her waiting.

He pressed the switch to unlock the lower door; that done, he turned to Bela Singh:

"Some one is coming up! You must hurry!"

Further words were useless. Bela Singh was gone. A slight noise from the fire escape outside a rear window told the path that he had taken. Listening, Sidney heard faint tokens of the Hindu's descent. A few seconds later, Barbara was rapping at the door of the apartment.

The Buddha bulged in Sidney pocket. It seemed to burn there, warning him of possible trouble if he kept it. Should Rex find the Buddha stolen, he would probably tell Barbara. She, in turn, would remember that Sidney had been to the apartment.

Satisfied that he had bluffed Bela Singh, Sidney quickly decided that he could handle Rex also. He was proud of his shrewdness; he liked the game that he saw ahead.

With a call to Barbara that he would be there in a moment, Sidney popped over to the mantel and put the Buddha where he had found it. He unlocked the door; Barbara came in breathless. She said that a pair of drunks had stopped beside the car to talk to her. That was why she had hurried indoors.

While Sidney was apologizing for his delay, Barbara saw the Buddha.

"Rex must have been here!" the girl exclaimed. "Don't you think he is foolish to leave the Buddha where any one could pick it up?"

"Maybe," returned Sidney, indifferently. "But that's his look-out. Personally, though, I don't think any one would bother to grab the thing."

"But it is worth a thousand dollars!"

"Not on its looks. If I didn't know that it was made of genuine crystal, I'd think it was a glass paperweight."

Sidney brought his bundles from the closet. He and Barbara went downstairs; the street was deserted except for Sidney's car. As they stepped into it, Barbara looked at her wrist watch and said, anxiously, that she was late.

Sidney promised to drive her to meet Lester. His grin, though, did not come because he had kept Lester waiting. Sidney was triumphant because Barbara suspected nothing regarding the visit of Bela Singh.

Had he known that Barbara had previously met Bela Singh, his elation would have doubled. Sidney had scored more heavily than he realized.

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For the present, Sidney's one thought was to get Barbara to her destination as soon as possible. That would give him his opportunity to open the envelope and read the message that Bela Singh had given him.

Speculating, as he drove along, Sidney had thoughts that were actually a glimpse of the future. He had a hunch that he would want the Crystal Buddha; and his guess was right.

Beginning with this night, Sidney's one mission would be to acquire that curious statue that stood on the mantel of his old apartment. In his quest, he would resort to many measures; but always with one purpose that would tax all his shrewdness.

That purpose would be the establishment of the claim that he had made to Bela Singh: that he, Sidney Brellen, was the rightful owner of the Crystal Buddha.

CHAPTER IX. TRIPLE BATTLE.

LESTER KURNZ was waiting when they reached the restaurant where Barbara had promised to dine. When he helped Barbara from the roadster, Lester scarcely noticed Sidney Brellen. The two were scarcely more than cordial; they disagreed on nearly everything.

Their one common interest was Barbara, and that merely widened the gap between them. When she had a chance to compare the two, Barbara felt that she preferred Lester. True, he always talked business and scaled all life on a commercial basis; but most of his ideas were sound. Sidney, on the contrary, seemed to care for nothing that was at all worth while.

Sidney drove away as soon as Barbara was out of the car. He lost very little time in getting to his new apartment. Once there, he ripped open the envelope that Bela Singh had given him. It contained thin sheets of paper, written in an ornate penmanship. At the end was a flourished signature, stamped with the same seal that had adorned the envelope.

All during the reading, Sidney's eyes opened wider. When he had finished, he set fire to the letter and the envelope and tossed the flaming paper into the fireplace. Once the message had burned, he crushed the ashes with his foot.

Smirking, Sidney sat down at a table and consulted a calendar. A fountain pen lay handy; Sidney used it to put a circle around a future date.

After that, he went out to dinner. When he came back, he held the impression that he was being followed. The feeling persisted when he reached his apartment.

Once inside, Sidney pressed a cigarette between his sallow lips and shrewdly watched the door. He thought that he heard a stir beyond it. That didn't worry him; on the contrary, it pleased him.

Bela Singh had spoken of protection. Sidney was getting it.

One thing Sidney did not want. That was too close observation from Bela Singh, until Sidney had a chance to deal with Rex. Getting the Crystal Buddha was more imperative than ever; and it would have to be done quietly.

A half hour later, Sidney's lights were out. Stealthily, he listened at the door; was satisfied that there was no one on the other side. Matters were working the way he wanted them; nevertheless, he waited another hour

before his next move.

That was a telephone call to Barbara's home. The girl had arrived there after dining with Lester Kurnz; and so had Rex. Sidney asked to talk with Rex; while he was waiting, he carried the telephone into a closet, to keep his words from being heard outside the apartment.

Sidney told Rex that he had the key of the old apartment and wanted to give it to him. Rex replied that he would stop off at the new apartment.

Sidney parried that suggestion. He said that he was going to a night club on Forty-eighth Street. He wanted Rex to meet him there and get the key; to which Rex agreed. He said that he would reach the club before midnight.

IT was very nearly that hour when Rex Lancott arrived at the appointed spot. He knew the place, the Starlight Club, for he and Sidney had visited it the previous night.

Rex had come in by subway from Long Island; but he had taken a cab after he reached Grand Central Terminal. He peeled a dollar from a slim roll, to pay the driver.

"Stay around a few minutes," suggested Rex, as he received his change. "I'll need a cab after I leave here."

The driver nodded his agreement. He shoved into a parking space just as another cab came up. The second taxi managed to squeeze in behind the first. That second cab halted beside a darkened stretch of sidewalk, where a cramped alleyway formed a passage beside the Starlight Club.

The gloom was made to order for the passenger who alighted. He was a being in black, no more than a fleeting image that merged with the enveloping darkness of the alleyway.

The Shadow had taken up Rex's trail, early in the evening. On Long Island, he had expected persons to cross it: spies from Bela Singh. That had not as yet occurred; but the Starlight Club looked like a spot where it might begin. The Shadow was planning some secret observations of his own.

That policy was to bring some startling consequences that even The Shadow had not foreseen.

Meanwhile, the driver of The Shadow's taxi was on the job, following an order that The Shadow had given at the moment he alighted. That driver, Moe Shrevnitz, was one of The Shadow's roving agents. The Shadow had told him to summon another agent, Harry Vincent, by phone.

Harry was the right chap for open contact with Rex. The Starlight Club looked like a good place for them to meet. In fact, it was a better place than The Shadow supposed. Events were to cement a strong friendship between Harry Vincent and Rex Lancott.

Inside the night club, Rex had found Sidney at an obscure corner table, away from the raucous music of an overloud orchestra. Sidney gave an affable grin and waved for the waiter. While he was ordering drinks, he produced the key of his old apartment.

"Saw some of your duds down there, this evening," he remarked. "I've taken all my stuff out; you can occupy the place any time you want."

With a thanks, Rex pocketed the key. The two chatted for a few minutes; then their conversation lagged. Sidney leaned across the table, about to speak in confidential tone. He was ready to begin his opening wedge:

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a mention of the Crystal Buddha.

Rex noted an odd eagerness on Sidney's mouthy face. It changed, as Sidney stared past Rex's shoulder. Relaxing, Sidney settled back in his chair. The chance arrival of the waiter covered up the occurrence. Sidney was quick to gulp a drink.

He had nearly ruined his prospective game.

BEYOND Rex was a screen, covering a little-used side exit. Sidney had seen a stir of the screen; immediately afterward, a dark eye had peered through the slats.

Sidney recognized that the person beyond must be Bela Singh, or one of the Hindu's henchmen. They were still on the job when Sidney left his apartment, although he hadn't known it.

Sidney didn't mind the Hindu protection; but he knew that any mention of the Crystal Buddha would be a give-away, with such watchers present. Sidney was gripped with a single desire that was to start Rex on his way as soon as possible.

Glancing at his watch, Sidney hurried his drink, muttering something about an appointment that he had forgotten. Rex took the hint and prepared to leave, much to Sidney's satisfaction. All the while, Sidney was careful to ignore the eye that watched from the screen.

Curiously, that eye was ignoring Sidney, also.

The hidden watcher had seen a stir on the opposite side of the night club. A figure had come in through a window that was located above a small balcony. Dimly outlined in the mild light, The Shadow was looking across the dance floor to observe Sidney and Rex.

There were few persons who could have seen The Shadow, and none of them were looking up in his direction. The Shadow supposed himself to be unseen. From his distance, he could not detect the eye peering through the screen.

Once Rex was on his feet, ready to leave, Sidney said something about another drink. Rex declined; but Sidney decided to have one, saying he had enough time. Rex started toward the front door; his progress slowed because he had to cross the crowded dance floor.

Instantly, The Shadow departed by the upper window.

When Sidney gave a sidelong glance toward the screen, the peering eye was no longer there. The Hindu spy, too late to see Sidney give the key to Rex, had decided that the latter was working for The Shadow. Here was a chance too good for Bela Singh to miss.

When Rex came from the Starlight Club, lurking antagonists were ready. A pair of dark-clad Hindus popped from the shelter of cedar plants that flanked the entrance. The gawking cab driver awaiting Rex, opening the door of the taxi, saw his fare smothered under a powerful onslaught.

Rex was a fighter. He proved it, by the way he met the double odds. His fists flayed for darkish chins; he wrenched away from the Hindus, to make a break for the cab. The driver jumped out to help him; that was as far as the fellow got.

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Another tall Hindu sidled up beside the cab, and pressed the point of a knife lightly against the cabby's throat. It was Bela Singh on hand to assure the capture.

The cabby slid back into his taxi, clutching his Adam's apple, to make sure his neck was unscathed. Bela Singh turned to help the Hindus. It was unnecessary, for Rex had stumbled and his captors had gained control.

Holding their prisoner with his arms behind him, the Hindus started Rex toward the parked coupe that Bela Singh indicated with his knife point.

Moe's cab was empty. He hadn't come back from making his telephone call. The street looked deserted; and Bela Singh's eyes were triumphant. He was staring toward the mouth of the darkened passage, confident that The Shadow hadn't yet arrived there.

BELA SINGH turned. The chill of a whispered laugh crept to his ears. Swinging about, he halted, rigid, before he could poise his knife.

Where Bela Singh had viewed emptiness, a solid shape had materialized. The Shadow was clear of darkness; standing beneath the ruddy glow of a neon sign, he loomed as a formidable foe. His fists held their automatics. One gun covered Bela Singh; the other yawned toward the Hindus who held Rex helpless.

It was The Shadow, himself, who made the first move. His ears caught the sudden purr of a motor, coming from the corner. As The Shadow side-stepped, there was a warning shout from across the street. It was Moe Shrevnitz who gave it; he was ducking for a doorway when he called.

The car that was bowling into view was that same touring car that had carried a crew of killers the night before. Their own snarls told that these thugs had spied The Shadow, along with Bela Singh. Revolvers were poking from the touring car; the muzzle of a machine gun was swinging into play.

In meeting the new menace, The Shadow did not forget Bela Singh. The whirl for darkness that The Shadow took was protection against a knife toss, as well as an avoidance of aiming guns. Nor did The Shadow neglect Rex. Instead of diving back toward the alleyway, he swept for the far side of the building, taking Rex's captors in his path.

The Hindus sprang away, whipping out their knives. With a lunge, The Shadow bowled Rex ahead of him, toward the side door that the Hindus had used. Completing his spin with amazing speed, he was full about again, aiming for the street. His swift maneuver had produced a remarkable result.

The Shadow had split Bela Singh from his Hindus, forcing them to divided action. Bela Singh was squarely in the path between The Shadow and, the thug-manned car. His only course was to ally himself with The Shadow, long enough to delay the leaden hail from the machine gun. Otherwise, Bela Singh would fall before The Shadow.

The Hindus, unaware of Bela Singh's plight, still regarded The Shadow as a foe. They were scrambling for cover; once there, they intended to make The Shadow their target. But there would be split-seconds before that danger came. The Shadow could handle other work during that brief interval.

Triple battle was due, and The Shadow was its focal point. Already, swift strategy had given him a momentary advantage. Speed and precision were the elements with which he could still stave off looming death.

CHAPTER X. HARRY REPORTS.

THE touring car was wheeling in from the left, along the one-way street. A vacant parking space was the place that the thugs wanted, to begin their fusillade; the driver cut in toward it, when he spied The Shadow.

Nevertheless, crooks were forced to a moment's hesitation before they could open fire. They had lost sight of The Shadow when he made his final shift.

The machine-gunner's overeagerness proved his own disaster. Before he could start the machine gun's withering blast, a shot spoke from darkness. A bullet whistled past Bela Singh's ear; it found the craning gunman and dropped him to the floor of the car.

The spurt of flame told The Shadow's position. Savagely, thugs began to use revolvers, while another expert grabbed for the lost machine gun.

Bela Singh wasn't in the path of fire any longer. He was ducking away, to let the battle rip. Bullets were pinging the wall where The Shadow shifted. The cloaked fighter's slugs were sizzling into the halted touring car.

The Shadow's fire was as rapid as the barrage that came his way. He had taken the advantage. He was on the loose, whipping from one spot to another, whereas his adversaries were bunched where he could reach them.

The gorillas on the far side of the car didn't wait to taste more metal from The Shadow's guns. Deserting their sagging pals, they sprang to the street, intending to scatter and equalize the fray. The Shadow's fierce laugh accompanied the jabs of flame that spurred the crooks to their mad endeavor.

There was one thug that The Shadow didn't bother. He was the driver of the touring car. The Shadow's job was to wither the crew in back, leaving no one who could snatch up the machine gun and put it into action. The thuggish driver guessed that he was secure. Half from the car, he swung his revolver to take aim at The Shadow.

The crook's finger tightened on the trigger; then stopped there. His arm and shoulder went back with a sudden jolt. All that foretold that sudden intervention was the whirring glint of an object that sped from the sidewalk. As the foiled killer sagged, the weapon showed plainly.

It was a knife buried in the crook's shoulder.

The Shadow had left that aiming gunman to Bela Singh.

It wasn't a matter of choice on Bela Singh's part. His own life, like The Shadow's, depended on clearing the crook-manned automobile. The Shadow was doing that, without Bela Singh's aid; but a chance shot from the driver would have stopped The Shadow's efforts.

After that, it would have been curtains for Bela Singh. He couldn't have stopped the scattering crooks from scrambling back into the car. Whether he liked it or not, Bela Singh had to take out the driver; and he did it.

THE lapse of gunfire produced a temporary lull that was ended by The Shadow's laugh. There was no approval in that tone; the sinister mockery seemed to define Bela Singh's deed as what it was: an act of self-defense.

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The Shadow's taunt served as another challenge, against all comers. Scattering crooks could accept it; so, for that matter, could Bela Singh and, the latter's followers.

Before Bela Singh could turn about, his two Hindus took the defy.

All through the fray, they had been watching dumbly, not realizing that The Shadow and Bela Singh were linked in common cause. They held back while The Shadow weaved and fired; waiting for their own chance to come. They sprang from shelter now, only to learn that The Shadow had not forgotten them.

The Hindus were copying the method of Bela Singh, and they were capable at flinging dirks. Their arms were launching long throws that would wing The Shadow, whether he held his ground or dived away. Instead, The Shadow performed the unexpected.

As darkish fingers loosed their blades, The Shadow was on the move, driving low, straight for the Hindus. One knife sailed a foot above his head. The other barely skimmed the cloak that enveloped his dropping shoulder. Confronted with gun muzzles; startled by The Shadow's oncoming drive, the Hindus had barely time to grapple when their foe arrived.

The Shadow didn't waste bullets with that unarmed pair. He knew that he would need his ammunition, later. He sledged blows that made the Hindus duck. He sent them sprawling across the sidewalk.

Separately, the Hindus came up to try a useless rally. A harsh voice stopped them, babbling words of command. Bela Singh had reached his car. He hadn't waited to retrieve the knife that he had hurled. His Hindus were weaponless, like himself. He was commanding them to forget The Shadow.

Bela Singh's present goal was flight; he wanted his servitors to join him. Coming to their feet, the Hindus sprang after their leader.

The Shadow had no opportunity to stop that departing trio. Already, scattered thugs were taking new aim, popping wild shots from across the street. Shot for shot, The Shadow answered spurts that came from isolated spots.

Thugs were trying sniping tactics—the most dangerous that The Shadow could face, although gunmen seldom realized it. But where The Shadow had fading methods as a protection against stray gunfire, there was a man present who failed to use such strategy.

That was Rex Lancott.

SWIFT fray had left Rex staring in amazement, from the safety spot where The Shadow had shoved him. Even The Shadow's clash with the Hindus had been too short-lived for Rex to take a hand.

At present, he thought that he could help. A gun was lying beside the stalled touring ear. Rex dashed out and grabbed it up. Thugs began to fire in his direction.

Pouncing upon Rex, The Shadow hauled him to cover. Moe's taxi was waiting, with its canny driver crouched low, for Moe had found a chance to come across the street. Starting Rex for the cab, The Shadow saw a coupe pulling up behind. It was Harry Vincent's car; The Shadow lurched Rex for it.

As Rex stumbled over the step, Harry yanked the door open and hauled him in. The coupe sped away, protected by the last barrage that The Shadow had time to give.

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Those shots came from in back of Moe's taxi, which was behind the halted touring car. The thug who had received Bela Singh's blade was painfully getting the touring car in motion. A few crippled crooks grabbed for the running board and went along with it.

The Shadow sprang aboard Moe's cab and followed. He didn't intend to let those gorillas go wild with their machine gun.

Patrons surged from the Starlight Club; among them, Sidney Brellen. His sallow face showed a mingling of shrewdness and terror. Sidney saw the cab that had waited for Rex and jumped into it. The huddled driver was glad of an excuse to get started. The cab was away before the police arrived.

Sidney was too excited to think of anything but safety. He gave the address of his new apartment; the driver headed there. Within two blocks, a car closed up and hung along beside the taxi.

It gave Sidney the shivers, until he saw dark faces at the window. He grinned in relief. Bela Singh was convoying him home.

Bela Singh had seen Sidney in the cab. That was why the Hindu's car fell back and followed him to his destination. Once in his apartment, Sidney expected a visit from Bela Singh. None came; evidently the Hindu was content to let matters rest, knowing that Sidney was safe.

MEANWHILE, Rex Lancott was explaining matters to Harry Vincent, who had come into the picture seemingly as a chance passer-by. Rex's story was simple.

A pair of strangers—evidently Hindus—had grabbed him when he came from the Starlight Club. A strange, mysterious rescuer—a human wraith, clad in black—had pitched in to help him. Thugs had provided a gun battle; and the sequel was this meeting.

A bit shakily, Rex laughed at his own story. It was hazy; hardly sensible enough for a listener to believe. But Harry Vincent took it with a serious nod. He remarked that he had come on the scene at the finish; had glimpsed enough to understand the facts of Rex's story.

There was a sincerity about Harry that made Rex like him. Harry was a clean-cut chap; he seemed to have the same urge for adventure that gripped Rex. They stopped at a spot near Times Square and chatted while they dunked doughnuts in coffee. It was while they were seated at that counter that Rex learned more about Harry.

His new friend, it seemed, was staying at a local hotel; but was looking for an apartment. Rex produced his key and palmed it with a grin.

"Drive me down to the Village," he suggested, "and take a look at my place. You might as well bunk there to-night. There's plenty of room."

On the way to Greenwich Village, Harry learned a fact that had not yet reached The Shadow; namely, that Rex had taken the apartment formerly occupied by Sidney Brellen. Harry made no comment on that fact. He had more important remarks to make, later. The right time came when they entered the apartment, where Harry saw the Crystal Buddha on the mantel.

Showing immediate interest in the Buddha, Harry examined the tiny idol and asked Rex how he had acquired it. Rex told the story of his uncle's legacy. It seemed to give Harry a sudden idea.

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"That could account for to-night's trouble," he told Rex. "Hindus grabbed you outside the night club. Maybe they wanted the Buddha."

"That might be it!" exclaimed Rex. "But why would they want it? Barbara appraised it; the Buddha isn't worth more than a thousand dollars."

"Not as a curio, perhaps. But the Hindus might figure it worth more. By the way, where did this girl you mentioned take it for appraisal?"

"Barbara said she'd been to Chinatown; other places, too. Say! Maybe she showed it to some Hindus! I'll have to ask her about that."

Harry smiled as he replaced the Buddha on the mantel. He asked quietly:

"Where are you going to keep this Buddha?"

"Right here," replied Rex. "Where else could I keep it?"

"This place is good enough. Provided you stay indoors, twenty-four hours at a stretch."

Rex's lips tightened as he nodded.

"I get the idea, Vincent. The Hindus might snoop around and walk in here after I go out. That's going to keep me on pretty steady duty."

"Not if we take shifts."

"You mean you'll stay here, Vincent? To be in on whatever happens?"

"That's about it."

REX gripped Harry's hand. Rex was intrigued by the prospect of more adventure; and of all persons that he had ever met, he couldn't picture a better running mate than Harry Vincent. That smooth departure from the battleground outside the Starlight Club had given Rex good evidence of Harry's spunk.

The deal was made, much to the satisfaction of Harry Vincent. He had made the contact that The Shadow wanted. By staying constantly with Rex, Harry could be on the lookout for future trouble. New difficulties would arrive; of that, Harry was sure. He was confident, too, that he could name the source.

Bela Singh would be the troublemaker.

In that guess, Harry went wide. It did not occur to him that Bela Singh sought the owner of the Crystal Buddha. Sidney Brellen, through his chance meeting with Bela Singh, had twisted circumstances, to put Bela Singh in an unfavorable spot.

Thrusts would come against Rex Lancott; the prize at stake would be the Crystal Buddha. But those shrewd strokes would be sponsored by a schemer other than Bela Singh.

CHAPTER XI. REJECTED TERMS.

MORNING brought worry to Sidney Brellen, when he looked from the window of his Fifty-fifth Street apartment. On the sidewalk below, he saw a uniformed policeman, with a companion who looked like a headquarters dick. They were quizzing the janitor of the apartment house.

It was eleven o'clock, Sidney's usual breakfast hour. It took him a while, though, to make up his mind about going out. When he finally went to the street, the officer and the detective had left.

On the way to a little restaurant, Sidney bought the early edition of an evening newspaper, hoping that he might find some explanation of the police visit.

The headlines gave the answer.

The police had linked last night's fracas with the Central Park battle of the previous evening. Again, a taxicab had figured; the one that had taken Sidney to his apartment. Police had located the driver of that cab and had quizzed him.

The driver, fortunately, hadn't remembered the exact address. He had simply dropped a passenger on Fifty-fifth Street; and he swore that his fare was a customer who had hurried out of the Starlight Club.

Apparently, the police had accepted the cabby's story. As he swallowed his coffee, Sidney let worryment disappear. His shrewd lips indulged in a wide grin. Events had turned the way he wanted them.

The presence of police had sent Bela Singh to cover. He and his Hindus would not be back on vigil until tonight, when darkness would give them cover. That offered Sidney a clear day ahead, to negotiate with Rex regarding the Crystal Buddha.

It wasn't difficult for a schemer like Sidney to analyze most of the important facts.

Bela Singh was sure that Sidney owned the Buddha and had put it safely away. Therefore, Bela Singh, protecting Sidney, was suspicious of any persons who approached. That applied to Rex Lancott. Last night, Bela Singh had tried to capture Rex, the real owner of the Buddha, to protect Sidney, the alleged owner!

Knowing nothing about The Shadow, Sidney simply assumed that Bela Singh had been overly suspicious. Anyway, the thing had worked well. The chance intervention of crooks had resulted in Rex's escape. Bela Singh would be doubly suspicious of Rex if he met him in the future. He would never believe the real facts if Rex tried to tell them.

Meanwhile, Sidney could meet Rex without Bela Singh's knowledge, and deny the whole thing afterward.

MID-AFTERNOON gave Sidney his opportunity. After several pay-station calls to his old apartment, he finally reached Rex instead of Harry Vincent. Rex was going to be home a while; so Sidney took a cab to Greenwich Village.

All during the ride, he made sure that no one was on his trail. Outside the old apartment house, he peered about before alighting from his cab. Confident that he was clear of Bela Singh's well-meant protection, Sidney rode up in the elevator to his old abode.

Rex was alone in the apartment, with the Buddha gleaming from the mantel. He received Sidney casually;

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and the visitor took the same tack. He opened by congratulating Rex on his timely departure from the Starlight Club.

"The very devil broke out after you'd left," remarked Sidney. "Some mobbies tried to storm the place!"

"They made a grab for me," rejoined Rex. "But I got away when the fireworks began."

Sidney changed the subject. He inquired about Rex's friend, Vincent, who had answered the telephone. Rex said Harry was an old friend that he had happened to meet. They were sharing the apartment to cut down expenses. That was a wedge for Sidney.

"You were foolish, Rex," said Sidney, "to turn down twenty thousand dollars on account of that Buddha. You'll have to hock it sooner or later. Why don't you turn it back to the estate?"

"Generous of you, Sid," laughed Rex. "You seemed glad, though, when I took the Buddha in the first place."

"We've barged around together since then. You're a good scout, Rex. I don't want to see you lose out on a lot of money."

"Does Lester Kurnz feel the same way?"

Rex's question caused Sidney's face to sour with contempt for Lester. Putting false sincerity into his tone, Sidney declared:

"I can handle Lester. If he won't let the Buddha go back to the estate, I'll make a proposition of my own. I'll swap my own share for the Buddha."

In substance, Sidney was offering Rex thirty thousand dollars for the Crystal Buddha. It proved that Sidney wanted the idol as his own possession. Sidney could see doubt on Rex's face; for Rex was unable to repress it. To cover his overstep, Sidney declared:

"I've got money of my own, Rex. A lot more than you think. I don't need a nickel from the Plaistead estate. You need all that you can get."

"It sounds like a good offer, Sid," decided Rex, playing a good bluff of his own. "Only, I can't take it until you've talked with Lester. Suppose you get his decision first."

Sidney agreed. He shook hands and departed; but his face was sour when he went down in the elevator. He had played his ace too soon. It would take a lot of smart work to back it up. Even though Rex had seemed ready to agree, Sidney could see trouble when his cousin thought things over.

THE difficulty was coming even while Sidney was on his way out. Up in the apartment, Harry Vincent had stepped from the bedroom to join Rex.

Harry had overheard the whole proposition. He and Rex were in prompt agreement that Sidney had learned a lot about the Crystal Buddha. To Harry, that was real news for The Shadow.

"Lester won't listen," declared Rex. "That much is sure. So it means that Sidney will be back with his thirty-thousand offer."

Harry nodded agreement.

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"And when I turn it down," added Rex, "Sid will be up a tree. After that"—Rex's tone was grim—"he'll be ready to try anything to get the Buddha."

"Whatever he tries," assured Harry, "we can handle it."

Harry knew that when new menace came, The Shadow would again be on hand.

MEANWHILE, Sidney was losing no time in his next move. Riding uptown, he recalled all that Rex had said. The best step, Sidney decided, was to force the issue, by getting a decision from Lester Kurnz. That was why Sidney stopped at the law offices of Robert Brinby, and asked to see Barbara. The girl appeared and conducted Sidney to a little conference room.

Sidney smoothly related the details of his talk with Rex. He emphasized his offer to have the Buddha put back into the estate; then shrewdly came to the proposition that had followed.

"Rex said that Lester wouldn't listen," declared Sidney. "You know, Barbara, that made me feel mighty sorry for Rex. I could tell that he regretted taking the Buddha in the first place. So I became big-hearted and told him I'd swap with him."

"Do you mean"—Barbara was incredulous—"that you offered Rex your thirty thousand dollars for the Buddha?"

"That's it," affirmed Sidney. "So, I want you to talk with Lester about it."

Barbara smiled. She had another dinner date with Lester Kurnz; the last one for a while, she hoped. This gave her a chance to keep it, without arousing Sidney's jealousy

"I'll talk to Lester," she assured. "But it won't do any good." She shook her head. "I know he won't listen to me. He will say that Rex made his choice; that the matter is settled."

"That's just what I want him to say, Babs," insisted Sidney. "Then I can do something big for Rex. I'll give him my full share, like I promised."

Barbara gaped. She thought that Sidney wanted to be relieved of that promise. Sidney saw her astonishment and tried to pass it off with a cheery grin. He strolled from the conference room, leaving Barbara speechless.

By the time Sidney reached the street, his face was as sour as before. His story hadn't gone over with Barbara. That meant it hadn't gone across with Rex.

Sidney felt like kicking himself, all the way to the nearest barroom. There, he ordered a drink, swallowed it and called for another.

WHILE he imbibed, Sidney kept muttering to himself. He was all set, so far as Bela Singh was concerned. The Hindu certainly believed that he owned the Crystal Buddha. Worth plenty, that Buddha. The message that Sidney had destroyed said so. The whole problem was Rex. Would he take the thirty thousand, or wouldn't he?

"Sure, he'll take it," mumbled Sidney, his voice thickened by another drink. "He's got to take it! He's a fool if he don't. I'll get that Buddha, before—"

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Sidney was trying to calculate the date that he had marked on his calendar. He couldn't figure what to-day was. He had to know to-day's date for a starter. A newspaper would tell him. Unsteadily, Sidney left the barroom and bought a newspaper. Dusk had settled, he stopped beside a lighted window to read the date line.

To-day was the fifteenth. The date that he had marked was the twentieth. Sidney mouthed a grin.

"Five days," he muttered. "That's easy!"

Squinting, Sidney noted the headlines of the late edition. He was looking for more news of last night, and he found it. Police had bagged some of the hoodlums who had battled outside the Starlight Club. They belonged to a mob that had once worked for Zimmer Cougal, a big-shot racketeer.

Zimmer Cougal argued differently. Reporters had been to see him, in his apartment at the Hampstead Towers. He was out of all rackets, so he said. Zimmer didn't want to be bothered by reporters. He didn't know anything about the "mystery moll" that captured thugs admitted had been in a taxicab.

The talk of a "mystery moll" puzzled Sidney. It made him laugh, to read that a girl had been seen in a cab, when he had taken the only taxi outside the Starlight Club. Then, reading onward, he found an explanation that even his befuddled brain could grasp.

The newspapers weren't referring to last night's episode. They were speaking of the cab that had been abandoned in Central Park, the night before. Sidney folded the newspaper and thrust it into his pocket. He walked hazily along the street until he saw a Chinese restaurant. He went in and took an obscure table beside a telephone booth. He ordered dinner; while he waited, he sat with chin in hands, again thinking about the Crystal Buddha.

He would wait here, Sidney decided, until he could call Barbara at her home, to learn how Lester had liked the idea of cutting Rex in on the estate. By that time, Sidney figured, he would be sober.

After that, he could plan the next move in his quest for the Crystal Buddha.

CHAPTER XII. THE DOUBLED TRAIL.

THE headlines that roused Sidney's attention meant much to Barbara Brinby. She, too, was reading them in a restaurant, where she awaited Lester Kurnz. Barbara was worried, although she tried not to show it.

She was the "mystery moll" of Central Park. The captured hoodlum had told the truth, when he said that there was a girl in the beleaguered taxicab. What was more, the squealing thug insisted that the girl had clambered into a limousine.

Barbara reconstructed the finish of her ride to the Plaistead mansion. She remembered that the limousine had started away just after she had rung the doorbell. It was Sidney who had answered the ring. If the driver of the big car had tarried, before getting to the corner, Sidney might possibly have seen the limousine from the door.

That troubled Barbara, until she decided that the car must have had time to turn the corner. She had folded the newspaper and was feeling quite relieved when Lester Kurnz arrived.

As serious as ever, Lester began with an apology, even though he was not late. Barbara smiled, telling him that excuses were unnecessary. She decided to try a test regarding the newspaper story, to learn if Lester had caught any connection linking her with the girl in Central Park.

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"This interested me a great deal," remarked Barbara, pointing to the headlines. "It made me wonder if I am wise to ride in taxicabs alone. I wonder who the girl could have been."

Lester studied the newspaper from beneath his heavy brows. He dismissed the account with a snort.

"Newspaper talk," was his opinion. "A mystery girl; racketeers—bah! What does any of it mean?"

"Nothing, I suppose," agreed Barbara. "You are right, Lester. Such reports are exaggerated."

Barbara was pleased by Lester's indifference toward the matter. She decided that if Sidney questioned her about it, she would dismiss it in the same fashion. Thoughts of Sidney made her remember his request that she sound Lester regarding the Crystal Buddha. As they began dinner, she broached the subject.

Lester's forehead showed its set lines the moment that Barbara suggested a change of the agreement with Rex.

"It's preposterous!" snapped Lester. "Rex had his choice. He took the Buddha. I expected him to welsh, once he realized he had done himself out of twenty thousand dollars."

"But it wasn't Rex who wanted me to talk to you," insisted Barbara. "It was Sidney."

"I'd like to believe you, Barbara." Lester shook his head. "But you know perfectly well that Sidney wouldn't think of doing himself out of ten thousand dollars."

"He wants to get rid of thirty thousand," countered Barbara. "He offered his full legacy to Rex, in return for the Buddha."

BARBARA'S voice was firm, like her expression. In that mood, the girl could accept no denial. It dawned on Lester that all she said was true. For a while, he sat silent; then spoke slowly:

"This is something that Rex and Sidney have cooked up between them, Barbara. To trick me."

"It couldn't be," returned the girl. "Sidney would still be the loser. Unless—"

Barbara paused. Lester's eyes were quizzical. Barbara completed her statement, in a far-away tone:

"Unless Sidney has learned that the Buddha has some value of its own. More than the price at which Bela Singh appraised it."

"Who is Bela Singh?"

"A Hindu who owns a curio shop. I stopped there after I left Chinatown. There is something odd about that Buddha, Lester—"

Barbara halted again. She was finding links that had not occurred to her before. She realized more than ever the need for discreet silence. She managed a smile, as she added:

"I've probably imagined things, Lester."

Lester's square face framed a fixed smile.

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"You imagine too much," was his verdict. "Sidney knows it; that is why he played his game to-day."

"His game?"

"Certainly. He knows that I care for you. He is jealous. He wants you to think that he is the soul of generosity. So he came to you, wanting to help out Rex. Sidney guessed that I would refuse. That makes him look generous, while I appear selfish."

The logic was good; still, Barbara shook her head.

"Sidney wants the Buddha," she declared. "I admit that he tried to hide it under a show of generosity. But—"

It struck Barbara that her best policy was to agree with Lester. If he wanted to keep his matter-of-fact theory, he could have it. That was why Barbara ended the discussion with the question:

"Shall I tell Sidney that you refuse?"

"Yes," replied Lester, dryly. "Tell him everything that I said. Let him know that I have branded his supposed cleverness as sheer stupidity!"

Barbara agreed to relay Lester's opinion to Sidney. That ended the subject. When dinner was over, Barbara said that she had to return to the office. The excuse enabled her to get away from Lester.

Instead of going to the office, the girl called the Cobalt Club and asked to talk to Mr. Allard. Allard usually put up at the exclusive Cobalt Club, to which he belonged. She made an appointment to meet him in the lounge of the Hotel Metrolite.

BARBARA'S worries faded after she met Kent Allard. Somehow, his calm presence totally reassured her. Allard was unperturbed by the newspaper accounts. He seemed unsurprised when he learned how Sidney had tried to talk Rex into selling the Buddha. Thin lips showed a slight smile at the theory that Lester Kurnz had supplied.

As The Shadow, Allard had already received a report from Harry Vincent. The events that had followed were the sort to be expected.

When they left the hotel, Allard chose a cab and rode with Barbara to the Pennsylvania Station, where the girl left to take a train, for Long Island.

Riding in the same cab from the railroad terminal, Allard spoke a quiet order while the taxi was moving up the ramp. From the rear seat, he drew a drawer-like compartment. He slid a black cloak over his shoulders, placed a slouch hat upon his head.

This was The Shadow's own cab, wherein he could don his guise of black at a moment's notice.

The destination that The Shadow had given the cab driver was near the apartment house on Fifty-fifth Street, where Sidney Brellen lived.

Shrouded by darkness, The Shadow entered the building and reached Sidney's apartment. There, with a tiny flashlight, he made a close inspection of the premises. He found burned ashes in the fireplace, but they were illegible.

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The Shadow's next clue was the calendar that Sidney had marked, with a ring around the twentieth.

There were scrawled bits of paper in the wastebasket. Sidney had forgotten them as unimportant; but they had been inspired by Bela Singh's message. They bore tabulated lists of figures, some with dollar marks. Sidney had nervously crossed out most of the numbers before he crumpled the papers.

The Shadow's laugh was low-toned in the darkness of that apartment, where Sidney had not returned. The soft mirth ended when The Shadow's keen ears caught a muffled stir outside the door. It was the same sound that Sidney had noted the night before.

Bela Singh's Hindus were again on guard.

Duplicating Sidney's process, The Shadow stepped into the closet with the telephone. He put in a call to Burbank, his contact man, giving him special instructions. That done, The Shadow waited in the apartment. At intervals, he flicked his flashlight toward a desk clock, until the right time arrived.

Stealthily, The Shadow stepped to a side window. He swung out into darkness, using a narrow ledge to reach the rail of a corner fire tower. Once there, The Shadow listened beside a closed door to an inner corridor. The barrier blocked all sounds. The Shadow turned the knob with a gloved fist.

With the door opened a crack, he could hear a stir in the hallway. The Hindus were still there. The Shadow let the door close; as his hand released the knob, there was a betraying sound. Moving swiftly, The Shadow descended by the fire tower.

SOON afterward, Bela Singh's Hindus came stealthily downward. They listened often in the darkness; when they reached a gloomy space at the bottom, they peered toward a rear alleyway. One hissed, warningly, sensing that some one might be close. The other stopped the hiss with a suppressed grunt.

The grunting Hindu pointed to the rear alley. There, close against a grayish wall, he and his companion saw the figure of The Shadow. The cloaked shape was moving stealthily toward the rear street. The Hindus followed.

The finish came with a rapid swoop. Like hawks, the Hindus were upon their cloaked quarry. Taking him unawares, they trapped his arms behind his back. There was a short gargle as they suppressed an outcry. The Shadow went limp in the hands of his captors.

Hurriedly, the Hindus carried their prisoner across the rear street, through to a secluded parking lot. Gagging him in the darkness, binding his arms and legs, they shoved their victim into the rumble seat of their coupe. Climbing into the front, the Hindus started away.

Darkness moved as the coupe swung into the street. It came from a wall close by the moving car. A cloaked shape, singularly like The Shadow's, made a swift spring to the rear of the car. The Hindus did not hear that silent arrival. They were picking a course through streets where traffic was light, anxious to avoid a meeting with police.

Meanwhile, the figure on back of the coupe was working with silent speed. A gloved hand raised the rear of the rumble seat. A long arm entered; its hand held a knife that slashed the bonds of the prisoner within. A street lamp gave a flickering view of that remarkable sight.

The Shadow was rescuing The Shadow!

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As the coupe stopped at a red light, the man inside the rumble seat came out. His rescuer hauled him over the edge; spoke to him in whispered tones. Before the coupe started, it was the rescuer who slid into the rumble seat, to remain there, unbound.

Soon after the coupe had gone, a young man strolled from the side street, carrying a wadded cloak and hat beneath his arm. The released prisoner was Harry Vincent. He had doubled for The Shadow.

A call from Burbank had brought him from Rex's apartment. Equipped with a cloak and hat, Harry had come to the designated place in back of Sidney's, to let the Hindus capture him.

The result of this deception was that The Shadow was gaining a free ride to Bela Singh's new headquarters.

The coupe circled blocks when the Hindus neared the borders of the Harlem district of the city. Satisfied that they were not followed, they stopped in an alleyway near the fringe of the Spanish district.

Not once had the Hindus noticed the occasional rise of the rumble seat. Keeping it from fully closing, The Shadow had checked often during the ride, by pushing the hinged lid a few inches upward. When the car stopped, he heard the Hindus alight. As The Shadow expected, they were taking a look to see that no one was about.

Silently, The Shadow slid to the paving, closing the rumble seat as he went. He slid away, passing the unsuspecting Hindus in the darkness. Lurking in a spot where they had searched, The Shadow watched the results. The Hindus were totally bewildered, when their flashlights showed the prisoner gone.

THE SHADOW caught muttered words in Hindustani. His captors decided that he must have dropped off long ago, when they were back in traffic. They were sure that The Shadow was nowhere in this alleyway.

One Hindu drove away in the coupe. The other raised a grating beside a deserted building and squeezed through. Afterward, The Shadow inspected with a flashlight; then moved away, without waiting for the first Hindu to return.

The Shadow had discovered all he wanted for the present; something that his agents had not managed to learn. The Shadow had found the new headquarters of Bela Singh.

That marked a vital move in The Shadow's campaign; one that could solve the riddle of the Crystal Buddha. Judged by previous events, the discovery was all-important, since Bela Singh was the key to much that had occurred.

But in following this trail, The Shadow had neglected others. Elsewhere, a plot was hatching to produce new strife before the claim of the Buddha's ownership was settled.

CHAPTER XIII. CROOKS TAKE A HAND.

WHILE The Shadow was finishing his check-up of Bela Singh, another investigator was handling a different angle in the case of the Crystal Buddha. Oddly, this investigator had never heard of the mysterious idol that reposed in Rex Lancott's apartment.

The investigator was Joe Cardona, ace inspector of the New York police. Joe was on his way to talk with Zimmer Cougal.

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The law's viewpoint was a simple, direct one. There had been a gunfight in Central Park, one night; another battle at the Starlight Club, the next. Captured thugs admitted that the same mob had mixed in both affairs. There was a chance that Zimmer Cougal was the big-shot behind the double trouble.

What the law did not know was that the entry of hoodlums had been a sheer coincidence. Zimmer Cougal, whatever else he might know, had never heard of the Crystal Buddha.

The Shadow had reasoned that point from the circumstances. He pictured exactly how and why the thugs had come into it. They were on The Shadow's blacklist; he intended to handle them later, if the law ran into obstacles.

Meanwhile, The Shadow was leaving that angle to Joe Cardona. In fact, he had already received a confidential report that Cardona was looking in on Zimmer Cougal.

The Hampstead Towers was an antiquated apartment hotel; Zimmer's suite occupied a sixth-floor corner. Cardona had no trouble reaching the racketeer.

Zimmer had apparently expected the inspector's visit. He greeted Joe with an affable nod; waved the ace to a big chair, that creaked when Cardona seated himself in it.

"Take a gander at this joint, Joe," suggested Zimmer, sourly. "Looks pretty cheesy, don't it? I just got dough enough to pay the rent. Can't worry about new furniture. That ought to convince you that I'm out of the rackets."

Cardona eyed Zimmer stolidly. They had met often in the past. Joe Cardona, the swarthy, poker-faced police inspector; Zimmer Cougal, the flat-nosed, rat-eyed racketeer. Joe knew that Zimmer had a reputation for persuasive argument; but that didn't go far with the ace inspector.

"Sure, you're out of your old rackets," agreed Cardona, looking about. "That probably means you're building up for a new one!"

Zimmer's ugly smile showed the glitter of gold teeth as he questioned:

"So what?"

"Just this," emphasized Cardona. "You needed trigger-men once; maybe you think you'll be needing them again. The best way to hold them is to keep them on the pay roll."

Zimmer rasped a laugh.

"If I had the dough for that," he declared, "I'd send the boys out to the sticks. They wouldn't be around town chasing taxis in Central Park. I'm telling you, Joe, that mob was working on its own."

Cardona was still doubtful. He shot a few questions regarding members of the captured gun crew. In every case, Zimmer had the right answer. By the time he was through, the ace decided that Zimmer was actually what he appeared to be—a broken-down racketeer.

When he left, Cardona paused at the doorway, to leave a blunt reminder.

"I'm giving you a break, Zimmer," he declared. "We've bagged that one crew, so we're satisfied for the present. But there are others that worked for you. If any of them get busy, I'll be dropping in again!"

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AS SOON as Cardona had gone, Zimmer strode angrily to an inner door and wrenched it open. Half a dozen hard-faced rowdies shambled into the living room, looking suspiciously toward the door that Cardona had left. Zimmer gave a snort.

"Don't worry about Cardona," he told his huskies. "You heard him through the transom, didn't you? That's why I had you here—so you'd know the jam that other mob got me into, working on their own."

There were nods; but with them, grumbles. Zimmer heard mutters to the effect that the other boys had needed dough.

"Sure they did," agreed Zimmer, "but they should have got by, somehow, until I needed them. Instead, they listened to that guy Malkett. He got his; they got theirs. First from The Shadow, then from the cops. You mugs will get the same, if you stick around; because I'm not using you."

Zimmer opened a squarish cabinet; brought out a batch of bottles and invited the crew to have some drinks. While they were filling glasses, he told them sourly:

"Don't think I'm quitting cold. Only, things have got to cool, because Malkett and that crew went screwy. Lay low a while. I'll need you later. Say"—Zimmer paused as he was filling a glass—"what got into that outfit, anyway? I haven't even got the low-down yet."

One of the thugs explained. Malkett had been cruising in his cab, tipping off the crew to any jobs that looked good. His mistake had come when he decided to stage the robbery in Central Park, hoping to fake that he was innocent.

"The bulls would have seen through that," sneered Zimmer. "It shows the kind of lug that Malkett was. Maybe it's just as well The Shadow got him. Only"—Zimmer was pouring another drink—"why did the mob go goofy the next night?"

"They wanted to get even," replied a hoodlum.

"Who with?" demanded Zimmer, "The Shadow?"

"No. With the guy they figured gave the tip-off to The Shadow. Some Hindu named Bela Singh."

Zimmer looked interested. He had heard that The Shadow was aided by mysterious agents; and fanciful stories had been built about them. This tale, however, surpassed any that had come in the past. Zimmer nodded for the informant to continue.

"The crew knew where Malkett called from, see?" declared the talkative thug. "He told 'em that the moll had dough; that she was lookin' over a lot of expensive junk down in Chinatown, an' then had gone to the Hindu joint.

"So, along after midnight, the next night, the guys that weren't too crippled got together and went down to case the place. They found that the Hindu, this Bela Singh, had lammed, takin' the works along with him. So they went lookin' for the Hindu, hopin' they'd get another crack at The Shadow."

Zimmer grinned. The thugs had gained their chance all right; but with another reverse twist. That was the way a bunch of dubs would work. If they had still had a leader—even Malkett—they would have known enough to steer clear of The Shadow.

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"One guy happened to be up by the Starlight Club," completed the informing thug. "He spotted a couple of Hindus sneakin' around there. So he tipped off the crew. By the time they reached the joint, The Shadow was wise again. He was there."

ZIMMER nodded. The Shadow was there, all right. He had heard that much, already. But the Hindu angle was a new one; something that had not reached the law. Zimmer asked the thug how he had heard about it. The hoodlum answered that he had met up with one of the wounded crooks.

Zimmer's eyes showed a gleam. Captured thugs hadn't spilled everything to the law. They had kept quiet regarding Bela Singh, probably for future reference. Zimmer was wondering what Bela Singh had done with all his curios. He was calculating the chances of acquiring that swag, when the phone bell rang.

Zimmer answered the call. He grunted a few words; then covered the mouthpiece.

"Sounds like Joe Cardona," he told his companions. "Pulling a stall! Listen to me kid him."

Zimmer began a series of mocking remarks, cocking his head as he heard the replies. An odd scowl appeared on his flattish face. His words became more abrupt. Covering the phone again, he questioned in raucous whisper:

"You're sure Joe ain't wise about that Hindu, Bela Singh?"

A headshake came from the thug who had given the information.

"Then this guy's got something," affirmed Zimmer, in an undertone. "It ain't Cardona." Zimmer listened in the receiver; then added: "It's some bird calling from a pay station. I just heard him plunk in another nickel."

From then on, Zimmer concentrated on his conversation with the unknown speaker. Listening thugs heard him give brief instructions. Zimmer hung up the receiver; delivered a gold-toothed leer.

"I'm meeting this gazebo," he informed. "Some of you guys take a walk; and make sure that everything's clear at One Twenty-three. Give me a buzz if it's jake."

"ONE TWENTY-THREE" was a disreputable grogshop a few blocks away. Zimmer liked it as a meeting place, because the back room could be reached through a rear alley.

Two thugs went out; they found the scene deserted. After telephoning Zimmer, they took their stand near a corner. It wasn't long before Zimmer arrived and did a sneak in through the alley.

Soon afterward, a taxicab arrived. The thugs saw a man step out, shove some money into the driver's hand and do a shift into the alley. The arrival's dark-gray overcoat was visible; but he had it muffled high around his face.

Twenty minutes passed. Zimmer came out from the dive and told one of the watching crooks to send a cab to the alleyway. They watched from a distance, until the muffled visitor had made his departure. Zimmer led the way back to the apartment.

"It checks," he told the assembled crew. "That stuff about the Hindu guy, Bela Singh, being mixed in things. Only, I don't know whether he's working for The Shadow. It looks more like The Shadow may be looking out for him. Anyway, we won't have to worry about Bela Singh. What we're after is a Buddha."

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The term brought puzzled looks from the listeners. Zimmer described the Buddha with a motion of his hands.

"Like a little statue," he stated. "Made of crystal—stuff like glass—and the guy that talked to me wants it. Another fellow—a cousin of his—has it. That's where we come in. We're going to get it for the bird that wants it."

Something big was coming, and the thugs knew it. Only a half hour before, Zimmer Cougal had been ready to lay off for a while. The present glint of his ratty eyes told that he had reversed his decision.

"There's dough in it," voiced Zimmer. "Ten grand, cash on the line! All we got to do is knock off the mug who has the Buddha, a guy named Rex Lancott. This other fellow"—Zimmer paused, without mentioning the name—"will tell us when and where. He'll handle things after Lancott's out of it."

Zimmer gestured with his thumb, as a sign of dismissal. One of the mob inquired about the split. Zimmer counted noses; there were five thugs in the outfit.

"Fifty-fifty," he decided. "Half for me; a grand each for you guys. We won't have to cover up. We'll grab the dough and lam. Let Cardona look for us. If he nails anybody, we all stick to the same story: We weren't in it, but we thought he'd try to pin it on us. So we lammed."

THUGS were gone from Zimmer's premises, ten minutes later. They were fortunate in timing their departure, for keen eyes peered from a passing cab, to note the dulled lights of Zimmer's apartment. The Shadow, back from the Spanish quarter, decided that Cardona's visit had produced beneficial results.

There were lights, too, in Sidney Brellen's apartment when the same cab came to a slow halt on Fifty-fifth Street. The Shadow watched them for a few minutes; then started to step from the cab. The apartment lights flicked out as he opened the cab door.

Settling back in the cab, The Shadow gave an order. As the taxi moved away, a low laugh whispered in its depths. All looked quiet to The Shadow. If he had suspected a possible link between Zimmer Cougal and Sidney Brellen, he no longer pictured one.

The Shadow was planning a watchful policy in the case of the Crystal Buddha. His unerring vigilance would be needed; for a murderous thrust would soon be due.

CHAPTER XIV. MOVES AT NIGHT.

AT noon the next day, Sidney Brellen went for a drive in his roadster. His course took him through Greenwich Village, but he did not stop at his old apartment. Sidney's bleary gaze was unpleasant when he went by it. After that, he drove elsewhere. It was two o'clock when he returned to his new apartment.

There were no police about; it was too early for Bela Singh. Nevertheless, Sidney took no chances when he made some telephone calls. He carried the telephone into the closet so that his conversation would be unheard.

Barbara Brinby was the recipient of one call. Sidney wanted her to have dinner at the Swing High Club, a secluded place that Barbara liked. When Barbara informed him that she already had a dinner engagement, Sidney hung up with a bang.

Barbara couldn't understand why Sidney was angry, until Lester Kurnz stopped at the office shortly before

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five. Lester's usually solemn face was glowing when he inquired:

"Where do we dine to-night?"

"I'm sorry," replied Barbara, "but I'm having dinner with Rex Lancott. He wants me to meet his friend, Mr. Vincent."

Lester looked a trifle annoyed; then delivered an indulgent smile.

"So that's it," he chuckled. "I guess Sidney was so mad when he called me on the telephone, that he supposed I had cut him out again. He must have called me after he talked to you."

"What made him angry?"

"He wanted to know my decision regarding the Buddha. I told him that Rex could keep it. After that, I talked like I did last night. I told him what I thought of his fake hero game: trying to make himself appear big-hearted."

Barbara smiled. No wonder Sidney thought that she had another date with Lester. She picked up the telephone and made a call to Sidney's apartment. After she had explained matters to Sidney, Barbara turned to Lester.

"That was odd," she remarked. "The phone stopped ringing very abruptly; but it was half a minute before Sidney spoke. I wonder what was wrong."

Lester shrugged. Like Barbara, he knew nothing of Sidney's practice of dragging the telephone into the closet every time he held a conversation. It worked all right when Sidney made his own calls; but it caused delay whenever he answered an incoming call.

"Anyway, Sidney didn't mind about Rex," concluded Barbara. "He said he hoped we enjoyed dinner at the Metrolite; and told me to give his regards to Rex."

THERE were four at dinner that evening; Barbara had brought a friend named Marjorie Jermyn. The girls had dressed in evening gowns at Marjorie's apartments, for this was opera night and both had season tickets. Rex and Harry were wearing tuxedos, although they had no place to go afterward.

Guests were never paged in the hotel dining room; but a head waiter happened to come quietly through, inquiring at various tables. He reached the table where the four were seated; it developed that he had a message for Miss Barbara Brinby.

When Barbara opened the envelope, she found the transcript of a message that had been telephoned to the hotel desk.

"It's from Sidney," Barbara told Rex. "He wants us to meet him at the Swing High Club at half past ten. He says that it is urgent. But I can't possibly be there before eleven."

Rex looked at the message. It specified that he was to be with Barbara. Rex shot a side glance toward Harry. Both could guess the import of the message. Sidney evidently wanted to talk about the Buddha. Rex had a simple solution to the matter.

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"I can get there at half past ten," he said to Barbara. "I'll jolly Sidney along until you arrive. Maybe you won't have to come at all. Call me after the opera, at the Swing High. I'll tell you if I've thrashed matters out with Sid."

Harry happened to glance at another table, where a lone diner had just arrived. He seemed to recognize the fellow's flattish face; but, a moment later, the man had turned away to give an order to the waiter.

When they finished dinner, Harry tried to get another look at the stranger; but the man was staring at a menu and had his back completely turned.

Harry still had his room at the Metrolite. He and Rex went there, after the girls had started for the opera. Rex's first action was to open a bureau drawer; he gave a relieved smile when he produced the Crystal Buddha.

"I told you it would be safe here," laughed Harry. "You don't have to worry about it, Rex."

"I guess not," Rex decided. "Do you think it will keep while we're at the movies?"

Harry nodded. Rex put the Buddha back into the drawer. When they left, Harry made a sign toward a room on the opposite side of the corridor, where a wizened face peered out, unnoticed by Rex.

The Buddha had not been unwatched during the dinner hour; nor would it be unguarded while Harry and Rex were again away. The Shadow had posted a clever agent named "Hawkeye" to safeguard the mysterious idol. Hawkeye had a duplicate key to Harry's room.

IN his pocket, Harry carried the crumpled message that had been left at the dinner table. Mentally, he could still picture the features of the chance diner who had been at the next table. He intended to report these to The Shadow; but he missed an immediate opportunity.

Rex headed to the sidewalk to hail a taxi, before Harry could stop at a phone booth in the hotel lobby. When they reached the theater, they were just in time for the feature picture. Harry let the call wait until afterward. He didn't expect any difficulty in detaining Rex from too prompt a trip to the Swing High.

Harry wasn't reckoning with Rex's impetuous nature. So far, he had judged Rex as a chap of unruffled temperament. Even on that night at the Starlight Club, Rex had seemed cool; but bewilderment had partly caused it. Rex's nerves had been getting taut, lately, particularly on matters that concerned the Crystal Buddha.

It was twenty after ten when they left the theater. Rex was glancing at his watch; he looked for a taxi. Harry stopped him, saying there was no hurry. After buying a newspaper, Harry nudged toward a cigar store.

"We need some cigarettes," he told Rex. "You get them while I make a telephone call. I'll only be a few minutes; then I can walk over to the Swing High with you."

Rex didn't need any cigarettes. He found a spare pack in his pocket. He watched Harry in the telephone booth; then became impatient.

He wanted a show-down with Sidney, about the Buddha business; and he couldn't see where there would be trouble to-night. Sidney had included Barbara in the invitation. Rex overlooked the fact that he would arrive quite a while ahead of her.

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Turning a few pages of Harry's newspaper, Rex suddenly planked the folded sheet upon the cigar counter. He indicated Harry's booth, as he spoke to the clerk.

"Tell the chap in there that I couldn't wait. He's the one that wants to buy cigarettes. This is his newspaper, too. Tell him I'll see him back at the hotel in an hour."

Harry came from the telephone booth. He had finished a complete call to Burbank, reading the message that Barbara had received. Harry had added a description of the man in the hotel dining room. He was thinking of the fellow's face, when he reached the cigar counter.

There, Harry saw the newspaper that Rex had left. Methodically, he picked it up; before he had a chance to look for Rex, Harry's eyes caught a photograph on the open page.

The picture portrayed the man who had come into the hotel dining room. Above it was the caption "Exonerated." Below, Harry read a name that seemed to leap from the page: ZIMMER COUGAL.

Linked thoughts flashed through Harry's brain. He saw the game in an instant. The message from Sidney was a lure to bring Rex to the Swing High Club alone.

Barbara had mentioned a dinner invitation from Sidney; this request for an after-dinner meeting was a natural one. But Sidney knew that Barbara went regularly to the opera; that was the catch. The mention of half past ten had necessarily meant that Barbara would be late.

Zimmer Cougal had dropped into the dining room when the message arrived, just to make sure that the bait was snapped. All he had to do was watch where the message was delivered; then take a table of his own, close by.

That was doubly important; it meant that Zimmer was in the game after all. The racketeer would have to know Rex when he saw him again, at half past ten.

THAT time was close. Harry looked for Rex. He wasn't around the cigar store, nor was he on the street. Dashing back to the counter, Harry interrupted a sale to ask the clerk where Rex had gone. The clerk growled the word that Rex had left. Harry didn't wait to buy cigarettes. He hopped to the street and grabbed the first taxi that he saw.

No time to call Burbank again. Harry had to flag Rex before he reached the Swing High Club. He didn't realize how long a start Rex had gained. Under Harry's urging, the taxi driver did wonders, smashing a few of the new traffic laws, escaping the observation of over-busy officers. They swung into the isolated street where the Swing High Club was located. Harry pointed to a taxi stopping up ahead.

"I've got to reach that fellow!"

It was too late. Rex was going into the door of the Swing High Club when the wheels of Harry's taxi screeched at the curb. Slapping a dollar bill into the cabby's hand, Harry dashed to overtake his friend.

At the door, Harry pulled to a sudden stop.

It was half past ten. Rex was inside the place. It wouldn't do to come bounding in like a maniac. Maybe there'd be a chance to ease Rex out, before trouble started.

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The Swing High Club was secluded; but it didn't look dangerous. The doorway was three steps down from the sidewalk, with a little entry beyond. Beside the door was a huge, frosted window, decorated with flocks of purple kittens.

Harry noticed a black-barred background through the window; but he didn't realize what it was until he stepped through the door.

Then he saw that the lines were a metal grille, forming a backing to the window. Those bars were ostensibly to prevent burglary; but they could keep people from getting out, as well as from forcing an entry.

The door was heavy, too. The club was a respectable little restaurant; but it was occupying the premises of a former speakeasy.

There was another thing that Harry didn't know. The Swing High wasn't a night club. It served dinners only; and usually closed at half past nine. Tonight, a few late customers had kept it open until ten. After that, the two remaining waiters had invited the belated diners to leave.

Those diners happened to be Zimmer's mob. They refused to leave; instead, they had requested the waiters to remain. The waiters had accepted, under the persuasive influence of five .38 revolvers.

At present, Zimmer's gorillas were spread about the restaurant, trying to look respectable. The waiters, in turn, were acting courteously, knowing that guns lay ready in the laps of the pretended customers.

The restaurant was about twenty feet in width, and extended a full fifty feet to its rear wall. Zimmer's men formed an irregular line from near the door.

THE waiter was showing Rex to a rear table, muttering that it had been reserved. Harry followed nonchalantly, running the gauntlet of ugly eyes that flashed from the fake customers. The lights of the little place were soft enough to dull the hardness of those faces; but Harry's sidelong glances told him that he was passing a living rogues gallery.

Keyed to coming danger, Harry spotted two small windows at the back of the café. He also saw a rear door in the corner. Those offered outlet; better, Harry thought, than a door to the kitchen, midway along the line.

Harry's opinion changed when he reached Rex's table. The windows were tiny; they had bars on the outside. The door was locked, and the key was gone.

That didn't sap Harry's nerve. He thwacked Rex on the back; then turned to the pale-faced waiter, with the comment:

"Friend of mine. I saw him coming in here."

Rex was too astonished to be angry because Harry had butted into his appointment with Sidney. Rex had cooled during his cab ride; he was smart enough to recognize that something important had brought Harry. Proof came, when Harry side-mouthed:

"We've got to slide out of here! Follow my move, Rex. Take it easy."

With that, Harry rose from the table. Rex did the same. It looked as though they were holding a discussion.

"Why don't you give Sid a call?" questioned Harry, loud enough for others to hear. "I'll talk to him. He won't mind my being here. There's a telephone at the front of the place—"

Swinging Rex about, Harry gained a new view toward the outer door. The scene had completely changed. Thugs were on their feet, revolvers glimmering in their fists. One hoodlum had shoved the waiters into the kitchen; he was growling for them to bolt the door from the other side.

That wasn't all. The gun-toting tribe was no longer leaderless. The front door of the restaurant had opened; inside stood a rogue whose face Harry no longer failed to recognize. Zimmer Cougal was on deck to supervise personally the scheduled murder.

Sight of Harry merely brought a brighter gleam of gold teeth, as Zimmer's thick lips widened in a grin. Zimmer was rather pleased by the prospect of delivering two kills for the price of one.

Bolts were pressed shut, making the heavy front door impregnable against a drive from outside. To prevent the last chance of escape, Zimmer had also turned the big door key; he was pocketing it when Harry saw him.

The little cafe had been turned into a sealed trap, where Harry Vincent and Rex Lancott faced the bristle of murderous guns.

CHAPTER XV. BROKEN BATTLE.

REX started a frantic forward lunge at sight of the aiming killers. Harry stopped that suicidal move with a hard elbow shove. The crooks were gesturing for victims to raise their arms. Harry reached; Rex, subsiding, copied the move.

The outlook was a bad one. For once, Harry was positive that he could expect no aid from The Shadow. Zimmer had cut off that prospect by bolting the heavy door.

Perhaps The Shadow had guessed what was due, provided that Burbank had contacted him at the sanctum. If so, he would be riding here in a commandeered taxi; but even The Shadow's arrival couldn't help.

Once The Shadow tried to storm this stronghold, Zimmer would give the word for slaughter. Death would come to Harry and Rex before The Shadow could hack through the door or bash an opening in the metal work that blocked the huge front window.

Approaching the outspread killers, Zimmer pulled a huge roll of money from his pocket. He peeled off packets that were girded with rubber bands; passed each to a receiving hand, always with the comment:

"There's your grand."

Blood money in advance. The wad that Zimmer replaced in his pocket was as large as all five shares that he had handed out. It was obviously a fifty-fifty divvy. Rex saw it; Harry could hear his mutter:

"Ten thousand dollars. That's what Sid was willing to let go, if I gave the Buddha back to the estate."

Rex was eager to try another break. Harry knew it would be bad, for some of the crooks were covering while others took their cash. The question was, would there be a later chance? That didn't look likely, either. So Harry chose the present.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Crooks hadn't overheard Rex's mutter. That was why Harry risked words of his own.

"Shift ahead," he undertoned to Rex. "Block out my right arm. I've got a gun!"

Rex staged a half lurch, that brought a warning snarl from one of Zimmer's band. Rex subsided, lifting his hands higher. A shift to the left; his shoulder was in front of Harry's right fist. Sneaking his hand downward, Harry clamped his fingers on an automatic that was in his hip pocket. He gave Rex the last terse order:

"Duck for a table!"

As Rex made a sidelong spring, Harry whipped his gun into view; he took instant aim for the thug who had Rex covered. The fellow forgot Rex. Giving a yell, he made a dive of his own. Harry whizzed a bullet past him; then turned to fire at the others.

ZIMMER COUGAL was too quick. His hard rasp sounded above the roar of Harry's first shot. His order was for gunmen to dive. They went for tables, Zimmer with them.

Harry took to shelter of his own, stabbing shots as he went. The thugs were shooting, too; but the bullets were sizzling wide. Harry stopped his trigger finger.

He and Rex were in back of corner tables, their plight worse than before. Harry had fired all but two of his cartridges. Zimmer had nullified the result. One crook alone had taken a minor flesh wound, from Harry's wasted barrage.

Zimmer's raucous shout showed ugly triumph: "Get them!"

Killers sprang up from behind tables. Rather than use his reserve shots, Harry hurled the table that he had taken as a shield. Rex did the same; the flung tables made the crooks dodge. Spasmodic shots went wild.

Harry grabbed for another table and slung it. Rex launched one a moment later. Ducking thugs warded off the wooden missiles. They came up with their guns.

Trapped in the clear space at the rear of the cafe, Harry saw a swift finish for himself and Rex. A crazy thought flashed through his brain, that only an earthquake could prevent the coming doom.

Harry was wrong; but he had the right idea. A cataclysm of some sort was needed; and one arrived. It hit before a single gloating thug could fire, and it wasn't much short of an earthquake.

A tremendous crash came from the big front window. Glass and metal bars were ripped away by a massive shape that tore through like a Juggernaut. The floor shook as brilliant lights flooded the whole cafe, bearing in on the aiming crooks. Zimmer didn't have to shout. His followers took for the walls of their own accord.

An instant later, all witnesses recognized what had struck. There was a screech of brakes; the clash of steel against masonry. A bashed taxicab slithered half across the floor, crushing the tables in its path. Some dare-devil driver had wheeled it straight in from the street, smashing everything that intervened.

Before crooks could recover from their startlement, they learned the identity of the venturer who had taken this bold course to reach them. From the wheel of the wrecked taxi came the burst of a challenging laugh that sounded a fierce crescendo above the clatter of falling bricks.

The Shadow was here to deal with Zimmer Cougal!

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

THE SHADOW had heard the muffled bursts of gunfire; that was why he had hurtled the cab over the curb, straight for the big front window. His mockery was but the prelude to his gunfire. Over the window ledge beside the driver's seat, The Shadow cut loose with a brace of automatics.

Thugs were belated with their revolvers. The Shadow clipped them as fast as they aimed; Zimmer howled at their folly; he knew the error of open battle with The Shadow.

Zimmer was trying to wedge through to safety, between the cab's mashed radiator and the wall. He looked back to see two of his henchmen slumped to the floor, a third sprawling to the same destination.

Harry was near a corner, crouched low, ready to supply his last two bullets if they were needed. Rex was only a few feet away, watching The Shadow's amazing work with living targets.

Both rescued men saw the fourth member of Zimmer's mob leap to a table at the side wall. That fellow had gained the angle that he wanted. He brought his gun hand down to aim over the ledge of the taxi's front window.

The Shadow's left hand pivoted its gun muzzle. The big .45 had only inches to move while the crook's hand was traveling a foot. Flame stabbed straight for the would-be killer. The crook's gun fist sank, while his left hand clamped his chest. With a slow, painful twist, The Shadow's adversary over-topped.

Harry saw The Shadow's gun blast; but Rex didn't. With a warning shout, Rex was on his feet, lunging for the table as the thug wavered. By his rise, Rex came into a path where Zimmer could offer fire.

Savagely, the murderous racketeer aimed for his wanted victim. It was Harry's quickness that saved Rex from the gunner that The Shadow couldn't reach.

Diving along the floor, Harry hooked Rex's ankle, sent his friend on a long spill, just as Zimmer fired. The racketeer's bullets whined above Rex's falling shoulders, to ping the wall between the rear windows. Zimmer's shout told that he thought that he had made a kill.

That call also brought The Shadow. The door of the taxi hurtled open.

With a long sweep, The Shadow reached the floor; he whirled like a dervish among the overturned tables, past the moaning thugs that he had dropped. Zimmer was frantically trying to clip that weaving shape in black. He might as well have tried to shoot a ghost.

His nerve gone with his futile bullets, Zimmer did a mad scramble over the taxi's bumper, hoping to escape through the shattered front wall of the restaurant.

The Shadow poised. His finger squeezed a gun trigger. Only chance saved Zimmer from that well-timed shot.

Up by the taxi's bumper popped the fifth man of Zimmer's crew. The thug failed to fire, for The Shadow's gun boomed first. From his bobbing angle, the hoodlum accidentally intercepted The Shadow's shot. The last thug's shoulder received the bullet that should have reached Zimmer's back.

Spinning about, the last mobster dropped his revolver. With a maddened howl, he clawed the air, then took a convulsive dive across the taxi's bumper, to land beside Zimmer. The racketeer did not wait for his companion. Seeing Zimmer heading through the broken wall, the wounded thug dashed in the same direction.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

THE SHADOW did not follow. His wild race to the battleground had brought police along the taxi's trail. Sirens were shrieking from the front street. Zimmer and his pal were almost in the hands of the law.

That suited The Shadow. He made a gesture that Harry understood. The rescued men were to clear out while The Shadow waited.

Harry sprang to the rear door; used both his bullets to shatter the lock. He shouted to Rex, who was crawling forward to pick up a revolver that a crippled crook had dropped. Rex snatched up the weapon; then answered Harry's beckon.

Shoving Rex into the outside air, Harry started him toward the rear street, with the abrupt command:

"Get back to the hotel! Stay with the Buddha! I'll join you there."

Rex bounded off. Harry turned, to find The Shadow beside him. It was Harry's turn to take orders; he heard them despite the shrill police whistles that reverberated from the front window.

"Meet Barbara," spoke The Shadow. "Tell her that Rex is safe; that she is not to come here."

Harry was away instantly. The Shadow turned to survey the cafe. None of the wounded crooks was rising from the floor. They had taken all they wanted. They were hoping that The Shadow would forget them.

Flashlights burned from beyond the ruined taxi. One gleam showed The Shadow silhouetted near the rear door. A cop's voice yelled:

"There's somebody at the back!"

Came a vague, trailing laugh; with it, the black shape vanished. Like the men that he had rescued, The Shadow had chosen the rear path into darkness. His course, however, was not to the next street. Instead, The Shadow scaled the one-story wall of a low house.

From it, he gained the roof above the next floor. He was lost from view when police arrived to spread their flashlights around an open courtyard in back of the Swing High Club.

From beside a crumbling chimney, The Shadow gained a slanted view toward the next avenue. An old car was cutting across, with a wailing police car in pursuit. Zimmer Cougal had managed a get-away. How far he would travel was a question; but, in a sense, his flight was fortunate. It aided Harry Vincent.

The Shadow could see Harry heading up the avenue, on foot, past a cluster of frightened pedestrians. There was a subway station only a block away. Harry could easily reach it. The only missing person was Rex. The Shadow accounted for him a few moments later, when a cab wheeled from the rear street.

Rex had been lucky enough to hail that taxi; but the cab was behaving oddly. Instead of heading toward the Hotel Metrolite—a direction also away from the police—the cab turned opposite. It was cutting right into the path of police cars. Fortunately, they let it ride through, for they were joining the pursuit of Zimmer.

Nevertheless, the cab's contrary direction told The Shadow much. Rex had disobeyed Harry's order. He wasn't going to the Metrolite. He had something on his mind beside the Crystal Buddha.

Rex was heading into fresh trouble; and The Shadow divined where it would be. The rooftop was a vantage spot no longer. The Shadow had other work to do.

A whispered laugh came low and grim, as The Shadow descended an outer wall. That sibilant tone was prophetic. It marked The Shadow's sudden start to a place where he had intended to go later, but which Rex had already chosen.

This trip could mean the forcing of an issue that The Shadow had preferred to postpone. The Shadow's plans would depend entirely upon the consequences that Rex Lancott produced.

CHAPTER XVI. HIDDEN SHADOWS.

REX'S cab completed a rapid journey near a subway station in the Fifties. Shoving cash into the cabby's hand, Rex headed for the subway entrance. He ducked down the steps; he saw the cab speed away. That taxi driver was glad to be off; and the decision pleased Rex also. He didn't want any one to see where he went.

Coming back out of the subway, Rex walked rapidly to Fifty-fifth Street. Once around the corner, he started a half run. In less than a block, he reached the apartment house where Sidney Brellen was listed in the lobby cards.

Rex didn't ring Sidney's bell. He pushed three or four other buttons. Voices spoke from a speaking tube; somebody pushed an upstairs button.

The automatic door lock buzzed. Rex shoved through. He took the elevator up to Sidney's and did a sneak to his cousin's door.

The transom was open. Rex listened, expecting sounds from within; for he could see the living-room light. The noise that came was the cautious turning of the doorknob. The move brought a grim gleam to Rex's stern eyes.

His own approach had been fortunate. Sidney must have been listening for something like it. Anyway, Sidney was going to peek into the hall; and that suited Rex.

Drawing the revolver that he had grabbed in the Swing High Club, Rex watched the knob. When its motion ended, Rex whacked his shoulder against the door, sent its winging inward.

In the center of the floor he saw Sidney, sprawling from the unexpected drive. As Sidney came up, scare-faced, he recognized Rex.

Sidney began to splutter. That stopped when Rex poked the gun muzzle between his cousin's eyes. Sidney's lips spread in a big-toothed gape. He tried to shrink away; his legs quit completely.

"Surprised to see me, aren't you?" gibed Rex. "Thought I wouldn't be coming around here, after to-night. I'm here, though, you rat; and I ought to settle with you!"

Ten minutes sooner, Rex would have used bullets instead of talk. Sight of Zimmer's ten-thousand-dollar divvy had aroused Rex's rage toward Sidney. All during the taxi ride, Rex had been clutching the revolver, promising himself that he'd drill Sidney when he found him. Fortunately for Sidney, Rex had changed plans by the time he reached the apartment.

REX'S immediate purpose was to learn about the Crystal Buddha. He intended to wrest all needed facts from Sidney's lips. At the same time, Rex's emotions were at hair-trigger pitch. One false step from Sidney, Rex would be ready to shoot.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Drumming through Rex's brain was the recollection of how Zimmer toyed with victims. Rex felt like giving Sidney a taste of that treatment.

"You're going to talk, Sid"—Rex put hard-voiced words—"and there'll be no holding back! I know what you're after. You want the Crystal Buddha, because it's worth a lot more than I'm supposed to know. Whatever it's worth, you're out to take all of it!"

Sidney's chinless face was quivering in fright. His shifty eyes were darting here and there, trying to forget the menace of the gun muzzle. Suddenly those eyes fixed toward a spot past Rex's shoulder. The effect was electric.

Sidney's fishlike lips formed a shrewd grin. His eyes met Rex's. With a display of nerve that puzzled Rex, Sidney mouthed defiance.

"Why shouldn't I want the Buddha?" he demanded. "I'm wise to you at last, Rex. I trusted you, even after you brought those crooks to the Starlight Club. They didn't get me that night; that's why you're here right now, threatening me on your own."

Rex thought that Sidney had gone crazy. He didn't guess that those words were meant for other listeners. He was even more dumfounded, when Sidney added:

"I'm keeping the Buddha, Rex. It's mine, and you know it. That's why I've put it away, where you and your ruffians can't get at it. The Crystal Buddha belongs to me!"

Sidney's hoarse tone had reached a shrillness. His insistence that he owned the Buddha was something that Rex couldn't take. Angrily, Rex shoved his revolver forward, pressed the cold steel muzzle against Sidney's forehead. Rex began a silencing growl:

"Why, you—"

Silent hands suddenly plucked in from both sides. They hooked Rex's arms, lugged them back behind him. His fingers went nerveless as a fist clamped his wrist. As the revolver hit the floor, Rex bobbed his head from left to right, to see himself flanked by a pair of stalwart Hindus.

Stealthy as ever, Bela Singh's men had moved to a surprise attack. Sidney had seen them coming; that was why he had suddenly changed tune, to hold Rex's attention. Rex, in turn, recognized these adversaries as the pair outside the Starlight Club. He had given them a battle then; he tried to repeat that process.

This time, the Hindus knew what they were up against. They didn't give Rex a chance to break loose. They hoisted him up against the wall.

Seeing Rex's wild struggle, Sidney sprang in to take a hand. There was ugliness in Sidney's snarl as he grabbed for Rex's throat; but he didn't get the clutch he wanted. Rex made a kicking drive with his feet; he landed them on Sidney's chest. That thrust propelled Sidney to a corner, where he plopped, gasping for breath.

A few seconds more, and Rex might have rolled the Hindus to the floor, despite the hold they had on him. It was another arrival who ended the short fray. Bela Singh had witnessed the entire struggle. Striding in from the doorway, he put an end to conflict.

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

BELA SINGH'S procedure was rapid. From a pocket, he brought a small glass vial. Rex saw gleaming eyes beneath a turban; a hand thrusting forward on a level with a solid chin. Dark fingers twisted; the frail phial broke, only a few inches from Rex's face.

A noxious odor penetrated Rex's nostrils. One intake of that pungent vapor was all that he could stand. Rex slumped in the arms of his Hindu captors.

Bela Singh watched the stalwarts carry Rex toward the door. Pointing, Bela Singh spoke a command in musical Hindustani. When the Hindus were gone, Bela Singh turned to Sidney, who was gasping from the corner.

Sidney had seen the whitish gas that curled momentarily from the broken container, only to dissolve when Rex inhaled it. Eyes fixed on Bela Singh, Sidney gulped:

"Is—is he dead?"

A headshake from Bela Singh, then the soft inquiry:

"Would you prefer that he died, sahib?"

Sidney did not answer. He came to his feet unsteadily; went sagging to a chair watching Bela Singh at intervals.

Sidney was groping for the right reply; he watched Bela Singh's expression, to gain a cue. Sidney was shrewd enough to read the Hindu's impassive face.

He recognized that murder was out of Bela Singh's line. An order for unnecessary death would surely bring the Hindu's disfavor. Sidney faked a sorrowful manner, as though he pitied Rex. While figuring what to say next, Sidney reached for a brandy bottle and poured a drink.

Bela Singh was looking toward the door, as though he heard a remote sound. His servants had been gone for nearly five minutes; they were safely on their way. Bela Singh seemed satisfied. He turned toward Sidney, who was gulping the glass of brandy.

Sidney's eyes were toward the door. He thought he saw a blackish streak cross the threshold. He decided that his blurred vision was the cause, for the darkness vanished when he blinked.

"I'm glad Rex is still alive," Sidney told Bela Singh. "He is a"—Sidney held back the word "cousin," adding instead—"a friend of mine. At least, he claimed to, so I trusted him."

Bela Singh accepted the explanation. That spurred Sidney.

"You heard what he said," reminded Sidney. "He wants the Crystal Buddha. Rex is dangerous. He's got to be watched."

"That shall be arranged," informed Bela Singh. "He has been taken to my headquarters. He can be kept there, until after his excellency has arrived in New York, to receive the Crystal Buddha from your hands."

"On the twentieth," mused Sidney. He was thinking of the fact that he still lacked the Buddha. Then, wisely: "But you've got to keep Rex quiet. He may make trouble."

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

"A mild dosage of hashish will accomplish it, sahib. The effect will not be harmful. He can be aroused at any time you wish."

That gave Sidney a smart idea.

"Keep him quiet until to-morrow evening," ordered Sidney. "Then take me to him, so that I can talk to him, alone. I can bring him to his senses, Bela Singh."

"You shall hear from me at eight o'clock," assured Bela Singh. "All shall be as you have ordered, sahib."

WHEN Bela Singh strode from the apartment, he failed to see the deep blackness that filled a corner of the outer corridor. That thick patch never stirred, until Bela Singh had gone out by the fire tower.

A black shape then materialized into the cloaked figure of The Shadow. Silently, the unseen listener moved past Sidney's door, which Bela Singh had closed.

The Shadow had overheard the entire talk between Sidney and Bela Singh. He understood what had happened to Rex Lancott. Changing his plans to fit these new circumstances, The Shadow decided to let Rex remain a prisoner, for the present.

From statements that Sidney and Bela Singh had made, The Shadow had gotten facts that he required. That was proven a half hour later, when the cloaked investigator reached his sanctum in an antiquated building lost in the heart of New York. There, beneath a bluish light, The Shadow laid clippings and typewritten reports upon a polished table.

These were data that The Shadow had previously acquired. The clippings stated that the Rajah of Lenapore, one of the wealthiest potentates in India, would arrive in New York on the twentieth of the month. The reports concerned other matters, including the journeys of James Plaistead.

As Robert Brinby had told the heirs to the estate, James Plaistead had been the friend of kings. One ruler that he had known well was the father of the present Rajah of Lenapore. A yellowed clipping, from a newspaper of thirty years ago, related how Plaistead had saved the life of the former rajah, during an elephant hunt.

The rest was obvious to The Shadow. The Crystal Buddha must have been the rajah's gift to James Plaistead. It was symbol of some promised reward that Plaistead had never claimed. That explained the peculiar legacy.

James Plaistead had hoped that one adventurous heir would prefer the Buddha out of sentiment. Rex Lancott had acted as his uncle desired. Though he did not know it, Rex was in line for the entire reward.

Sidney Brelen had made false claim of ownership. That had deceived Bela Singh, who had been appointed by the present rajah to serve as his temporary representative. Sidney had learned the Buddha's real worth. That was why he had tried to get the idol. Sidney's efforts had failed; but he was still bluffing Bela Singh.

That was why Sidney wanted a private talk with Rex. It would be his only way to get the Buddha before the rajah arrived. What Sidney intended to do if Rex refused to make a deal, was a question that would be answered tomorrow night. Until then, The Shadow could wait.

That, at least, was The Shadow's decision, as he turned off the bluish light. An eerie laugh trailed through the sanctum; it betokened that The Shadow's new plans were complete. Nevertheless, as always, The Shadow made allowance for unexpected complications.

It was well that The Shadow did so. New events were due before eight o'clock to-morrow evening. Murder, halted often by The Shadow, was to strike at last, due to a freak of chance that even The Shadow was unable to foresee.

CHAPTER XVII. MARK OF DEATH.

AT five the next afternoon, Barbara Brinby met Kent Allard. She had talked with him earlier, by telephone, requesting that he find out facts regarding Harry Vincent, who claimed to be a friend of Rex Lancott.

Harry, it seemed, had assured Barbara that Rex was safe, despite the newspaper accounts of battle at the Swing High Club. Barbara wasn't quite sure that Harry was right.

Allard's quiet-toned discussion relieved Barbara, when they talked together in the Metrolite lounge room.

"Vincent strikes me as the right sort," announced the hawk-faced explorer. "He says that Rex has gone on a trip; and I believe him. At present, Vincent is staying at the apartment in the Village, keeping the Crystal Buddha until Rex returns."

"But there was a terrible fight at the Swing High," insisted Barbara. "The criminals that the police captured admit that they were paid a thousand dollars each to murder some one."

"They did not state who was to be the victim?"

"No. Only their leader, Zimmer Cougal, can tell that. The police haven't found him. But I am afraid that they killed Rex."

"No victim was found. There was no chance to dispose of a body."

Allard's quiet argument convinced Barbara. She recalled that police attributed Zimmer's flight to The Shadow. She finally nodded her belief that Rex must have escaped harm. Still, she wondered why he had gone away.

"It's odd that Rex didn't call me," mused Barbara, aloud. "I thought he might have dropped in to see Sidney and left a message. But Sidney hasn't seen him."

There was a slight smile on Allard's lips. Barbara noticed it but failed to guess its significance, for Allard gave a different reason. He suggested that The Shadow might be responsible for Rex's absence.

That brought a pleased gasp from Barbara. She realized that The Shadow had for some reason appointed himself Rex's protector. Allard's theory seemed a likely one.

Allard turned the talk to Sidney. He asked Barbara about the spendthrift's finances. Barbara was able to give a rather thorough report, for her father had charge of Sidney's income. After reciting various details, Barbara added:

"Sidney is always asking for payments ahead of their date. That's why I feel that Lester was right, when he declared that Sidney was only pretending to offer Rex thirty thousand dollars for the Crystal Buddha. Why, that thirty thousand won't be paid until after the estate is settled. He has already borrowed a few hundred from father, on the strength of the legacy."

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Barbara was ready to leave. She was going to meet her father, and start home for Long Island. Allard gave her a telephone number; told her to call it promptly, in case of any new developments. Barbara promised to do so, although she couldn't imagine what might occur.

WHEN Barbara left the hotel, Allard watched her go. His eyes took on a penetrating gleam that Barbara would have recognized, had she looked back.

They were the burning eyes of The Shadow. Their gaze told the thoughts within The Shadow's mind.

The Shadow knew that Barbara was playing a part far more important than she supposed, in the matter of the Crystal Buddha. With it, The Shadow saw reasons why Barbara would be absolutely safe, no matter what might occur to others.

There could be danger for Barbara, if she happened to find out too much; but that could come only if The Shadow chose it. In his calculations, The Shadow made allowance for all factors. It chanced that an unknown factor was to enter, at a most untimely moment. Not knowing that, The Shadow fared forth on a side trip after he left the hotel.

Dusk found The Shadow in a dingy, East Side district where squatty old brick houses crowded each other for space. The Shadow no longer appeared as Allard. He was attired in black as he weaved his way to the rear of a squalid building. There, he gave a low, almost inaudible whisper. A hunchy man crept close to report.

The fellow was Hawkeye. A clever spotter, Hawkeye was keeping watch on a second-floor room, where a dim light was visible through the cracks of a battered window shade. The Shadow's agents had done good work to-day. They had located a spot that the police had been unable to discover: the hide-out of Zimmer Cougal.

The racketeer hadn't risked a trip back to his apartment after the Swing High fiasco. Zimmer had lammed straight for this hide-away, knowing that Joe Cardona would soon be on his trail.

Entering the house, The Shadow crept up a rickety stairway. He reached a locked door; inserted a plierlike instrument that gripped the end of a key. Silently, imperceptibly, The Shadow turned the tiny pliers. The key twisted without grating.

A few moments later, The Shadow was peering into the interior of Zimmer's dingy hide-out.

ZIMMER was glowering as he sat on a rickety chair. He wasn't alone; another man occupied a battered cot by the end wall.

The prone man was the lone gorilla who had escaped along with Zimmer; and the fellow wasn't faring well. His shoulder was bandaged in makeshift fashion; the layers of cloth were stained with oozing blood.

A groan from the cot. Zimmer snapped an oath.

"Whad'a you want a croaker for?" he demanded. "I can't call no doc up here, Plugger. I'm waiting to hear from the guy that slipped us the ten grand. After that, maybe, we can fix you up."

Slow minutes ticked. A buzz came from the corner. Zimmer lifted an inverted soap box to reveal a telephone. The Shadow heard Zimmer's cautious growl as the racketeer answered the call:

"Hello!... Yeah, this is Zimmer... Been waiting to hear from you, figuring you'd help me lam... What's that?"

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

Zimmer's face went vicious as he heard the voice across the wire. He mouthed an angry retort.

"Whatta you mean, we didn't rub out Lancott? Say, I plugged him myself! You must be screwy... No, I ain't seen the papers. Read me what they say..."

Zimmer listened; his flattish mug retained its scowl; then widened into a gold-toothed grin.

"What if the cops didn't find Lancott at the Swing High Club? There was a guy with him, that could have lugged him out... You got your ten grand's worth. I'm telling you, Lancott is croaked... Listen, any time you can prove different, I'll give you the dough back..."

"It ain't the cash, huh? All right, quit the beefing, then... Find him for me and I'll take another crack at him... Yeah, without wanting any more dough. Only I'm telling you this"—Zimmer's growl was sarcastic: "When you do find Lancott, it'll be in the morgue! I croaked him...Yeah, give me a buzz here, any time you want."

Zimmer turned to the cot. He muttered the details, saying that the newspapers were goofy. Zimmer stared. "Plugger" had neither groaned nor budged.

Zimmer shook the thug's shoulder; there was no protest. Plugger was dead.

That discovery made Zimmer gloat. He wouldn't have to worry about scouring the underworld for a surgeon who would handle criminal cases. Plugger could keep this hide-out as a tomb, after Zimmer was through with it. Moreover; the thug's death was profitable.

Fishing through the dead man's pockets, Zimmer found the thousand dollars that he had paid the fellow. Chuckling, he added that cash to his own fat roll.

The door closed; the key turned. The Shadow descended the stairs; there, his own laugh sounded in an audible whisper. There was no use to watch Zimmer. He wouldn't get another call while Rex was still in the hands of Bela Singh.

Some time after eight o'clock, Zimmer might again become a factor; not before.

MEANWHILE, circumstances were building without The Shadow's knowledge. Barbara Brinby had expected to meet her father outside his office building. When he didn't arrive, she went up to the office. There she found Lester Kurnz seated at her father's desk.

"Hello, Barbara," greeted Lester. "Your father forgot another of those directors' meetings; and had to rush there. Luckily, I was here; and told him I could wait. He says for you to meet him for dinner at his club."

The telephone rang while Lester was finishing his statement. Waving toward the desk, Lester added:

"That's probably your father, now."

Barbara answered the telephone. She spoke, expecting to hear her father's voice; then her expression became puzzled. The call ended abruptly from the other end. Barbara hung up the receiver, turned to Lester with the question:

"Did you ever hear of a man named Torrington?"

"No," replied Lester. "Who is he?"

THE CRYSTAL BUDDHA

"An old servant who worked for James Plaistead. He says he was pensioned off, some years ago."

"I seldom went to visit Uncle Jim." remarked Lester. "He always thought that relatives came to borrow money. They generally did; that's why Sidney went there so often. Call Sidney; maybe he knows something about Torrington."

Barbara picked up the telephone. She dialed Sidney's number; held a brief conversation. When she had finished, she turned to Lester.

"Sidney claims he knows nothing about Torrington," said Barbara. "But I think he does, the way he talked. He tried to find out what Torrington wanted. I didn't tell him."

"What did Torrington want?"

"He said he had something important to tell me"—Barbara's eyes were thoughtful—"about the Crystal Buddha. I am going to see him."

Before Lester could offer a suggestion, Barbara started from the office. Lester followed, calling for her to wait; that he would go with her.

Barbara shouted back that Torrington wanted her father or herself to come alone. Before Lester could overtake her, she was in an elevator. The door clanged shut as Lester arrived.

Downstairs, Barbara remembered her promise to Kent Allard. This was a new development that he ought to know about. Barbara didn't want to wait for Lester, so she quickly wrote the address that Torrington had given her. Handing it to the elevator starter, she repeated Allard's phone number; told him to call it and state where she had gone.

Barbara was away in a taxi when Lester arrived. He looked anxiously toward the street; the starter saw him. Recognizing Lester as a friend of Barbara's, the starter showed the slip of paper:

"This is where Miss Brinby went, sir. She left in a cab."

Lester hopped out and hailed a taxi for himself. It took the same direction as the first one. The starter shrugged; then went to a telephone to call the number that Barbara had given him.

THE SHADOW had gained an inkling of these events. He had stopped to look in on Sidney Brellen. The Shadow was peering through the crack of the apartment door when Sidney took the telephone into the closet, to answer Barbara's call.

Sidney threw off his smoking jacket. He thumbed the pages of a telephone book. It was plain that he was starting somewhere, so The Shadow did not wait.

He headed downstairs; reached a telephone in the janitor's empty room and put in a call to Burbank, the contact man.

Over the wire, Burbank gave Torrington's address. He had just received it from the elevator starter, who was transmitting Barbara's message to Allard.

Cutting through to the rear street, The Shadow boarded Moe's taxi, which was waiting for him. As they swung past Fifty-fifth Street, The Shadow saw a cab pulling from the front of Sidney's apartment building.

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He knew that Sidney was in that cab.

The Shadow was speeding to a race with death. It was only a short run to Torrington's address, but the trip was difficult, due to tangled traffic. Moe was delayed at intervals, but finally managed to get clear. Only a dozen blocks lay ahead.

Barbara had already arrived at Torrington's, to find an old man waiting at the door of a row of connected houses. Torrington did not wait for introductions. He drew Barbara inside and pushed her into a little parlor. His tone was quavering with haste.

"I've read the newspapers, Miss Brinby"—Torrington wagged a shaky finger, beneath the flickering gaslight—"and something has told me that all that shooting was on account of the Crystal Buddha. I guessed it because he told me"—Torrington nodded his head—"he told me to pay no attention to anything I read."

"Who told you?"

"Sidney Brellen. I didn't remember him when he came here. It's been years since I'd seen him. But I told him all I knew about the Buddha."

"What was that, Torrington?"

"That some day, it will be worth a lot of money—as much as half a million dollars. That's what old Mr. Plaistead said to me; but he didn't say why the Buddha was worth that much. He swore me to secrecy, Mr. Plaistead did."

"And yet you told Sidney!"

Torrington sadly shook his head.

"I'm a poor man, miss," he pleaded. "It was bad investment that made me lose what Mr. Plaistead gave me. Since he was dead, I thought the promise wouldn't count. Particularly"—Torrington drew his hand from his pocket, to show some crumpled money—"when Mr. Brellen gave me this."

"For telling him about the Buddha?"

"That was it, miss. And for swearing that I'd say naught; no matter what might happen. But I couldn't keep silent longer—not after I'd seen the newspapers to-day."

Barbara gripped the old man's arm. Torrington shrank away, as she tugged him toward the hallway door. Plaintively, he said he couldn't go. Barbara insisted.

"I'm taking you to Sidney!" exclaimed Barbara. "That's blood money that you hold there, Torrington! We are going to find Sidney, so that you can accuse him in my presence."

"Accuse him?"

"Of murdering Rex Lancott, his own cousin! I know the truth at last. That money"—Barbara pointed—"is a mark of death!"

TORRINGTON stood horrified. His quivering lips set tight. He turned toward the rear of the little parlor, to get a hat that rested on a bookcase.

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It was then that Barbara screamed a warning, as she saw the muzzle of a revolver jut through drapes covering a rear door. Her cry was too late.

The gun spoke, its bark muffled by the drapes. Torrington staggered; the money fluttered to the floor as he pressed his hands to his body. With a wince, he caved at Barbara's feet.

There was a thud of a closing door beyond the curtain; the click of a key in a lock.

Barbara scarcely heard. She was staring at Torrington's form, face up on the floor. Scrawny arms had gone wide; a peaked face was strained in death. Upon the old man's white shirt front was an irregular blob of crimson, that filled the definition that Barbara had given to the money.

That blot was an actual mark of death. From Barbara's lips crept the name of the one person that she could accuse of murder:

"Sidney Brellen!"

CHAPTER XVIII. CHANGED CAPTIVES.

STUNNED by the sight of sudden death, Barbara let a full minute lapse before she gained her senses. Once she recuperated, she acted in the practical fashion that was natural to her. Barbara did not run, screaming, from the room of death. Instead, she sprang for the door that the murderer had closed.

Finding the barrier locked, Barbara cut back through the parlor and reached the hall. There was a rear door there; it led to a darkened dining room. Beyond, Barbara saw the flickering glow of a kitchen gaslight.

In the kitchen, she found the back door locked; the key gone. That avenue, too, was blocked.

Barbara's next thought was to telephone the police. She went to the hallway but found no telephone there. There was a dull light on the second floor; at the top of the stairs, Barbara again looked for a telephone in vain. She realized, then, that Torrington probably made few calls; that the house had no phone at all.

Remembering that the old man had been waiting at the door, Barbara guessed that he had called her from a pay station. She started down the stairs, intending to go outdoors and find the nearest telephone booth.

A brisk clangor halted her. Some one was ringing the front doorbell. Barbara felt a sudden fear that it might be Sidney; then her bravery took control. Boldly, she went to the front door and opened it.

Lester Kurnz was on the door step. Barbara welcomed him with a glad gasp. Her checked emotion loosened. She began to sink as she stepped back into the hall.

Lester's arm supported her. He closed the door; helped her into the hallway, questioning anxiously:

"What's happened to you, Barbara? Where's Torrington?"

"I'm glad you're here, Lester," gasped Barbara. "I need your help. Tell me; did you see Sidney?"

Lester shook his head. He explained how the elevator man had given him the address. Barbara told him to be prepared for a shock. She pointed to the parlor. Lester stopped abruptly, when he saw Torrington's body. Mechanically, he asked:

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"You found him this way?"

Barbara shook her head. When she told that she had seen Torrington die, Lester gaped sheer amazement at her bravery. He listened intently while Barbara recounted all that Torrington had said.

"So it was Sidney's work," voiced Lester. "He wanted the Buddha, after all. You made a mistake to telephone him, Barbara. He must have suspected that Torrington intended to talk. I'm afraid, Barbara"—Lester was solemn—"that this death is not the first."

"You mean Rex?"

"I'm really afraid so. He seems to be missing, despite what that chap Vincent says. There's one way, though, to find out the truth." Lester paused; his fists clenched as he added: "That's to talk to Sidney!"

"He knows I was here—"

"But he can't know how much Torrington told you, or he would have murdered you; too; although he claims to care for you. If I know Sidney, there's only one place he would go: Back to his apartment. Stay in the front hallway; I'm going out to telephone."

LESTER went out. Barbara stood in the hall, watching toward the dining room, ready to use the front door in emergency. She did not calculate the passing time. She thought it was Lester returning, when she heard the front door open, only two minutes later.

Then came a whispered voice. Barbara turned.

It was The Shadow. He had stepped from darkness like a specter; yet Barbara felt no fear. The glow of burning eyes strengthened her. She conducted The Shadow to the parlor. As he viewed Torrington's body, Barbara breathlessly told all that had occurred.

The opening of the front door interrupted; it was Lester, back again. The Shadow stepped beyond the curtain that covered the rear door of the parlor.

"Sidney hasn't reached his apartment yet," announced Lester, entering from the hall. "He'll go there, without question. That's why we'd better not inform the police too soon. Let's get out of here, Barbara. You have to meet your father."

"But the police should know—"

"They will know!" Lester was emphatic. "I'll take care of that. I'll keep calling Sidney; when he finally answers, I'll act as though I suspect nothing. I'll tell him that I intend to drop in; when I arrive, the police will be with me."

Lester stooped beside Torrington's body. Barbara saw the curtain move; The Shadow's head nodded its approval.

When Lester suggested that they start, Barbara agreed.

A grim, mirthless laugh filled that death room after the pair had left. It was a tone of vengeance, that came when The Shadow stepped toward Torrington's body. The Shadow had approved Lester's plan regarding Sidney because he could foresee its climax. Lester was right; Sidney would eventually reach his apartment.

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That would be the right spot for the trapping of the murderer, under conditions that would lure the killer to betray himself. Much though The Shadow regretted Torrington's death, he knew that it had forced a final issue. The quest of the Crystal Buddha had become more than a contest for a fortune. It would have to bring retribution to a murderer, who had at last managed a kill.

IT was almost eight o'clock. The Shadow did not return to Sidney's apartment. Instead, he headed toward the Spanish section of the city.

He reached the isolated alley that offered access to Bela Singh's new lair. The entry grating came upward when The Shadow tried it. He descended into gloom.

There were glimmers of a tiny flashlight, as The Shadow chose a course through narrow passages. Sounds came from the darkness; most of them were muffled. Soon, the tiny glow was penetrating into farther depths.

All the way, The Shadow was in search of traps. He found them—ingenious devices planted by Bela Singh.

Soon, a flashlight shone upward. A figure finally crawled to the grating; came out into the alleyway. That figure shifted away, following the fringe of the alley. All signs of that prowler were gone, ten minutes later, when a car pulled into the narrow passage.

From the car stepped Bela Singh, accompanied by Sidney Brellen. The two Hindus followed. They could hear Bela Singh speak, in low reproval:

"You were not at your apartment at eight."

"I was looking for some one," muttered Sidney. "A man who—well, just some one I heard about. I was afraid he knew something about the Buddha."

"You found him?"

"No. I guess it won't matter. He couldn't know anything that would hurt. Anyway, Bela Singh, I was back when you called at quarter past. The phone was ringing when I came in."

They were through the grating. Bela Singh slid back a barrier in the darkness. When they were past, with the sliding blockade closed, Bela Singh turned on a light. Sidney saw a door ahead and stepped toward it.

"Not that way," spoke Bela Singh. "That door delivers a paralyzing shock to any one who touches it."

The door had the glint of copper beneath it; only a keen eye could have detected the electric wire. Bela Singh turned to a solid wall; worked his fingers along a narrow crack. The wall slid back. The group descended a spiral stairway.

Near the bottom was a step that differed slightly from the others. It looked newer.

Bela Singh cautioned Sidney to avoid that one step. When they were past, Bela Singh picked up an iron bar and shoved it through the slatted rail beside the spiral stairs. He pressed the shiny step.

Instantly, curved doors slid at the top and bottom of the stairway, converting the whole spiral into a cage that reminded Sidney of a gigantic mousetrap.

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"Once caught in there," remarked Bela Singh, "a man cannot escape. The doors complete an electric circuit. The release"—he stepped to the far side of the room below—"is here."

Bela Singh pressed a switch. The curved doors came open.

Bela Singh led the way through a passage into a circular room. When they had crossed it, Bela Singh drew them into another passage. He pointed back to the round room.

"My best snare," he said, musically. "Watch it operate."

A touch of a button; the floor cut beneath the wall with a rotary motion; completing a revolution, it came back again. Another press; Bela Singh's Hindus shoved a ladder downward, to keep the floor from closing.

All descended into a ten-foot well. The ladder was pulled below; the floor closed.

"No one can escape that rotary floor," assured Bela Singh. "It is designed to throw a person away from the passages."

"But when we entered," objected Sidney, "the floor was tight in place."

"Because I set the clock," smiled Bela Singh, pointing to the wall of the lower room. "That was before I left here. Had any one entered before we came, the floor would have dropped him, automatically."

"But he could escape, if uninjured by the fall."

Sidney's statement made Bela Singh smile. Dark eyes gleamed in the mellow light of this lower room as Bela Singh pointed to the mechanical floor.

"We never keep a ladder here," stated Bela Singh, "except when we are below. A trapped prisoner could not reach that floor. It is ten feet above this level. He could open it, I grant, if he could reach it. But there are no giants in these days."

LOOKING about, Sidney saw a narrow, lighted passage that led directly to the grated door of a cell. Bela Singh announced that it was the prison room, where Sidney could meet Rex alone. A Hindu unlocked the door with a large key.

"We have allowed the prisoner to recover," said Bela Singh, "so that he may talk with you. I shall let him see first that we are here. After that, we shall remain beyond the passage, ready, in the event that we are needed."

Reaching past Sidney, Bela Singh slid back the door. The action automatically caused lights to glow from the cell walls. Sidney stared into a square, stone-lined room, expecting to see Rex. Instead, he viewed only the furniture—a few chairs, a table, a cot in the far corner.

There was darkness near the end of the cot; odd darkness that wavered, as though the lights had flickered. As Sidney stepped into the cell, that blackness grew. Before Sidney's affrighted eyes, it became a living form.

It was a cloaked figure, with eyes that took the glow of the cell's lights, to burn upon the startled man who viewed those brilliant orbs.

From unseen lips below those eyes, Sidney heard the whispered taunt of a rising laugh. This prisoner wasn't Rex at all. Rex was gone, vanished as mysteriously as this arrival had appeared!

Sidney Brellen, like the Hindus who backed him, stood face to face with The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIX. A MURDERER SPEAKS.

SIDNEY was the first to see the thrust of an automatic that loomed from The Shadow's fist. Sidney quailed; instinctively, he went sideways as the big gun swept toward him. That was exactly what The Shadow wanted. It cleared the path to Bela Singh.

The Hindus had heard the rising laugh. Its mockery quivered from every wall of the cell. They saw The Shadow swing straight toward them, crossing the short space to the passage. Only a man with Bela Singh's iron nerve would have dared to take that challenge.

In so doing, Bela Singh performed as The Shadow expected.

With a lunge, the turbaned man sprang for The Shadow. The Hindu servants followed. There was a whirl of blackness; Bela Singh went sprawling, hurled by The Shadow's free-hand swing.

The first of the following Hindus came up against the muzzle of an automatic. As the second man drove in from the side, The Shadow whipped another .45 to stop him short.

Bela Singh was flattened, shaken by the suddenness of his overthrow. The Shadow was motioning the Hindus toward the side of the cell away from Sidney. They were no longer close enough to offer fight when Bela Singh arose. The Shadow had that trio helpless.

Sidney was behind The Shadow's shoulder. He, alone, had a chance to attack the cloaked master. All that held Sidney at bay was the finishing shudder of The Shadow's laugh; and it was sufficient. The Shadow had calculated exactly how Sidney would act.

However much Sidney might steel himself on certain occasions, this was one situation that he couldn't stomach. Yellow at heart, Sidney was terrified. Like a snared rat, he looked only for escape. The path was open, through the passage.

Deserting Bela Singh and the Hindus, Sidney fled. What happened to them didn't matter.

No shots pursued Sidney. The Shadow was occupied with his three prisoners. Sidney reached the ladder; stumbled upward and wavered as he grabbed at the revolving floor. Fitted with ball bearings, the floor circled almost at his touch.

As its edge came around, Sidney hoisted himself over it. The floor swept him toward the wall; then stopped with a sudden jolt.

Dizzily, Sidney crawled to the outer passage. He came to his feet, made a terrorized run for the spiral staircase. Despite his frenzy, he didn't forget the tricky step. Sidney sprang over it as he ascended. Fumbling for a switch, he opened the top door. He clambered out through the grating, breathless.

Even the fresh air was tinged with horrifying shapes. Sidney's shaking knees gave twice, as he staggered through the alley. Each time, he flattened on the cobblestones. Clothes torn, his hands rubbed raw, he gasped when he saw a lighted street.

There was a taxi at a corner; but the driver took Sidney for a bum and started to shove him away as he

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climbed aboard.

Sidney found a five-dollar bill. When he tendered it, the cabby nodded. Inside the taxi, Sidney gasped his address. The cab headed south. Sidney was choosing the only haven that he knew: his own apartment.

He was still jittery when he got there. He couldn't manage the key. Shakily, Sidney sprawled against the door; it jerked inward. He went rolling to the floor. Hands helped him up; shoved him to a couch.

Staring wildly, Sidney saw himself faced by Rex Lancott.

"So you met The Shadow," observed Rex, smiling at Sidney's bewilderment. "Neat, wasn't it, the way he dodged those traps? All except the revolving floor; but he saw that one coming. The fall didn't even jar him!"

Sidney's lips had a fishy motion, but no words came from them. Rex understood what he was trying to ask.

"How did I get out?" laughed Rex. "The Shadow picked the cell lock. He didn't need a ladder to put me through the revolving floor. I opened it, standing on his shoulders. He had me coached to look out for the traps when I came."

Rex turned to nudge his thumb toward a table. Sidney saw the Crystal Buddha glittering there.

"I know enough about the Buddha," remarked Rex. "If there are any minor details, you can spill them later. Only remember: the Buddha is mine; not yours!"

The telephone bell jingled. Mechanically, Sidney arose to answer. He swayed; Rex pushed him back to the couch.

"It's done that before," said Rex. "It's only Lester. I'm not ready to talk to him yet. I have another call."

The ringing ceased. Rex picked up the telephone. The number that he dialed was Burbank's. Rex made a low-voiced query; the answer must have suited him. Hanging tip, he called another number.

"Hello, Lester," said Rex... "Sure, this is Rex... No, nothing's happened to me. I'm over at Sidney's... Yes, he's here. He just came in. Come over right away, can you?" Rex's tone was confidential. "There's something to this Buddha business, Lester... Yes, Sid knows all about it. But he won't talk until you get here..."

Finishing the call, Rex told Sidney that Lester would arrive in fifteen minutes. That interval became a slow-motion nightmare for Sidney. Try as he could, he wasn't able to forget The Shadow. His ears quivered with the echoes of that master-fighter's laugh.

Sidney thought that he heard a stir from the bedroom; he had hardly banished that thought before he was sure that a noise occurred at the window. Looking toward the pane, Sidney fancied that he saw the gleam of The Shadow's eyes. He blinked; realized that he had spied two distant lights.

A rap at the door made Sidney shudder. Rex opened the door; Lester stepped into the living room.

OBSERVING Sidney's shaky condition, Lester stopped short, his hand still on the doorknob. He looked to Rex, seeking an explanation. Rex pointed to the Buddha.

"That's the whole trouble," informed Rex, seriously. "It turns out that the Buddha is worth a fortune. Some rajah, isn't it"—Rex looked to Sidney—"who's willing to give a lot for it?"

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"The Rajah of Lenapore," replied Sidney, gloomily. "He promised that he'd make any one wealthy; if our uncle gave that person the Buddha. Bela Singh gave me the rajah's message. The rajah sent it when he learned that Uncle Jim had died."

"So Sid tried to pull a fast one," Rex told Lester. "I guess you told Bela Singh that the idol was yours. Wasn't that it, Sid?"

A nod from Sidney.

"Down at your apartment," he admitted. "Bela Singh saw me there, after you'd moved in. The Buddha was on the mantel. That's why Bela Singh made the mistake."

Lester looked to Rex, made the query: "How did you learn all this?"

"From a person who calls himself The Shadow," returned Rex, steadily. "He put me straight on a lot of things that he had figured out. It only took him a few minutes, too. You know, Sid"—Rex turned to his seated cousin—"I owe you an apology, after all. I figured that you sent Zimmer Cougal and his mob to finish me, down at the Swing High Club."

Sidney's face was blank. Rex shook his head.

"You couldn't have sent them," added Rex. "The Shadow doped that out. Zimmer had ten thousand dollars, cash in advance. You couldn't have raised that much money. You couldn't even have scraped up the thousand bucks for Torrington."

"Torrington!" The name aroused Sidney's recollection. "I looked him up in the telephone book. There were two Torringtons listed; I went to both places. But neither one was the man I wanted."

"Because old Torrington had no telephone," supplied Rex. "The Shadow knew that cleared you, Sidney."

"Cleared me of what?"

It was Lester Kurnz who answered. His tone came harsh, as his hand tightened on the doorknob. His heavy brows were lowered in a glower; the lines of his forehead made vivid upright streaks.

"You've learned enough of it!" rasped Lester. He was facing Rex. "Enough of it to put the rest together. I knew there was something about the Buddha, when Sidney wanted it so badly. That's why I hunted up old Torrington. He told me all he knew; just enough to start me after the Buddha, too."

"Torrington didn't know me"—Lester's face was livid with his cunning—"so I told him I was Sidney, just for future use. I got in touch with Zimmer, figuring he was the man for the job I wanted. That was to murder you, Rex, and pin the goods on Sidney."

Rex remained steady, but Sidney sagged deep into the couch. He was barely grasping the extent of Lester's devilish plot.

"With you dead, Rex," reminded Lester, "and Sidney charged with murder, the Buddha would revert to the estate. That would make it mine, along with the entire sixty thousand dollars. I had to kill old Torrington, to-night, after he was fool enough to call Brinby's office. Barbara was going to drag him out, to identify Sidney."

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"So I shot Torrington. I doubled around the block to pop in on Barbara. She thinks Sidney pulled the murder. She'll still testify to that. Even when she hears how you two finally got together, and shot it out between you—with fatal results for both!"

With that, Lester ripped the door open. In sprang Zimmer Cougal. He saw Rex; covered him with a revolver. Lester pulled a gun from his own pocket, aimed it coolly toward Sidney.

"Make it neat, Zimmer." Lester's tone was hard. "Remember, we're planting the guns on them afterward."

"Sure!" grunted Zimmer. "I owe it to this lug Lancott, anyway! O. K. when you say the word, Kurnz."

Before Lester could snap the order, a window sash whipped upward. In from the outer ledge came a fist, shoving a .45 ahead of it. The muzzle weaved between Lester and Zimmer; above it, gleamed the eyes of The Shadow.

Forgetting the victims, the two murderers sprang apart, hoping that from double angle they could drop The Shadow.

That maneuver failed. The Shadow's gun steadied on Zimmer. Before Lester could take advantage of his temporary freedom, he was covered by another gun. Harry Vincent was stepping in from the bedroom, aiming as he came.

Gun hands sagging, the confessed murderers swung toward the outer door. They saw the turbaned figure of Bela Singh, entering with an aimed revolver. Behind him were his Hindus, each with a glittering knife.

The Shadow had talked to that trio after Sidney's flight. Learning the real facts about the Crystal Buddha, they had become The Shadow's allies.

"IT'S all up, Lester!"

Rex made that statement; Lester started to accept defeat. It was Zimmer who changed the situation. He knew the electric chair would get him if The Shadow didn't.

Zimmer wanted a shot at the black-clad victor. With a snarl, he raised his gun and tried to tug the trigger.

Other marksmen beat him to the shot. Timed with the prompt spurt of The Shadow's automatic, Bela Singh fired his revolver. Harry swung his gun from Lester; blasted a shot toward Zimmer. The racketeer took a twirl as the bullets shuddered his body.

The roar of guns drove Lester berserk. His speed was as surprising as his madness. He sprang for the table, grabbed the prized Buddha with his left hand. Jabbing his gun straight ahead of him, he launched for the window from which The Shadow aimed.

The Shadow shifted, dropping from view. He made that move so that the others could take Lester alive. Only The Shadow's free fist remained on the sill. Lester never noticed that clutching hand. He was burning bullets through the space where The Shadow had been.

Harry aimed for Lester's gun arm, realizing that a crippling shot was all that was needed. Bela Singh, seeing The Shadow gone, delivered a more telling shot, that clipped Lester's shoulder blade. The bullets struck while Lester was still driving toward the window. The impacts spurred the murderer's lunge.

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Sprawling headlong, Lester hit the window sill. It was low; his dive sent him into a crazy, outward hurdle. The Shadow shoved his gun hand upward, to stop the killer's vault. The plunge could not be halted.

Those in the room were riveted by silence that seemed long. The Shadow saw the finish that they heard: the crash of Lester's body on the cement, many floors below. Sixty thousand dollars had only one remaining claimant: Sidney Brellen.

For Rex's legacy was still the Crystal Buddha. That idol, for which a rajah was bringing half a million, lay on the floor within the window sill, where Lester's faltering hand had dropped it.

The Shadow swung in from the darkness of the ledge. His gloved hand plucked up the Buddha.

Stepping to the center of the room, he gave the idol to Rex. Hindus stepped aside as The Shadow approached the door. Bela Singh delivered a profound salaam as The Shadow reached the hall.

They saw him turn there, those witnesses who could testify to the crimes of Lester Kurnz. There was a flash of steadied, brilliant eyes; the swish of a black cloak as gloved hand thrust away its automatic.

A whispered laugh, mirthless, solemn as a knell. Then vacancy, in that open hall, where a cloaked conqueror had paused.

The Shadow had gone, with the riddle of the Crystal Buddha solved.

THE END