

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

Maxwell Grant

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GUARDIAN OF DEATH

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CHAPTER I

LIGHTNING streaked the sky with a jagged flash, and Graydon Towers mushroomed like an Aladdin's castle at a genii's thunderous call.

The sight was so fantastic that Harry Vincent still couldn't believe it when he flung his arm across his eyes. The glare had left an after image of a vivid object against a blackened background, a lurid collection of bloody yellow turrets fashioned by some architect whose nightmares must have been his guiding talent.

Smashing thunder delivered a deluge of rain that pelted the top of Harry's halted coupe and licked in through the crevices of the tight-closed windows. Guardedly, Harry opened his eyes and blinked as another belt of lightning slashed the horizon. The Towers itself blocked off most of this zigzag dazzle and Harry saw that the edifice was as real as his imagination had proclaimed.

Roughly, Graydon Towers was a chunky pile rising like an irregular pyramid, three stories high, or more, if the various towers were included. The whole motif was square, more on the order of a French chateau than an English castle, though there was a resemblance to both. This wasn't strange considering the varied tastes of Gifford Graydon, the strange man who had built the stone monstrosity and died within its walls a

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quarter-century ago.

Without doubt this was Graydon Towers, for there could be no other mansion of similar size along this isolated countryside. Besides, the pillars of the great stone gate by which Harry had drawn his car for shelter, bore the stately gryphons which old Graydon had borrowed from some heraldic source to form a synthetic coat-of-arms.

It would have taken a gryphon in full wing to clear the huge wrought-iron gates that barred the private driveway leading to the Towers. But the bars were wide enough for human passage and that fact enticed Harry from his car, despite the fury of the rain.

The storm was just the excuse that Harry needed for a visit to the Towers. If he could find the front of the place and bang on the door, Harry could plead admittance on the claim that the sudden rain had stalled his motor. The heavier the rain, the better the argument. Harry wasn't pleased when the downpour suddenly slackened before he was half way to the Towers.

Anyway, the idea was still good; at least until the next thing happened.

It began with another sharp lightning flash, which caused Harry to shy instinctively from a clump of trees near the final curve of the driveway. His black slicker drawn tightly about him, Harry went rigid at what he saw.

There were shrubs flanking the last stretch of the drive and from one of them came a tiny stab of flame like a puny left-over from the lightning. It was timed, that jab, to the pound of the ensuing thunder and so was the answering spurt that tongued from a corner of the massive mansion. The accompanying sounds were deadened and completely lost.

Those were gun-shots, flung through the teeth of the storm, an exchange between two unknowns who like Harry – and perhaps more – had business around Graydon Towers!

Cutting through the clump of trees, Harry made for a corner of the mansion. He was traveling diagonally opposite the direction of the feud and his process promised quick shelter with a chance of gaining admittance indoors, before anyone within Graydon Towers learned of outside trouble. Reporting such an event might bring Harry a first-class welcome, a point which he didn't overlook.

There was one point however that he did overlook. Harry was forgetting the lightning flashes.

One came when Harry was just past the man who was shooting from the shrubs. The flaring sky etched Harry clearly, and the man at the house corner mistook him for an extra enemy cutting across to try a flanking job. Along with the thunder, the man at the corner took a pot shot Harry's way, and, despite the mighty rumble, Harry heard the whine of a bullet much closer to his head than the storm clouds.

Another flicker from the sky and with it, the man by the shrubbery turned and fired after Harry. Now that the sound of gunfire had been heard, the rival shooters didn't worry about covering up their future shots. Each jabbed a few more at Harry; then both ducked to shelter.

Harry had reached shelter, too. Hurriedly timed to lightning flashes, those wild shots could have clipped him only through some freak of ill-chance. Harry was past a corner of the mansion; which corner, he didn't know, there were so many of them. He certainly wasn't at the front door, for a reflected waver of lightning showed him only an angle formed by two stone walls. One had a barred window, some fifteen feet above the ground; the other was entirely covered with an overgrowth of ivy vines.

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How safe this spot was, Harry wasn't sure, but at least he could do something to improve it. He drew his automatic. If either of the fighters who had included him in their feud should choose to ferret him out, Harry would be ready for them.

Harry peered past the corner from which he had arrived. Immediately he was rewarded with a better view than the lightning flashes provided; what the present glow lacked in brilliance, it had in constancy.

This light came from windows of Graydon Towers, giving Harry one fact that he had been sent here to learn; namely, how well occupied the place was. From the number of lights that appeared, the house must have several occupants.

It was obvious, too, that the windows were all barred. He noticed criss-crossed lines in the light that was cast to the ground below them. But what Harry particularly wanted to know was what had happened to the wild-shooting gunners who had taken him as their new target.

With one sweeping glance, Harry spotted them by those window lights. One, the man from the shrubbery, was loping over toward the cluster of trees. His was a long, lean figure, conspicuous with hip-boots, baggy trousers, a leather hunting jacket and what looked like a hunter's cap. This impression was well-etched by a glare of lightning from the receding storm; then the lean man was lost among the trees.

As for the other, Harry saw him sneaking back toward the far corner of the house, stooping below the level of the windows. The man was blocky, but that could have been due to his crouch, for he lengthened somewhat as he made a dash for the corner.

This man was wearing a dark rain-coat and an oilskin hat, about all that Harry could remember for future reference. Then, as the lights in the house began going out slowly, one by one, some sudden thoughts struck Harry.

First; the chap in the hunting outfit could well have stayed among the trees, waiting an opportunity to approach the house again. More important, the fellow in the rain-coat had unquestionably started a sneak toward Harry's corner, otherwise he wouldn't have been forced to such a long retreat when the window lights appeared.

He could still reach Harry without crossing open ground. The route would be longer but safer; in fact, the man in the rain-coat could already have covered much of it. His route would be simply to come around the house and spring up on Harry unaware.

Turning full about, Harry gripped his automatic and shifted around the corner, intending to keep close to the wall and spring a surprise of his own, the moment that the man appeared. The storm was distant now and a glare of sheet lightning, mostly a reflection from the clouds, revealed the figure that loomed suddenly through the misty drizzle.

Only a few yards from Harry's elbow, turning toward his very corner, came the stocky shape in rain-coat and wide-brimmed oilskin hat.

Catching that glimpse in the last moment of the lightning flare, Harry saw the glitter of a gun that was swinging in his direction and knew that he was spotted, too. Shots in the dark weren't the right policy, not unless the challenger fired first. Harry sidestepped and lunged in at an angle to meet his adversary's charge.

A gun sputtered past Harry's elbow and hard upon that misplaced jab, he landed on the figure in the darkness, his own gun lifted for a downswing. But Harry's drive was potent in itself; under its force, his opponent

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sprawled and lost his gun. Pulling his gunswung, Harry turned it into a glancing blow against the head that wore the oilskin hat.

A few moments later, Harry Vincent was stooping beside this crumpled foe who had capitulated almost without a struggle. The broad hat had rolled aside, while he fished in his pocket for a flashlight.

No flashlight was needed. Another sweep of reflected lightning gave Harry a full look at the face on the ground. It was Harry's strained imagination, plus the illusion caused by the drizzle that had made him picture this foe as a stocky man with hard and vicious features.

Harry was wrong on every guess.

What Harry had bagged in the darkness was a very lovely girl whose looks were good enough to stand the effects of the drizzle that had marred her make-up. Her charm was increased by the wealth of red hair that had tumbled from the oversized hat and her build was anything but stocky, considering how the coat had fattened around her limp form.

Harry Vincent had been warned that anything might happen around Graydon Towers.

It had.

CHAPTER II

RATHER difficult, talking in the drizzly darkness and waiting for lightning flashes to see what effect your words had on the person who heard them. Better though than bringing a flashlight into the conversation, which would have been not only impolite but dangerous, when you didn't know who else might be stalking about.

Harry Vincent wished the conversation could have been less one-sided. In sense, he was doing all of it, for the girl's responses were merely nods and head-shakes that showed when the sky glared.

"So you still won't tell me who you are?"

The lightning obliged just as Harry finished that question and the girl gave a head-shake. She was sitting up, staring straight ahead, her lips tight-closed.

"But you think you had a right to shoot me?"

The girl lost no time in answering that one. Her nod was emphatic; if brief, it was only because the lightning flicker ended. He put another question:

"Would you shoot me now if I gave you back your gun?"

The answer was a long time coming. When it did, it was worth it. The girl shook her head, and there was plenty of sincerity in her silent reply. Her lips were solemn and her eyes, meeting Harry's squarely, carried a plea that she seemed almost ready to express verbally. Until that moment, the red-haired girl had maintained an attitude that could have been classed either as pride or challenge, but now she was willing to forego both.

Harry was reaching toward the girl with one hand, pocketing his gun with the other, just as the lightning gave way to another blackout. Finding the girl's hand in the dark, he drew her to her feet and planted her lost revolver in her fist.

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"All right, Reds," laughed Harry. "There's your gun and here's your hat" – stooping, he recovered the oversized oilskin and swung it in the girl's direction – "so since we've come to an understanding, why not let it be the beginning of a friendship? Not necessarily a beautiful friendship," Harry added, "but at least a talkative one. You might say thank you –"

A flare from the sky interrupted, and with it the girl did say thank you. Her lips were just as tight as ever, though now they had begun to smile. It was her eyes that spoke, and nicely. Her hands dangled a .32 revolver and an oilskin hat, so she had to toss her head to clear away the copper tresses from her forehead. That gesture added just the needed touch to the gratitude that her eyes expressed.

"You're weakening, Reds," began Harry, with a touch of mock rebuke, "but after all, why shouldn't you? I set the example, didn't I?"

The girl was starting a slow nod, and Harry's hands were resting on her shoulders, as though inspired by protective duty. After all, Reds had a right to be terrified in the midst of a dark and dangerous night, and Harry deserved part of the blame. It was only right that he should make amends.

At that moment something said "Whsssssooooo" directly overhead and punctuated its thud with a crackle. It was a sound that meant the same in any language, the whistle of a sniper's bullet from somewhere yonder in the night.

Harry shoved the girl to the rain-soaked turf. Turning about, he took a side-hop that ended in a crouch.

"Duck for it, Reds," snapped Harry, "and stay there. I'll handle this show. Don't shoot, you'll only give yourself away."

A flame spurted from somewhere out on the blackened lawn and Harry blasted a shot in return. Two hops to the right, then another jab from Harry's gun in answer to a pair that talked together. Apparently the feud boys were ganging up on Harry – at least so he thought until his next shot. Harry took three hops before he fired and three guns crackled in return. Bullets whined high and wide, but they had a nuisance value, coming in such quantities.

"There's a mob of them; Reds," declared Harry, coolly. "Keep close to the wall, before the lightning flashes. After that, we'll make a run for it."

Over against one wall, Harry turned for a look at the girl the moment that the lightning blinked. His hand was raised in beckoning gesture, ready to point the way they were to run, when Harry very suddenly forgot those guns out on the lawn. Something so singular had happened that the whole situation seemed a fabric of Harry's imagination.

The red-haired girl had vanished!

He waited for the next few lightning flashes to make sure that his eyes had not completely betrayed him. There wasn't anywhere that the girl could have gone in this angular nook of solid stone, unless she had clambered up the creeping vines to the roof.

The only other possibility was that she had darted out to the open; this, though surprising in itself, was far more feasible than the ivy route. But Harry had no time to weigh such considerations.

Bullets were winging from the open, whining dangerously close, whacking hard against the stone at Harry's back and bringing chipping echoes from the walls. The girl had been smart to take to the open spaces and

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Harry decided to do the same. Amid another lightning blink, he darted from the alcove and started a dash across the lawn.

It was a blind run in more ways than one. Not only did Harry lack an objective, he couldn't have found one in the blanketing blackness that was broken only occasionally by the lightning flashes. Besides, Harry didn't want a goal, unless avoiding bullets could be counted as such.

Either those shots weren't meant for Harry or the men in the dark were becoming worse in their aim, for no longer did Harry hear the whine of bullets. What finally stopped Harry's flight wasn't a leaden slug; it was a wooden tree.

After covering about half an acre of the Graydon premises, Harry had blundered squarely into the little grove where he had sought an earlier refuge.

Landing suddenly upon the soggy ground, Harry took time to breathe and turned his face into the drizzle to recuperate from his collision with the tree clump. Lightning was blinking only faintly from beyond the hill-tops surrounding Graydon Towers and the rumble of thunder had been demoted to an occasional dull growl. Yet Harry still heard gun-shots, distant and spasmodic, receding as though drawn along by the storm.

It was then that Harry remembered something. The first man that he had spotted, the one in a hunter's costume, had taken to the shelter of these very trees after ducking away from the shrubbery.

The fellow couldn't be around here any longer, not with the shooting happening elsewhere. He was probably stalking some other prey through the drizzle. Harry came from beneath the sheltering trees and began a personal prowling in the general direction of the gunfire, which was well away from the mansion and down a slope in the lawn.

A few final shots were all that Harry heard. From then on it was a blind hunt across the sodden lawn until he came to a stone wall. Beyond the wall were trees, dank and dismal, visible only as a jet-black bulk. Then, while Harry listened amid the drip of the rainfall, he heard the sudden snort of a motor somewhere among the trees.

That car had obviously been waiting on an old road in the woods, and its departure represented the withdrawal of some participants in the recent fray. At least the terrain was safer, but since Harry had come to learn what was going on, there was no use in staying now.

Except that it wasn't quite all over.

As Harry turned away from the stone wall, intending to trace the way back to his car, the glare of a flashlight poked in his direction. Licking along the wall the beam would have found Harry within a few more seconds, if he hadn't pitched himself into a patch of tall grass that flanked the lawn.

Harry hit the ground, staying motionless, when the flashlight's glare skimmed the tops of the weeds that hid him; then Harry heard the squidge of footsteps going past.

Lifting his head, he caught a good glimpse of this prowler just as the fellow swung the flashlight toward himself. He was the lanky man in the hunter's costume and his face showed a scrubby black beard. It was the sort of face that Harry was sure he could remember.

Crawling from the long grass, he stole after the bearded man guided by the constant squidge of the heavy-booted footsteps. One riddle was enough for a single night and Harry had experienced his quota in the

disappearance of the red-haired girl. The bearded man wasn't going to get away as easily as she had.

Whatever the riddle of Graydon Towers, this bearded prowler might have the answer. Gun in hand, Harry Vincent was prepared to put the question in no uncertain terms, the moment the proper time arrived!

CHAPTER III

IF Harry Vincent had guided the footsteps of the man ahead, he couldn't have directed them better to his liking. Even in the thick blackness of the drizzle, Harry could gauge the route from the slope of the lawn, the drip of tree branches overhead, the slap of wet shrubbery and finally the tone of the mushy grind of waterlogged gravel.

The bearded pacemaker was leading his stealthy trailer right back to the big gates that fronted Graydon Towers!

The climax, Harry decided, would come when the bearded character found the strange coupe parked on the road in front. It would then behoove Harry to become forcible, though he didn't want to overdo it, remembering how a man in oilskin slicker and hat had become a red-haired girl.

At least the thought was pleasant, despite its lack of likelihood. However, the whole idea evaporated like the fading drizzle by the time they reached the gate. The man ahead didn't even see Harry's car; instead, he veered to the right as he wormed his way through the gate bars and turned his flashlight on a decrepit old car parked across the road. Harry heard a muffled chuckle as the lanky huntsman hurried in the direction of the motorized junk-heap.

Harry hadn't spotted that other car at the time of his own arrival for the rain had been coming down in pitchfork style. But since the bush-faced gentleman had evidently decided to go somewhere in his antique car, Harry decided to let him have a try. Getting into the coupe, Harry sat patiently at the wheel while he heard a starter wheeze repeatedly from the darkness just across the road. Then a motor coughed, fenders began to rattle, and dim headlights moved along the road. Starting his own car smoothly, Harry put it into gear and followed, guiding by the old car's wavering tail-light.

It was easy enough on the straightaway, but the business became tough when the other car began taking dips and bends. Harry let it gain some distance, then turned on his own dimmers and followed along. Harry knew where this road led. It was taking both cars into the town of Kanakee Junction, some four miles from Graydon Towers by this roundabout road.

Judging by the rattley condition of the bearded man's car, it couldn't be traveling much farther than the Junction and Harry's guess proved correct. As he neared the sparse lights that represented the town, Harry saw the other car jounce into a driveway that looked like an entrance to a coal-yard. Keeping ahead, Harry parked under some large elms that obscured the nearest street lamp and in a few minutes, he was sneaking around the coal-yard fence, looking for an opening through it.

Harry wasn't the first to find one.

A slat flipped up from the wooden fence and out from the space poked the bearded man, whiskers first. His eyes, squinting craftily front side to side, were too late to spot Harry who, at the first clatter of the fence-pale, had dropped behind a convenient barrel.

In stoop-shouldered style, the lanky man sneaked across a strip of tree-sheltered grass and disappeared into an alley between two dilapidated buildings on the far side of a narrow street. By then Harry was stalking him

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tree by tree, ready to negotiate the alley's darkness.

The bearded man's caution inspired Harry to the same, particularly as the alley was a blind one. It was a perfect lurking spot for anyone who wanted to spring an ambush and Harry didn't doubt that he would be on the receiving end if he moved unwisely. The alley mud was soft and carpeted Harry's footsteps, but he was afraid that it might prove sludgy.

A squash from Harry's footsteps would be bad enough, but even worse was the fact that none were coming from ahead. Remembering the swish–swash that had preceded him across the Graydon lawn, Harry was disturbed. The complete silence gave the definite effect that he of the stoop–shoulders and black–beard was crouched somewhere in the muck ready to do mayhem to any follower.

Harry groped with the utmost care, working himself along one blank wall, intending to try the inwards of the alley and come out by the other wall. At the deepest part of the alley, Harry was probing what he thought was a fence when a portion of it gave with a sharp, warning creak. Instantly alert, Harry whipped around, gun in readiness to meet a sortie from the alley's outlet, which he could dimly see by a reflected street light. Backing at the same moment, Harry tripped across a low threshold and landed at a slant within a door that shrieked on its old hinges.

Harry had struck a stairway leading upward. Gripping a step with one hand, he came to his feet, gun thrusting from his other fist. Then, sensing something cold and clammy, he pocketed his gun, drew out a blue–headed match and struck it, to take a glance at his mud–stained hand.

The clammy stuff was just what Harry expected, mud from one of the boots worn by the bearded huntsman. With all his caution the gunner from the Graydon preserves hadn't tried to cover his tracks. The muddy footprints led right up the stairs ahead of the flicker of Harry's match. Blowing out the flame, Harry drew his gun again and started upward.

It was totally dark at the stair–top. Groping about, Harry found different doors and wondered which the man had used. Listening, Harry heard slight thuds from beyond one door. A match flame proved the lock to be a simple type, the sort made to order for the average skeleton key. Having a few such samples in his pocket, Harry tried them quietly and the lock soon yielded. After that, there was no need for a match; enough light came through the low windows beneath a sloping ceiling at the opposite side of the room.

This looked like a store–room, poorly stocked, and it had two other doors, one in each side wall. Boldly, Harry tried the one on the left; it gave and he yanked it wide, keeping his gun in readiness. At sight of a pair of boots standing on the floor, Harry dropped back with a low, quick–voiced challenge; then paused.

They were the hunter's boots, all right, but they were empty as was the rest of the costume. All the stooped man's regalia was hanging in a closet. Dripping a small quota of drizzle dampness was the black beard that had been the most impressive part of the prowler's get–up.

Closing the closet door, Harry stalked across the room and opened the door on the other side. He used a few matches and found he was in a large room devoted to grain and feed, packed in sacks and barrels. Over in one corner was a square–cut hole with a ladder leading down to the floor below. Harry took that route and found himself in a grain store which consisted mostly of a counter and a pot–bellied stove. There were windows here, so rickety that their catches couldn't hold. Harry opened one, and then dropped out to the ground. No foot–marks being visible, he decided that his unbearded predecessor must have used the door.

In the front street, Harry was almost caught in the huge glare of a locomotive searchlight. The depot was just across the street and a big freight engine was doing some shifting chores. Entering the station, Harry found

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the ticket window open, with the agent busy at his telegraph key. Picking up some telegraph blanks, Harry called to find out the price of a wire to New York.

The agent consulted a book and named the charge without turning from his table. Harry addressed a telegram to Lamont Cranston, Cobalt Club, New York, and wrote the following message:

I THINK YOU HAD BETTER COME AT ONCE

Clanking the right change on the counter, he waited while the agent came over and took the telegram. Without looking up, the man counted the words and said:

"You can still use two more."

"Two more?" returned Harry. "What about two less?"

With his pencil he crossed out the words "I think" and asked how that was. The agent nodded.

"All right I reckon," he said. "No law against crossing out words instead of adding them. Kind of neat, the way you did it. Makes the message read simpler."

"So it does," agreed Harry. "Suppose I knock out another pair."

With his pencil, Harry crossed out "You had" and the agent chuckled in appreciation. Then, to show that he was impartial, Harry marked off another pair, the words "At once." That really impressed the station agent.

"Say, mister," he declaimed, "I reckon that's about the shortest message ever went out from here."

"It hasn't gone out yet," returned Harry, "so I'll make it one word shorter."

Harry put his pencil through the word "Better" and left the agent gawking at a telegram that consisted of the one word:

COME

It wasn't until Harry was going out the station door that the agent looked up and saw only his customer's back. Calling after Harry, the agent reminded him of an oversight.

"Guess you don't need them other nine words, mister, but there's something you've forgot. Most people put their names on the end of telegrams. What's yours?"

"I'm an Indian;" called back Harry. "Named after a famous chief. My name is Rain-in-the-face so just sign it that way for me."

The station agent was scratching his chin by the time the door slammed; then, methodically, he wrote Rain-in-the-face under the word "Come." Going to his table he sent the message; then shook his head. After brooding considerably over the strange telegram and its even more unusual signature, the agent opened a door and went out to the rain-soaked platform.

There, the station agent interrupted a tall, brawny man in overalls who was helping two others load some crates into a freight, car. The tall man asked:

"What is it, Jerry?"

"About this telegram, Rufe," explained the station agent. "Being as how you're sheriff in your off-time, I thought you'd like to know about it."

"Guess I can take a few minutes from my railroad work if you say so, Jerry. You're talking to Sheriff Dodson" – drawing back his overalls, Rufe gave a flash of his badge – "so let's see the telegram."

Jerry obliged and Rufe scratched his chin as the station agent had earlier, but in broader style.

"Who gave this to you, Jerry?"

"Rain-in-the-face, only I didn't get a look at his face, sheriff. Talked like a stranger, though."

The sheriff nodded.

"Guess he's staying at the Junction House," supplied Jerry. "He ain't the first new guest as has arrived today. Been about a half-dozen of them."

Another nod from Sheriff Dodson. Then, indifferently, he passed the slip back to the station agent.

"You sent it, didn't you, Jerry?"

"Of course."

"All right then." Sheriff Dodson turned to help heave another crate. "If it was paid for, why bother me about it? If Indians want to send telegrams, I say let 'em."

Such was the sheriff's official verdict, but it wasn't final. Under the misty glow from the freight shed lights, the face of Rufe Dodson underwent a series of changes as he continued piling crates into the box car.

At last a gleam came from the keen eyes that were the conspicuous factors of the sheriff's long, sharp-chinned face. As representative of law and order in this county. Rufe Dodson wasn't worrying about the current quota of strangers.

That question would solve itself and soon. All Sheriff Dodson had to do was wait.

CHAPTER IV

KANAKEE JUNCTION was one of those quaint little towns that had everything except a main street.

Harry Vincent discovered this in the light of a bright and pleasant morning when he took a pre-breakfast stroll around the hamlet. Whoever had done the city planning for Kanakee Junction just hadn't; and the reason was obvious.

As its name implied, Kanakee Junction was formed by the crossing of two railways, the station which Harry had visited serving for both. The town had sprung up around that focal center and sprawled in every direction. Nobody lived on the wrong side of the tracks because the railroads were the only reason for the town's existence, but it was considered good form to reside some distance from the station.

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Hence the buildings that looked like tic-tac-toe marks around the cross formed by the railway lines were mostly business places. The hotel was one; so was Hatwood's Grain and Feed Store, which flanked a newspaper building bearing the name of the Junction Junto. Over across the tracks was a large general store while at a diagonal Harry saw a town hall and a few assorted buildings including a barber shop.

There were trees all around, with green sward under them, one sector representing a park where there was a church, library and school house. An old-fashioned cannon stood on that green together with a statue that looked like a Minute Man. But Harry was more interested in the strip of grass that lay between two dirt streets that eventually met in a fork.

Beyond the other side was the Junction Coalyard, its far end jutting to one of the railway lines and receiving a spur track along which coal cars could be shunted. That stretch was the one that Harry had crossed when trailing the man with the false beard.

After such a survey it was only natural that Harry should stroll past the grain store. He did and found that the front was boarded up, indicating that Mr. Hatwood had gone out of business. By then, Harry was conscious of another stroller, a limber man with a roundish face that was both quick in looking places and in turning away.

So instead of hovering around the closed store, Harry sauntered back into the hotel and glanced over his shoulder to see the stranger right behind him. Then for the first time Harry noticed the stoop of the man's shoulders and the sharpness of his narrowed eyes.

"Could be," thought Harry.

As a guest at the Junction House, this stranger might have had as much reason as Harry for visiting Graydon Towers the night before; perhaps more. But before branding him as a gentleman who preferred black whiskers, Harry decided to sound him out. In the hotel lobby he gave the man an inquiring look that brought a complete change to the fellow's expression.

Serving Harry a broad grin, the round-faced man became quite genial, even to the point of introducing himself in a slightly wheezy tone:

"My name's Jeff Gerster. What's yours?"

"Vincent. Harry Vincent."

"An art dealer?"

Harry shook his head.

"No?" Gerster appeared surprised, only to add brightly: "A collector then?"

"Neither," replied Harry. "Just a salesman who stopped here because he couldn't find any place else."

Gerster chuckled at that one. With a flip from his vest pocket, his fingers extended a card to Harry. The card bore the man's name with the title "Insurance Investigator." Not to be outdone, Harry produced a card identifying himself as a writing paper salesman, which fitted a load of stationery samples that he carried in the back of his coupe.

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"I know a lot of people in your line," nodded Gerster. "They have fires and other claims, just like everybody else.

"Say" – affably, the man waved toward the door of the dining room, which was being opened – "how about having breakfast, Vincent?"

Harry agreed, silently deciding that Gerster had a lot to tell. At the same time he recognized the reason for the garrulous trend. Men who talked a lot could learn a lot, if they listened between times.

Gerster might toss ten words for Harry's one and still come out winner.

Something, whether intuition or just good common sense, warned Harry that Gerster was checking on last night's events, seeking to learn if Harry had participated in the fray near Graydon Towers. That in itself would justify Harry's gathering conclusion that Gerster was the bearded prowler. So Harry let Gerster talk and results were prompt.

Hardly were they seated at the breakfast table before he posed the question:

"Going up to the Towers while you're here, Vincent?"

"What Towers?"

"You mean you never heard of Gifford Graydon?"

A neat trick, Gerster's question. If Harry had recognized the name Graydon it would have gone without saying that he should have heard of the Towers. So Harry's square face kept unchanged, except for a slight blink of query at what seemed a change of subject.

"Gifford Graydon," explained Gerster. "They named Graydon Towers after him. He was the famous art king of twenty-five years ago."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place," put in Harry, deciding not to play dumb too long. "You mean the fellow who owned the castle that they're going to tear down."

Patiently, Gerster shook his head.

"It isn't a castle;" he said, "and they aren't going to tear it down. What they intend to do is open the crypt so that Jerome Hybart can produce the archives."

"What did he do, buy the place?" "No. Hybart is an antiquarian who was appointed custodian of the Graydon art collection. He doesn't own Graydon Towers but he lives there and probably always will. When he dies the treasures will go to various museums while the Towers will be turned over to the heirs."

Harry gave an indifferent nod as though such things were customary.

"But it's those archives that are worrying people," continued Gerster. "Certain people like art dealers." His eyes narrowed, as though suspecting Harry of belonging to that clan. "I guess you don't remember how a lot of people were gypped after the first World War, by phony art treasures that were peddled in from Europe. Do you?"

Not being an art dealer, Harry naturally shouldn't remember, so he didn't.

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"Well, they were," affirmed Gerster, "and old Graydon was one of them. He saw to it that he wouldn't be hooked again. Put a whole crew of experts and researchers to work checking the history of every art buy that came his way. They used x-ray photographs, added their own secret marks. In fact they didn't overlook a scientific stunt among those that were known in that day."

"Old Graydon should have been sure enough of his collection after that."

"Only it doesn't apply just to Graydon's collection, Vincent. Do you know how much in the way of art treasures went through his hands? Half a billion dollars' worth."

Harry gave an incredulous stare.

"I mean it," asserted Gerster. "Of course Graydon never owned anything like that amount all at once. I doubt if he ever tied up more than ten million at a time. But he was always buying and selling, more like a mania than a hobby, and there was lots of stuff he just considered but never did take. But everything he looked at was tagged for future reference."

All this was known to Harry; it concerned his visit to Kanakee Junction, but the figures that Gerster talked belonged on the box cars down by the depot. Still, the fellow might not be greatly exaggerating, for the art buying activities of Gifford Graydon had unquestionably run into the fabulous. However, it was policy for Harry to sit back and let Gerster continue with the details.

"Old Graydon spent a fortune in tabulating art stuff," Gerster declared, "and he called those records the Graydon Archives. Gave orders that they were to be buried with him and never dug up unless –"

With that, Gerster paused to glance at some other guests who had entered the dining room. His pause was purposely timed so that Harry would pick up the statement and give himself away, but Harry didn't fall for the ruse. Finishing his glass of orange juice, Harry asked casually:

"Unless what?"

"Unless there was another World War," resumed Gerster, his eyes back on Harry. "Well, one came along and it knocked the art business a hundred times sillier than the first war did. Why, the stuff that has been smuggled out of Europe one way or another would fill a hundred museums."

"What has that to do with Graydon?"

"Plenty. Here's the question." Gerster's gaze narrowed shrewdly. "How much of that smuggled stuff would you say was genuine?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Neither has anybody else. That's what old Graydon foresaw and his Archives will tell the tale. Some of the dealers who have peddled questionable stuff are going to be in a bad jam, maybe. One of them is sitting right over there."

Harry looked and saw a crab-faced man whose baldish head was lowered toward a newspaper which he wasn't reading, as was evident from the change in his eyes, every time they took a furtive, sidelong look through his pince-nez glasses.

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"Hugo Atmore," undertoned Gerster. "He's unloaded a couple of million dollars' worth of art stuff brought in by refugees, always at fancy commissions. He's watching Elliot Huxford over at that other table."

Gerster's wig-wagging thumb pointed out a heavy-joweled man with shocky gray hair and beetly eyebrows to match. Huxford wasn't trying to subdue the glares that he gave at Atmore. Apparently Huxford felt that Atmore's presence contaminated this dining room. Since Harry wasn't supposed to know who Huxford was, he purposely put the wrong question:

"Another art dealer?"

"No, a collector," corrected Gerster. "The kind that Atmore would like to have on his sucker list. Only Huxford knows too much to let Atmore trim him. What's more" – Gerster emphasized this with, a chuckle – "Atmore knows that Huxford knows too much."

Gerster's chuckle ended abruptly as a tall, long-jawed man entered the dining room and took a table close by. Shoulders erect, he let his coat flap back sufficiently to reveal a badge, though the action was purely coincidental. It was just a habit with Sheriff Rufe Dodson, this silent way of proclaiming his authority.

Nevertheless, it took effect on Jeff Gerster.

"Let's talk about your line for a while," suggested Gerster, leaning across the table toward Harry. "How's writing paper going – or isn't it?"

Accepting the change of topic, Harry Vincent felt a silent satisfaction. Whatever his purpose in Kanakee Junction, Jeff Gerster was leery of the law.

That was all Harry Vincent wanted to know.

CHAPTER V

BY mid-afternoon matters had gotten nowhere fast.

Such at least was Harry's verdict, but his guess was very wide. Things began to pop when the three-fifteen local steamed into the Junction its usual forty minutes late.

Harry was strolling toward the depot at the time, with the talkative Mr. Gerster at his elbow. Several passengers alighted from the local, among them Lamont Cranston. A tall man, calm-faced and leisurely of manner, Cranston glanced around languidly as though viewing some strange land, which was appropriate enough considering the difference between Kanakee Junction and New York City.

Cranston's stare was careless only in appearance. He looked right through Harry Vincent as though his friend wasn't there. This was a regular policy of Cranston's under uncertain circumstances and Harry's abbreviated telegram hadn't detailed the situation.

A large limousine was parked near the station with a uniformed chauffeur standing in attendance. The big car formed a contrast to the ramshackle vehicles owned by the towns folk, so Cranston strolled in its direction. The chauffeur immediately tipped his cap and greeted.

"Good afternoon, sir. Are you going to Graydon Towers?"

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At Cranston's nod, the chauffeur opened the door and bowed Cranston into the car, which already contained two passengers, Hugo Atmore and Elliot Huxford, who were sitting as far apart as space would allow.

Close enough to catch what was going on, Gerster gave Harry a quick nudge.

"Get a load of that, Vincent. We're going to Graydon Tower, too."

The chauffeur accepted the two new passengers without question and the limousine started for the Towers with a full load. The man who analyzed the case more critically was Rufe Dodson, who was staring from the station agent's window.

"Reckon I'll be going up to the Towers shortly, Jerry," commented Rufe. "Looks like old Hybart is receiving visitors. Maybe he won't mind introducing me."

When the limousine rolled through the open gates, Harry gained his first daytime view of Graydon Towers and was more than surprised. Last night the building had looked fantastic; today, the word hardly described it. Instead of gaining a more normal look, Graydon Towers loomed like a monstrosity.

Conceivably every house was built to some sort of plan, but the Towers stood as a noticeable exception. None of the windows were on the same level nor were any of the jutting roofs. The mansion looked precisely as if some giant hand had taken blocks of assorted sizes, piled them hit or miss, and poured a mass of concrete over them to weld them into place.

From last night, Harry remembered fanciful chimneys that had pencilled themselves against the flashing sky. He'd attributed the weird effect to the lightning, but the sunlight produced an effect that was even more grotesque. For a final touch, Harry noted that nearly every window had an outside balcony jutting from it; that was, all the windows above the irregular line that roughly represented the ground floor. The windows on that zigzag level were barred.

To reach the front door, the limousine went clear around to what should have been the back of the house. This tour gave the passengers a view of more architectural irregularities, but it didn't include the side of the house where Harry had found an ivy-grown nook inhabited only by a red-haired girl.

What he now saw of the weird mansion, Harry decided that the girl in question was probably the resident banshee. Certainly her uncanny disappearance had marked her as anything but human.

Entering the house the visitors formed a hushed throng as they came into a great hall. All the effect that the outside appearance had promised was gathered here in full. Through stained glass windows, the sun's rays cast a myriad of colors across the floor, producing fanciful patterns. Most curious was the fact that when the visitors advanced, the patchwork effect remained, though they blocked off the shafts of light that formed the multiple hues.

Bothered by this mystery, Harry suddenly realized that the floor itself was colored with many tiles that matched, or more properly replaced, the rainbow galaxy that the stained windows cast. Yet somehow, the footsteps echoing over that stony floor were absorbed into the hush that predominated this high chamber.

The sounds must have carried, for a man in smock and skull cap appeared from a large door above a short flight of steps. Descending, he approached the visitors and eyed them with a tilted head above a pair of shoulders that slanted in the same direction. The man's eyes looked immense and owlish through the large-lensed glasses that he wore and his smile was one of the most peculiar that Harry had ever seen.

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It gave the effect of a smile, but it wasn't one. It was a slant of the man's lips, contrasting diagonally to the tilt of his head, so that his lips were actually level. When he spoke, the man retained his unique smile.

"I am glad to meet you, gentlemen." The tone was high, but firm and not unmusical. "I am Jerome Hybart, the custodian of these premises. I take it that you have come to learn about the Graydon Archives?"

There were nods along the line and Harry noticed that Cranston's was the most casual of all. In fact, Cranston, standing just beyond Gerster, was the one person who was taking this scene as a matter of course, which didn't surprise Harry at all.

In another life that he frequently led, Lamont Cranston was known as The Shadow, a master of mystery in his own right. This setting was quite to his liking, indeed the sort that he preferred. With brief side glances, Harry observed that Cranston was taking in the numerous nooks and alcoves that the great hall provided and also sizing up the assorted stairways and oddly shaped balconies that were common indoors as well as out.

It looked as though The Shadow had future plans for Graydon Towers.

Now Hybart was introducing himself to his visitors. Shaking hands with Atmore, he learned the man's name; then studied the crab-faced visitor. There was a glint from Hybart's tilted eyes, as he remarked:

"So you are Hugo Atmore, the noted art dealer. May I ask your particular interest in wishing to see the Graydon Archives?"

As Atmore hesitated, Elliot Huxford bulked forward from the other end of the line. Introducing himself abruptly, he said to Hybart:

"If Hugo won't tell you, I will. He's worried about what's in those records. He's afraid he's going to find some genuine examples of the fakes he's been selling suckers. It will be bad news for you, Atmore."

Savagely, Atmore wheeled toward the accuser, then relaxed as Hybart stepped between.

"I may have made a few mistakes." In contrast to his challenging air, Atmore's tone was a plaintive whine. "If I have, I intend to rectify them. That is my only purpose here, Mr. Hybart. I felt that I should be the first to know."

"You should be," sneered Huxford in basso style. "Those few mistakes might cost you the half million that they say you've stacked away. If you find out first, you won't stay long in this county." Pausing, Huxford guffawed, then added: "Did I say county? I meant country."

Hybart began to oil the troubled waters.

"As a famous collector, Mr. Huxford, you have a right to be critical," declared Hybart. "I know that you have been very careful in all of your art purchases –"

"I have at that," interrupted Huxford. "That's why I've never been one of Atmore's customers."

"I can understand your interest," continued Hybart. "Having been impeccable in your own choice of art treasures, you will find further satisfaction in learning how closely your findings tallied with those of Graydon's research experts."

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Huxford bowed his acknowledgment of Hybart's statement. Having soothed this guest with flattery, Hybart turned to Lamont Cranston. The moment that he learned the calm-faced visitor's name, Hybart became literally aflutter.

"Lamont Cranston!" he exclaimed.

"Why, the world of art owes you its deepest gratitude. You are the traveler who brought the famed jade Iota from the Black Hat lamasery in Tibet! You are the man who furnished a first-hand description of the silver coffin of Temujin, otherwise Genghis Khan, whose bodyguards, descendants of those originally appointed, still carry the remains of their great master through the dunes of the impassable Gobi! It is an honor in itself to meet Lamont Cranston!"

Hybart's voice rang out as he extended a thin hand to this esteemed visitor. In fact the utterance of Cranston's name was so strong that it drowned the heavy footsteps that approached from the outer door. Then, as Hybart was extending his hand as though to invite his visitors through the premises on the strength of Cranston's name alone, the footsteps arrived.

Sheriff Dodson stepped in from the flank, gave the line a sharp-eyed stare and turned to Hybart with the gruff admonition:

"Don't you think it would be better to ask permission before showing people around this place?"

"Permission?" demanded Hybart in a quick tone. "Why should I ask permission from you, sheriff?"

"Not from me," returned Rufe bluntly. "I was thinking of another party –"

Again, footsteps interrupted. This time they were light; audible only because they came from one of the quaint stairways that flanked the great hall. The footsteps halted as the visitors turned and a girl's voice said quietly:

"Mr. Hybart is still the custodian here, sheriff. He has a right to do as he chooses."

Turning with the rest, Harry saw the vision that addressed them. She was standing on a little landing at just the right elevation to catch the sunlight from above the stained glass windows, so that she received its untinted volume.

Fancy colors weren't needed to increase the girl's beauty; they would merely have masked it. Only pure sunlight could have given that auburn hair its coppery iridescence and furnished those eyes with the clear blue sparkle that was rivalled only by the delicate ruddiness of the girl's lips and cheeks.

She was the girl that Harry had met the night before and she wasn't any banshee, of that Harry was quite sure. Banshees didn't wear flowing green negligees; nor did they prefer sunlight.

The Graydon Archives could stay in their crypt for all that Harry Vincent cared. He'd found something of much more pressing interest.

CHAPTER VI

HYBART'S reaction to the girl's arrival was typical of the man's quick-changing moods. First he bowed most politely and introduced the girl with much eclat.

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"This is Miss Linda Graydon," announced Hybart. "She is a grandniece of my benefactor, Gifford Graydon, and his nearest relative. This house is her home, even though I am its custodian."

Finishing that profuse statement, Hybart turned his straight-lined smile toward Rufe Dodson and inquired:

"Did you hear what Miss Graydon said, sheriff? I have a right to do as I choose."

Looking past Hybart, Rufe saw Linda nod. In the same steady tone, the girl declared:

"Whatever Mr. Hybart says is an order."

Instantly Hybart swung about, gratitude fading from his face as he snatched the full right of the authority that the girl had so generously granted him.

"Then go back to your room, Linda!" snapped Hybart. "Go back there and stay until you have my permission to leave. You accepted my authority when you came here. I demand obedience to the letter!"

The glow of the girl's cheeks grew to the deeper color of her tightened lips and Harry could see her fists clench in the sunlight. Then, suddenly yielding to Hybart's order, Linda turned and half-stumbled up the stairs. Hybart, attempted an explanation after he heard a door slam.

"Poor child," expressed Hybart, indulgently. "She was caught in the rain last night. Our housekeeper, Mrs. Moffitt, has been looking after her, and decided she should stay in bed. If I spoke sharply, it was for her own good."

Then, dismissing the Linda question instantaneously, Hybart turned to Gerster and inquired abruptly:

"And who are you?"

"The name's Jeff Gerster," came the reply. "Insurance investigator. Here's my card."

Hybart shifted the card until he found a yellow light from the patchwork pane.

"With what company. Mr. Gerster?"

"Working on my own," replied Jeff. "Wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

"And why not?"

"Because lots of companies insure art treasures," stated Gerster, "and for big amounts. Thought I'd make a general check-up and then go the rounds. You see" – Jeff looked around the group – "if somebody pays something like fifty thousand dollars for a work of art, he usually insures it for that amount, doesn't he?"

"He should," returned Hybart drily.

"But suppose it turns out to be worth fifty bucks instead of fifty thousand," suggested Gerster. "Wouldn't the insurance company pay something to find it out? Of course it would and that's my business, telling insurance companies what they ought to know."

Hybart shrugged and turned to Harry who introduced himself by name and modestly styled himself an art collector. Accepting Harry at his word, Hybart turned to the others.

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"This way, all of you," said Hybart. "I shall show you through the music room, then down to the crypt. But you are early arrivals, gentlemen. The crypt will not be opened before a few days from now, when the other heirs are expected."

The music room was a few steps down from the great hall and was approximately at ground level. At the far end was a large organ set in an immense alcove; to the right was a small hallway leading to an open elevator. Hybart's gesture, however, was to a doorway at the left.

"This way," repeated Hybart. "I shall take you to the stairway that leads down to the crypt. But first" – he paused and gave his hand a wide sweep to include the entire floor – "I think you should notice this tiling. It was Mr. Graydon's pride."

The term was well applied.

It would have been impossible to imagine a finer piece of mosaic work than that tiled floor. Its border outmatched the intricate pattern of an Oriental rug, while the field consisted of beautifully hued designs as perfectly fashioned as if they had been woven. But the center tiling was the real prize.

The center was circled by a tiled border about eight feet in diameter. The circle itself was of three colors, each about an inch across, consisting of garnet, jet and jade. Those simple colors of red, black and green were but a frame for the varied hues that filled the center.

There, the tiling ran riot, forming a modernistic picture that both astonished and confused the eye. According to Hybart, it was old Graydon's conception, done according to his design.

"Gifford Graydon was a man of unusual vision," spoke Hybart in the manner of a lecturer. "He called this work 'Eternity' because it symbolizes past, present and future. In its pattern you will observe a blending of all those factors, depicting a single moment which can be said to include all time."

Under such interpretation, the design made a certain amount of sense. Great stabs of red and orange tiles unquestionably represented volcanic forces of the world's creation. Drifts of gray–streaked white were either heavenly clouds or the smoke from those same volcanoes, perhaps both. There were jagged lines of yellow representing lightning, great twists of green that might be either prehistoric reptiles or masses of vegetation. Faces were present, but none were more than partly formed and some of steel–blue hue looked like robots representing the mechanical age.

Hybart gave his peculiar smile when the visitors were loath to tread upon the conglomerated floor. He remarked drily that this pattern, like everything else designed by Graydon, was meant to last forever. Shuffling his own feet across the tiles, Hybart invited the others to do the same and learn for themselves how sturdy the flooring was.

"Mr. Graydon had a weakness for concrete," declared Hybart, "probably because concrete has no weakness of its own. Like all the other floors in this mansion, this one has a concrete base. As a matter of fact, Graydon added extra strength at this particular place.

"Directly beneath here" – Hybart was pointing downward – "is the front wall of the crypt, a great concrete bulkhead. It serves as a center beam for this music room and no one could ask for a stronger foundation."

The others were treading on the center tiling, noting the firmness that Hybart mentioned; but there was one man more interested in watching the group than in studying the tile pattern.

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That man was Rufe Dodson.

Looking from face to face, the sheriff was comparing them. To begin with, he knew that Atmore and Huxford were at total odds; that fact had been rendered quite clear. Also he correctly classed Harry and Gerster as chance acquaintances. Otherwise, the members of the group appeared to be total strangers. As dealer and collector, Atmore and Huxford apparently had never met Gerster, the insurance investigator. But that was all unimportant to Dodson.

The sheriff was anxious to learn who knew Lamont Cranston and so far nobody qualified. As a matter of policy Cranston hadn't greeted Harry and their policy of non-recognition was keeping Dodson quite confused.

"Now let us descend to the crypt," suggested Hybart, gesturing toward the door at the left from which he had detoured to exhibit the tiled circle. "Be careful going down the stairway. It is fan-shaped and has no rail."

Past the doorway the visitors found a circular staircase looming up from the lower darkness. The concrete stairs gave a ghostly effect, which was not dispelled when Hybart turned on lights above. The glow that then came from below was dim and almost as ominous as darkness.

More ominous in one sense.

As the visitors reached the bottom of the stairs they saw something that they wouldn't have viewed in darkness. It was a great formidable figure, bulking its giant form in the center of an ante room fronting the great wall of Graydon's crypt.

The figure was a statue at least eight feet tall. It was made of bronze and it was mounted on a concrete base that bore a hemisphere that might have represented the top half of the world, except that it was drilled with ornamental holes, placed horizontally.

This statue represented an angel, with one hand raised in peace-giving fashion the other clutching a bronze staff as a warlike symbol. Most noteworthy of the angel's features were its wings; rising at angles from the statue's back, they didn't stop until they reached the line where the front wall of the crypt met the ceiling, twelve feet above the floor.

Though only partly spread, those great bronze wings had a span of nearly eight feet and formed a one-sided archway under which Hybart conducted his visitors, to show them the massive steel door that formed the only entrance to the crypt.

"The statue represents Graydon's guardian angel," stated Hybart. "But if you will examine the steel door, you will observe that he relied on other protection. This door is fitted with intricate multiple locks, including a time device set in years as well as days. No one can possibly enter this crypt until the exact hour appointed by Gifford Graydon."

Even Sheriff Dodson was interested in the bulky door, enough so to forget the men about him. That was when Harry brushed past Cranston, who deftly drew away an envelope that poked from Harry's pocket. Not even the Guardian Angel could have witnessed this transfer that took place beneath its very wings, for like the persons present, its gaze was turned the other way.

That envelope contained Harry's report to his chief, The Shadow.

CHAPTER VII

THERE wasn't any doubt that Gifford Graydon had taken sufficient precautions to guard his private tomb. That combination of steel and concrete was quite enough to settle any doubts. It left only the question of the all-important records that Graydon had ordered buried with him.

Jerome Hybart seemed to know that thoughts were concentrating on the Graydon Archives.

"If you will come up to the library," spoke Hybart, "I shall let you see samples of the archives – those of you who are interested."

Those words came back with whispered echo from the solid walls of the dim ante room. There was a metallic tone to the whisper, as though the bronze wings had caught it and added an echo of their own. Hybart's eyes, canted into the light, carried a knowing glitter, as though he had put the offer as a test.

Atmore snapped the bait instantly.

"Specimens of the records?" he inquired. "You mean data on the art treasures that Graydon kept as his own?"

Hybart gave one of his diagonal nods.

"Of course I'd like to see them," asserted Atmore. "As an art dealer I am always interested in anything which may establish authenticity."

"As an art collector, Atmore," put in Huxford, "I am interested in watching the reactions of dealers like yourself. I would prefer to wait until the crypt is opened and see the archives which may have a bearing on your recent sales. But since one concerns the other, I shall come along."

The others being similarly inclined, though nonexpressive, Hybart led the way up the fan-staircase, through the music room and into the great hall. The library was at the rear, through the doorway from which Hybart had originally appeared, so the group went in that direction. But by the time they went through the doorway one of their number was missing.

In the shelter of an alcove, Lamont Cranston had read the note handed him by Harry Vincent and was now strolling out through the front door of the mansion.

It was Harry who first learned of the absentee. Like the other visitors, Harry was in the library, a sizeable room with many nooks and crannies, all lined with shelves of books, except one corner where Hybart's desk stood with a stack of filing cabinets beside it. The library had a balcony with ladders leading up to it and the balcony in turn had book shelves thus taking advantage of the wall space clear to the high ceiling.

In looking for Cranston, Harry had competition. The thing that started Harry's quest was a restlessness on the part of Sheriff Dodson. After wasting ten minutes watching Hybart dig some musty volumes from a file cabinet and spread them in front of Atmore and Huxford, Dodson had begun to get bored. Knowing that the sheriff might soon be counting noses, Harry decided to see how matters stood.

Responding to a prompt thought, Harry personally left the library and went down the few steps to the great hall.

Time had gone rapidly and it was almost sunset. Everything was etched in vivid colors and the hall had lost its effect of emptiness. It seemed furnished and peopled, for now a multitude of art objects, previously

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overlooked, stood out in sharp relief and among them were statuary and suits of armor which seemed in repose, rather than in a state of permanent immobility.

Oddly, Harry had noticed these things before but hadn't given them second thought; now, he knew why.

The various alcoves were built on the bias; perhaps it was from studying them that Hybart had gained the habit of keeping his head at a slant. Whatever the case, you couldn't appraise the contents properly when coming from the front of the hall. Only a small portion of the lamps, vases, armor and statuary were visible from that direction; the rest were hidden in their nooks as were most of the woven tapestries that Harry now admired.

Amid the cathedral silence, Harry felt the curious impression that the standing figures were not only alive but had crept from impossible hiding places, drawn by the sunset. Like ghosts, were these creatures ready to welcome nightfall. Striding abruptly toward the front of the hall, Harry turned full about and saw to his relief that the illusion was destroyed.

Just deep crannies, nothing more, for the immobile shapes were now hidden by the jutting, angular corners.

Footsteps carried from the library doorway, and Harry knew it must be Dodson. There was a stairway handy, leading up to a half-story above and Harry immediately ascended it. Rufe heard the footsteps on the concrete, turned and spotted Harry at the wooden rail above.

Sharply, the sheriff demanded:

"Well, where is he?"

"Gerster?" queried Harry. "In the library, I suppose. He said something about looking at the books on the balcony."

"I don't mean Gerster," snapped Rufe, coming closer. "I mean Cranston."

"Crandon? Which one was he?"

"The name is Cranston not Crandon. The fellow that Hybart said had been to Tibet."

"Oh, yes." Harry nodded as though recalling the comment. "Maybe he went back there."

"Forget that stuff," retorted Rufe. "If you were out here, you should have seen where he went."

Harry merely shrugged.

"I'm a stranger around here myself, sheriff. I was just looking around at the armor and the statues. Maybe Cranston was doing the same."

"And maybe not."

"Why don't you ask the servants? They ought to be around somewhere."

"I guess I will. Only suppose you come along."

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Coming down the stairs, Harry turned at the bottom and joined the sheriff. As he did, he caught a stir from a higher balcony and took a quick glance, thinking it might be Cranston. In that glance, Harry recognized someone else: Linda Graydon.

A brief flash of a green negligee, the momentary blaze of red hair; then the girl had withdrawn from sight. The sheriff turned, glanced up toward the balcony, but saw no one. Gruffly, he decided:

"Let's look for the servants."

It didn't take long to look. The household numbered half a dozen servants and they began arriving before Dodson could even start to hunt them. The servants were bringing wax tapers on the ends of long lighting sticks, so they could ignite the candles that stood in high wall brackets and in hanging lamps. After watching the procedure briefly, the sheriff began asking the servants if they'd seen Cranston, only to receive headshakes.

The servants not only hadn't seen Cranston, they didn't know who he was.

"Maybe we ought to be leaving," remarked Harry. "It's getting pretty late. How about driving me down to the Junction?"

"Hybart's car will take you," returned Rufe. "It's out front and it's on call unless Cranston took it."

At the front door when he spoke, Rufe opened the door and looked out to see the limousine in the driveway with the chauffeur dozing at the wheel. Striding back through the hallway, Rufe passed Harry, and finding that he no longer counted, Harry shrugged and decided to make the trip to town. He was turning from beneath the higher balcony, when something fluttered down past his shoulder. Catching it, Harry found it was a piece of paper, which bore one word, written in pencil:

The one word was: "Stay."

From Linda!

Among the servants going elsewhere with the candles, Harry noticed a woman who could only be the housekeeper, Mrs. Moffitt. Harry lost no time. Taking the steps to the higher balcony, he looked along a hallway and saw Linda beckoning from near a window.

A few moments later, Harry was again face to face with the red-haired girl of the lightning flashes.

Sunset was quite as much to Linda's order. Her hair was fluffy, rather than streaming; she was willowy instead of limp. But now her eyes were solemn and her lips appealing.

"I want you to help me," the girl said softly. "You heard what Hybart said. He didn't quite admit it, but he's practically keeping me a prisoner."

Harry nodded; then asked:

"Where?"

The girl gestured from the barred window and Harry saw another pair on a slightly higher level; two windows under one of the square-roofed towers. Studying the ivied wall, Harry made mental note of that particular tower's location.

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"I came here a month ago," Linda continued. "And I haven't been free since." A momentary pause, then quickly, in a different tone, the girl added: "Since –"

"Since last night?"

"Yes." Linda lowered her face as she completed her nod. "I didn't mean to lie to you. I was just exaggerating. I should have remembered."

"Remembered that I am the man you met outside?"

Another nod; then Linda's face came up, wearing an apologetic smile.

"It isn't as bad as all that," she declared, frankly. "About Hybart, I mean. He said I was welcome to stay, but he insisted that I shouldn't meet anybody until after his own business was settled."

"Those archives from the crypt?"

"Yes. He is responsible for them and therefore he mistrusts everybody."

"Including you?"

"Of course. That's why I mistrust Hybart. I think he should make an exception in my case."

Looking at Linda, Harry began to feel that anybody should. Those eyes of hers were a sufficient reason. Linda was the sort of girl who needed to be considered detail by detail, and those captivating eyes demanded their full turn. All that Harry wanted was cause to linger, so he parried for it.

"About last night," recalled Harry. "The way you disappeared was very sudden."

The blue eyes went wide as though to take in more of the fading light. In a surprised tone, Linda asked:

"Was it?"

"It was," replied Harry, "and I've been wondering why."

"Why, there wasn't any reason," laughed Linda, softly. "You said to run for it and I did, toward the trees of course –"

She halted, catching a look that must have told her that Harry had taken off in that precise direction.

"Of course the lightning frightened me," picked up Linda, quickly, "so I turned back, thinking the trees might be struck. So you see what I really did was come around the house."

The girl was lying, or she wouldn't have let her eyes drift from Harry's.

Her gaze was directed out through the hallway window and Harry casually looked that way himself. What he saw impressed him more than Linda's words.

A man was dodging rapidly across the lawn, trying to keep in the streaky blackness wrought by the growing dusk. He was over a slope that must have hidden him from the ground floor of the mansion, but he could still be seen from this higher window.

The man was Jeff Gerster.

With a side glance at Linda, Harry saw the girl's eyes turn and knew that she had spotted something else. Her hands clutching his arm, she was pressing him inward from the window.

"You've got to believe me," Linda pleaded. "You are the only friend I have. I'm so afraid – afraid of what may happen inside this house –"

Over Linda's shoulder, Harry saw Rufe Dodson striding across the lawn and from the sheriff's determined stalk, Harry knew that he was going straight along the path set by Jeff Gerster. More important, both were aiming for those very woods where Harry had heard a car start the night before.

In his note to Cranston, Harry had mentioned that spot and was sure it was where his chief had gone.

"Did you say inside?" demanded Harry. "I thought the real trouble was outside Graydon Towers."

"No, no," began Linda. "Why, I've been looking out my window ever since I came back to my room and I didn't see anyone –"

She had seen someone; the way she tried to cover it was proof. So was the quick turn of her eyes; the sudden flush of her cheeks.

"No, wait! I can explain –"

Linda's protest was useless. Harry was already striding to the stairway where Linda didn't dare to follow. Face buried in her hands, Linda didn't see the look that Harry threw back when he turned at the top of the stairs.

Explanations were still in order where Harry Vincent was concerned. He was classing this abrupt parting with Linda Graydon as something that came under the head of unfinished business.

CHAPTER VIII

AMONG the things that Lamont Cranston managed inconspicuously, carrying a brief case was one. Today he had taken his brief case in and out of Graydon Towers without anyone realizing that he had it with him. Carrying a brief case was something of an art and Cranston had cultivated it for occasions such as this.

At present the brief case was parked against a tree down in the woods where an old dirt road disguised itself as a gully. Ordinarily such a road should have revealed plenty of traces of any recent vehicle, but last night's rain had scored a complete washout.

Of course the road itself was something in the way of testimony and now, as darkness grew beneath the trees, a sound had disturbed the silence that came with the approach of night, the brief throb of a laboring motor.

It ended, that sound; then Cranston caught another, that of a scuffly stumble among dry leaves, slightly up the slope.

Instantly the brief case came into use. The center of the brief case opened like a V and from a secret compartment between the dividing section, Cranston drew out a black cloak of thin material and a felt pancake that opened into a soft slouch hat.

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Sliding the black cloak over his shoulders, planting the slouch hat on his head, Lamont Cranston became The Shadow.

In the dying daylight, the cloaked form literally vanished.

A blink of an eye would have caused a person to miss sighting him, for The Shadow's passage could have been mistaken for the waver of a tree. His stride was silent, practically a glide. It was simple business for The Shadow to remain unnoticed while trailing the stumbler from the slope above.

Finally blundering to the road, the man paused to mop his forehead with a handkerchief. Deceived by the quiet all about him, he didn't bother to stay out of daylight. One glance at the man's face and The Shadow saw who he was: Jeff Gerster.

More stumbles from the woods above. Hearing them, Gerster turned along the road and took it on a half-run. Behind him came The Shadow, holding an easy, silent footing among the stones and ruts.

Having given himself away by his stumbles, Jeff sensed that the man up in the woods was taking a short-cut and was gaining on him.

Not for an instant could Jeff have suspected the cloaked figure that was so closely on his trail. If he had, Jeff wouldn't have done the thing he did when a car coasted into sight, casting dim lights ahead of it. Sidestepping rapidly into the car's curving path, Jeff did a wild imitation of a jack-in-the-box, waving his arms to halt the arrivals.

The driver recognized Gerster and stopped the car. Only a brief patch of fleeting blackness flickered across the glow from the dimmers as The Shadow, keeping to the side of the road, reached a vantage point within earshot and remained there unseen.

A voice from the car croaked:

"What's up, Jeff? Something sour?"

"I'll say!" panted Jeff. "Hold it and listen."

Lights clicked off and with them the motor. Unearthly silence took over, only to be broken by a crackle from the woods.

By then, Gerster was over beside the driver's door, almost within arm reach of The Shadow, whose figure did nothing more than give an added bulge to an old tree stump on the bank behind his shoulders.

"Is that what's eating you?" came the croak. "You're letting the jitters get you, Jeff. Sounds like a deer on its way home."

"Just keep listening, Frisco," undertoned Gerster. "What you're hearing is an old fox starting out for the night."

Frisco's croak muffled to a whisper.

"You mean that yap sheriff?"

"That's right. He was up at the Towers when I started my sneak. He spotted me."

"So what?"

"You've got to hand him the dodge, like last night."

"No dice, Jeff. He'd nick us if we tried to turn around. This is it."

Frisco's last words were to his companions in the car, which was a low rakish roadster, built to order for its occupants. Doors opened, disgorging four men who came around to the front, one almost brushing The Shadow when he passed. Tricky lights showed Frisco and his three followers fixing bandana handkerchiefs around their necks, ready to draw them up as masks.

"You turn the car, Jeff," croaked Frisco, "only don't start until we've rounded up this fox of yours."

"Hold it," snarled Jeff. "Who's giving the orders for this outfit?"

"You are," acknowledged Frisco, tactfully, "only they come from a guy higher up, don't they?"

"Only because he's paid for them."

"And he's given them, according to what you told us. Guys like this hick sheriff are to be brought in to him."

"Not just yet," parried Jeff. "The other job comes first."

"Only it isn't coming," reminded Frisco, "not while this tin star yap is blocking it."

"But I'm still waiting for the word –"

"And so will we. What's wrong with keeping our sheriff friend on ice until then?"

"He might be missed."

"Then let them find him. He works for the railroad, don't he?"

"In his off-time, yes."

"Which railroad?"

"Both, I guess."

"All the better. Maybe he'll get the schedules mixed and be walking over a trestle where he don't know a train's coming. That's where they'll find him."

Leaving Jeff no further chance to argue, Frisco and company began to spread, working gradually up the slope. They maneuvered it craftily and silently, for they had a marked advantage. Here where the trees were thin, the slope was still soggy from the rain and it was steep enough for the crew to advance on hands and knees.

A muffled slam of the car door told that Jeff had taken the wheel as Frisco suggested. The Shadow heard that slam while making a flanking trip past Frisco's tribe and knew it might be misinterpreted.

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In trailing Jeff Gerster, Sheriff Dodson could presuppose that the questionable investigator was getting into a car that he had personally left in the woods. That surmise would call for rush action on the sheriff's part, making him a target for Frisco's stalking mob. This called for rush action by The Shadow, but Dodson didn't give him time.

The foxy sheriff had been creeping closer all this while, much closer than even The Shadow suspected. His rush, attack and capture came all in one burst.

Out of darkness blazed a flashlight, its path to the car blocked by the masked faces of Frisco's tribe, all of them squarely in the glare. Before Rufe Dodson could whip up his gun at point-blank range; the mobbies swarmed upon him, smothering him without a shot. Finding Rufe's gun with the flashlight that the sheriff dropped with it, Frisco dangled both together in his left hand, letting the gleam play along the row of masked faces.

"You're up against it, guy," informed Frisco, in a tone more gruff than his usual croak. "There's a friend of yours wants to see you and ask what it's about."

Getting back his breath, Rufe showed he wasn't awed by his captors.

"Guess you don't know I'm sheriff here," he barked. "Acting on authority of the law in this county."

"What county?" demanded Frisco. "We didn't know there was any."

The sheriff gave a puzzled gape in the light.

"We thought this was Indian Territory," sneered Frisco, "judging by the primitive characters we've seen around the Junction."

Enlightenment crept into Dodson's stare. Raising his head for a better look at Frisco, he exclaimed:

"Rain-in-the-face!"

Frisco didn't understand the reference. He thought Rufe was getting smart and what was more, he didn't like the bold way the sheriff poked his chin out in an effort to see what lay behind the mask. However, the statement called for repartee, so Frisco gave it double.

"Smack-in-the-Puss!" snarled Frisco. Suiting the name with action, he gave a side-slash at Rufe's face. "Take it and forget the smart stuff."

It wasn't good judgment, using the hand that held the flashlight. The glow wigwagged Frisco's intent, better than anything else could have. Rufe snatched for the flashlight with both hands and got it and his gun into the bargain. Hauling himself half to his feet with the grab, he was back in action.

"Give it!"

At the command, Frisco's crew copied their leader's ferocious lunge. Restrictions were off regarding gunplay, now that Rufe was proving himself tough stuff. The county was due to lack one sheriff, or would have been, if the members of this murder squad hadn't been so sure they could beat Rufe to the shot. All wanted to deliver a point-blank bullet, so they sought the victim with their gun-points before pulling their triggers.

Split-second business this, a thing in which another personage specialized; usually with bullets of his own. Only this time, The Shadow suited his action to counteract a mass attack. Crouched behind a boulder loosened by the storm, The Shadow was already heaving forward when Rufe made his wild break.

Before a single gun could stab, the rock was ploughing squarely into Frisco's tribe and riding with it, like a surf-board expert topping the crest of a wave, came a gun-swinging mass of living blackness whose strident laugh proclaimed a death-challenge that no murderer could fail to understand!

CHAPTER IX

IT was like a preview of vengeance, that fierce taunt of The Shadow. Chimed with the crash of the rock that swept past Dodson and slanted into Frisco's charging crew, it produced an effect before the cause.

In saving the sheriff's life, The Shadow did more. He gave Frisco's squad a chance to save their own hides, slim though the opportunity was. Luck went with the scattering four as they hurled themselves from the path of the juggernaut and the flying fighter who rode it.

Somersaulting men slid through the muck and coasted headlong to the road where Gerster was madly swinging the car around in the narrow space of a turnout. Taking a side-bounce the hurtling boulder missed Frisco by mere inches and with its hop, skipped over a crook who was hitting the mud face-first. Hearing the boulder coming, Gerster jammed the brakes just as the rock went clouting across the car's front fender.

The boulder's eccentric ricochet flung The Shadow at an unexpected angle, where he struck sidelong and rolled right down to the road. In his slide, The Shadow overtook the other pair of thugs and in their turn they overtook him. Stabbing blind shots in the darkness, they received The Shadow's answers, but his aim in turn was wide. The Shadow wasn't taking time for accuracy, not while Sheriff Dodson was still at large. Rufe was likely to blunder into the path of bullets if given too much invitation.

Rufe did blunder into something and it was just as well he did. Waving his gun and flashlight, shouting the authority vested in him as sheriff of Beaverwood County, Dodson was lurching down to the road a few compass points off his course, ready to settle scores with any and all he met.

What Rufe met was a figure that came spurting down the road into the swinging glare of the sheriff's flashlight. Rufe didn't stop to reason that this couldn't be one of the masked gang; instead, he slashed with the hand that bore the flashlight and brought his gun to bear with the other. The man from the road met both strokes with a lunge that ended in a grapple.

This could only be Harry Vincent who quite logically had kept an eye on Sheriff Dodson, knowing that Rufe had one on Lamont Cranston. Sacrificing an ace agent in a mistaken brawl wasn't worth the chance of stopping a few of Frisco's crowd.

So The Shadow turned course with a running drive up the embankment and a long leap as he veered back near the top. The muddy hump was like a springboard that launched him into the private feud between Harry and Rufe, a conflict that The Shadow settled by the sheer weight of his arrival. Both men sprawled and with his twist, The Shadow saw to it that Rufe landed the harder. As the sheriff flattened in the road, his gun and flashlight scaled from his loosening fists and bounced to the other side.

The touring car was away, with Gerster at the helm. Finding all hands on board, Frisco and his gunners were firing back, but their shots were futile. The car was already jouncing around a bend and even a stray bullet couldn't have winged the human targets who had sprawled under the shelter of the embankment, The Shadow with them.

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Darkness had really settled in the woods. Coming to his feet, Harry heard the fade of the touring car's motor as it crossed a distant hump. The sound was replaced by the rhythmic chorus of frogs, starting their evening anthem. More important was the flashlight that was focussing on the center of the road.

In the circle of light, Harry saw Rufe Dodson stirring groggily, muttering as he rubbed his mud-stained hand through his matted hair. The Shadow acknowledged Rufe's efforts with a low, whispered laugh; then stooped to lay the flashlight beside the sheriff's hand, putting Rufe's gun in the glare. A hand plucked Harry's shoulder in the darkness; a moment later he was being drawn rapidly along the road.

It was Cranston's calm voice that spoke what Harry already had in mind.

"He'll be all right." The reference was to Rufe. "Let him report back to the Towers – if he wants."

"Why won't he?" queried Harry. "It's the only way he can round up that mob, isn't it?"

"Too late for that," returned Cranston. "The servants wouldn't be much help as a posse, not with the headstart that Frisco and his crew have gained."

"Frisco?"

"Yes. I heard Jeff Gerster call him by name."

"Not Frisco Karlin, who was mixed in a couple of small-town bank jobs?"

"Very probably. It ties in nicely."

"How?"

Cranston's slight laugh at Harry's question was very much like The Shadow's mirth. Somehow it stimulated an answer in Harry's mind.

"I get it!" exclaimed Harry. "The big proposition is to get at those Graydon Archives, the big stack that is in the crypt, before they see the light of day."

A quiet laugh corroborated Harry's opinion.

"And Frisco is qualified to do it," added Harry, grimly, "if he can find the right spot to crack. Only from the way that crypt is fixed, he'd just about have to wreck Graydon Towers to get into it."

"An ambitious undertaking, but not unlikely, Vincent."

"It would take time," conjectured Harry, considering the prospect literally, "but Frisco has plenty of it on his hands. He could play it cagily, too, provided Sheriff Dodson hasn't found out who he is and guessed what he's up to."

"The sheriff hasn't," assured Cranston. "In fact Frisco put him on the wrong track by giving him the right one."

"How was that?"

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"He told Dodson that a friend of his wanted to see him. Frisco meant it, too. Murder wasn't the issue, not unless Dodson forced it."

"Who's Frisco's friend? Jeff Gerster?"

"No, he's just a friend of the friend that Frisco doesn't even know. Jeff rates as what is technically termed a go-between."

Harry gave a nod in the darkness.

"I should have known it," he asserted. "Somebody wants to get at that crypt; some outsider –"

"Or some insider."

"Say, that's right! I was thinking of Hugo Atmore, the art dealer. But if Jerome Hybart has been playing a two-way game –"

"Go on, Vincent."

"I was just thinking –"

"About someone else in Graydon Towers?"

"Yes. You see I was looking over the art treasures –"

"And you finally met one that talked to you."

"That's right," admitted Harry. "I talked to Linda Graydon. She wanted me to help her out, just the way Jeff Gerster did. Only she was holding back on what she had to say and when she tossed the helping hand to Jeff, well I wasn't surprised at what happened afterward."

"How did she help Jeff?"

"By trying to hang on to me after I saw him sneak down this way, with the sheriff on his tail. Look, chief" – Harry became very earnest as he trudged along – "if we head back to town right now, we'll find that Jeff has switched to that jalopy he used last night. He'll be there ahead of us, staging the fake beard act, like he did before."

There was no reply from the darkness, unless The Shadow's action could be counted such. They had reached the hump in the road and The Shadow was drawing Harry toward the summit of a ledge that reared its gray mass to the tops of the stunted trees.

At the crest, they paused, and in the dim twilight from the spreading sky, Harry could make out Cranston's figure, brief case in hand. The Shadow had gone back to his other self, but he was still following a trail that belonged to his cloaked personality.

It was Cranston's hand that pointed to the trail and traced it, off along a slope that rose among the pitch-blackness of the trees that banked another hillside.

There, tiny lights were bobbing, disappearing, only to come in sight again, until finally they veered off into blackness. Looking up to the stars, Cranston checked the direction by them and gave Harry a quiet summary.

"We'll trace that road by a local map," stated Cranston. "It will tell us where Frisco Karlin headed – at least so far. Now suppose we go back to the junction and look into this question of disguises."

There was just a trace of The Shadow's sibilant tone in the words that Cranston uttered.

It should have told Harry that new surprises were to come.

CHAPTER X

THE big limousine hauled up in front of the Junction House and discharged two passengers who still weren't on speaking terms: Hugo Atmore and Elliot Huxford. Their visit to Graydon Towers had widened the natural breach between the questionable dealer and the collector of authentic.

No sharper line could have existed than between that pair. There wasn't any doubt as to the status of each.

The whole art world knew Atmore for an utterly unscrupulous dealer whose guarantees were worthless. His whole technique consisted in covering his dishonest practices. It was common opinion that Atmore had the making of an outright crook, but had managed to avoid circumstances that would force him to commit statutory crime.

In contrast, Huxford bore a reputation for absolute integrity which he had made every effort to maintain. In any question over art objects, he gave the other man all benefit of doubt, which was why he would have no dealings at all with Atmore. Indeed, Huxford had frequently questioned the ways of certain art dealers whose methods, compared to Atmore's, were like a yardstick contrasted to a corkscrew.

Evidently these passengers had left the Towers before any excitement was reported there, for they separately dismissed the limousine and walked into the hotel to go to their respective rooms. The limousine pulled away and Kanakee Junction took on a silence deeper than the woods.

The next change in the local aspect came when two men appeared alongside the coal yard, pausing when they neared the corner of the fence. They took a careful look across the green and after that survey, one man nodded. At that, the other started forward.

Promptly, Cranston drew Harry back.

"Wait here, Vincent. I'll coax your friend from behind his slat, false beard and all."

Placing the brief case in Harry's hand, Cranston sauntered out to the open. Over his arm draped a loose bundle that might have been a light top-coat. Just furtively enough to excite suspicion, Cranston started toward the hotel; then, turning his face into the light, he drew back among the trees.

Another figure copied that quick withdrawal. From his corner, Harry saw a bearded face poke from near the broken fence paling, then, like its owner, flattened back against a darker stretch of boards. The disguise was complete, including the hunter's hat and jacket of the night before.

Under the trees, Cranston's shifting figure was making what seemed futile efforts to slide out of sight. The bearded watcher took the bait and began a crafty maneuver along the fence, finally finding his chance to work from tree to tree.

It was hide-and-seek clear over toward the schoolyard where the children played the same game in the daytime, but after some five minutes of this, the thing became a strict reverse. From his vantage point, Harry

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saw the bearded man come dodging back among the trees, veering wide of his original course.

Harry had expected Gerster to do just that.

Nobody could trail Lamont Cranston, not when he carried The Shadow's cloak and hat. Around some chance corner, the original fugitive had made one of his patented transformations. Harry could easily picture the consternation of the trailing man who had suddenly found he was no longer stalking anyone.

After the encounter in the woods, Jeff should know that this again meant The Shadow. Either Jeff was just ignorant or had enough confidence in his bearded disguise to trust to shifty maneuvers rather than mad flight. Then, as if playing a last card, the man with the bushy make-up made a quick dart into his favorite alley behind the feed store.

Watching the blackness of the alley's outlet, Harry saw no change in it, but within the next few minutes, he became confident that The Shadow had merged with the same gloom. Harry himself was sidling over past the hotel to reach the side window of the abandoned store, which he was sure could be Jeff's only exit.

Crouching there, Harry expected to play a hand when Jeff dropped from the window minus his disguise. It would be easy then, to stop him before he could sneak in the back door of the hotel. However, the drifting minutes produced no stir whatever from the rickety window.

Maybe there was trouble upstairs; perhaps Jeff had been smart enough to lay a trap for The Shadow!

Worried by that possibility, Harry worked the window open, crawled through and took the ladder up to the loft. Moving cautiously, but steadily, he reached the door to the little store room and worked it open.

At the creak of Harry's door, a figure turned from the closet and Harry caught an impression of leather-jacketed shoulders with hands that held the false beard. There was nothing else but to make a lunge and Harry did it, tripping across a box that he didn't see in the darkness.

As Harry sprawled, a low tone warned for silence; then Harry was being brought to his feet by Cranston's hand. But it wasn't his chief's face that Harry saw when he looked up. Cranston had just put on the false beard!

"You shouldn't have become impatient, Vincent," said Cranston, coolly. "After I trailed our friend here, I decided I could use his disguise, since he didn't want it any longer."

"But he didn't come out!" exclaimed Harry. "I was waiting down by the window and there wasn't a sign of him."

"It wasn't the way he used. You picked the wrong route, Vincent."

"But what other way is there?"

Adjusting the beard, Cranston gestured to the window at the front of the storeroom. Along with his false-bearded chief, Harry looked out and saw a narrow roof that formed a catwalk to the second floor of the newspaper building next door.

"Those offices over the print shop!" expressed Harry. "Say – I never realized that Jeff might have gone out through one of those. He bluffed me without my knowing it!"

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Parking his hat and cloak back in the brief case, The Shadow turned it over to Harry; then, in his new guise of a bearded hunter, he beckoned his agent along the cat-walk. Only one office had a window and it was the one The Shadow opened; a few moments later, he and Harry were among the desks and chairs.

"I wonder how Jeff got in here in the first place," mused Harry. "Somebody certainly should have been suspicious of a stranger coming upstairs."

The Shadow had reached the door and was opening it. He turned his bearded face toward Harry and gave a soft laugh as he gestured toward the name upon the door. Harry stared in new amazement as he read the legend:

RUFUS DODSON

SHERIFF

BEAVERWOOD COUNTY

Thoughts began to chug through Harry's brain.

"Then it wasn't Jeff Gerster –"

"Who wore these whiskers?" Cranston's voice came through the thing he spoke about. "Of course not. He wasn't watching for anyone named Cranston."

"But Rufe Dodson was," admitted Harry. "I should have guessed that he saw that telegram."

"Only he didn't see you, Vincent."

"That's right, he didn't. Since he didn't know who Rain-in-the-face was, he had only your name to go on. He must have been checking on you instead of Gerster when he went down to the woods."

"Precisely." The word was odd, spoken from that bushy beard. "It's time we gave Dodson one of his own treatments. We'll start over to the depot, only you're to stay out of sight, Vincent."

They were down the stairs and out on the street when Harry realized that the chugs weren't imaginary. A passenger train was pulling into the station where Rufe Dodson had returned to his nightly railroad job. Like the rest of the freight loaders, Rufe glanced across the platform to see who boarded the local.

From where he waited, Harry watched the erstwhile sheriff gape at sight of a stoop-shouldered man who stepped on the train wearing Rufe's own disguise. Dropping the end of a crate, Rufe came tearing across the platform.

On the train steps, Rufe encountered a burly brakeman holding a leather jacket and a hunter's cap containing a pair of false whiskers.

"Hello, Rufe," greeted the brakeman. "Fellow just said to hand you these. Kind of flung 'em at me when he was starting up ahead."

Grabbing the garments Rufe started through the car looking for anybody who resembled Cranston. It didn't occur to him that Cranston might have doubled back to the rear car while the brakeman was unsnarling himself from the hunter's outfit. It wasn't until the train was pulling out that Rufe jumped off, deciding it was

useless to follow a man against whom he had no tangible complaint and who was clearing town anyway.

There were a few passengers who had stopped off at Kanakee Junction and they were all walking over toward the hotel. Overtaking them, Rufe noted a solitary stranger among them and followed the man into the hotel. There, one look was enough for Rufe to know that the newcomer wasn't Cranston.

Bent of shoulder, withery of face, the newcomer was an elderly man whose voice had a high cackle as he asked the clerk for the best room available.

Leaning on a heavy cane, the old gentleman signed the hotel register with a shaky hand and looking over his shoulder, Rufe saw his name: Isaac Twambley. Much annoyed at finding someone close to his elbow, old Twambley turned and gave Rufe a sharp, indignant stare. With a mumbled apology, the sheriff turned and left the lobby, still hoping he'd find the missing Mr. Cranston.

The missing man was already found and lost again. As the clerk stepped away to find a room key, a whispered laugh came from the thin, dry lips of old Mr. Twambley.

There was nothing quavery in that subdued mirth.

It was the echoed laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XI

HARRY VINCENT sat on the veranda of the Junction House chatting with Jeff Gerster. It was another afternoon and they were exchanging ideas just as if nothing had happened in the meanwhile, which rather limited their conversation. Neither Harry nor Jeff saw fit to discuss the twilight fray that had occurred in the woods, but in avoiding it, Harry held a distinct advantage.

There was no way in which Jeff could know that Harry had been mixed in that imbroglio, whereas Harry knew the entire part that Jeff had played. Though the hints that Jeff tossed were directed toward the subject of the gunfight, the fellow was covering other points as well.

"Funny the way everybody dropped out of sight yesterday," observed Jeff. "First that fellow Cranston was gone; then I couldn't find you. Next it was the sheriff and finally there weren't any signs of Atmore and Huxford."

Harry laughed idly. "And where were you all that time?"

"Looking around the place. Appraising the art stuff for one thing, to make sure it wasn't over-insured."

"Was it?"

"I don't know. Old Hybart wouldn't give me any figures. Acted kind of sore over the way I'd been browsing around."

"I'm glad I didn't run into him then," remarked Harry. "I was browsing around too."

"Whereabouts?"

"In and out. I finally took a walk down to the big gate and while I was there a truck came along and offered me a hitch into town."

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Jeff eyed Harry in steady, calculating style. Then:

"You didn't happen to meet up with anybody who had red hair, did you?"

"If you mean Linda Graydon, yes. I'd gone up to a balcony to have a close look at a tapestry when I ran into her."

"What did she say?"

"Mostly double-talk about Hybart keeping her a prisoner in what ought to be her own home. I let it pass."

"And why?"

"Because anybody could walk out of that place if they wanted. If she was really in a jam, she could have told the sheriff."

Jeff gave his head a slow shake.

"Maybe she can't walk out, Vincent."

"Why not?"

"Look at it this way. A lot depends on those Graydon Archives. I saw the few volumes that were in the library and from what Hybart says, there's a whole coffer of them in the crypt."

"And what does Linda care about them?"

"They're practically priceless, aren't they?" inquired Gerster. "The sort of thing for which a bidder would pay plenty."

"By a bidder," returned Harry, "I suppose you mean Hugo Atmore."

There was a slight wince from Gerster at mention of the art dealer. Jeff gave a quick glance toward Harry, then covered it with a hard, steady stare.

"Unless Elliot Huxford goes higher."

"Why should he?" queried Harry. "Huxford hasn't been selling phoney art stuff."

"But Atmore has," argued Gerster, "and that's enough for Huxford. He's branded Atmore for the fraud he is and would probably like to see the proof."

It sounded fair enough, even from Jeff Gerster. Of course it was part of Jeff's act to discuss matters openly and logically as a means of covering what he didn't want to talk about. How long Jeff could be kept at it was the problem that bothered Harry; nevertheless he put it to the test.

"Getting back to Linda," remarked Harry. "Why should she care?"

"About the archives?" returned Gerster. "They're part of the estate, aren't they? Naturally she's interested."

"I thought old Hybart was taking care of that."

"Maybe Linda doesn't trust Hybart."

It made good sense. If the archives were worth a price to the right bidder, there wasn't any reason why Hybart couldn't handle the bidding privately, if so inclined. The question was how Hybart could manage to turn them over to a buyer when the crypt was opened.

"Maybe Linda wants somebody to check on Hybart," suggested Gerster. "I'd like to help the lady out, if Hybart would only let me in. But I don't seem to rate so well since yesterday. Atmore and Huxford were invited up to the Towers again, but I wasn't."

"Why should I be?" inquired Harry, bluntly meeting the question he was sure was coming. "I'm neither a dealer nor a collector. I'm just a salesman who's waiting for a new coil for a car that won't run until it gets one. After all, you franked me into the Towers in the first place. Remember?"

"All the better," replied Gerster, with a nod. "It means you can make the grade again." Turning, he gestured to the hotel door and the droop-faced proprietor stepped out. "Say, Mr. Swink," spoke Gerster. "what about this old gent Twambley? Is he going up to the Towers?"

"Says he is," drawled Swink. "Only I don't reckon they know he's in town."

"What's he want up there?"

"Says he's got letters introducing him to Hybart, only he can't walk that far. Says his cane would stand it, but his legs won't."

"Isn't there a local taxi?"

"Not that I ever heard of. Course I've only been here fifteen years."

Grinning at Swink's comment, Gerster swung to Harry.

"Couldn't that buggy of yours make it, even with the bum coil?"

"It might," calculated Harry. "Only I wouldn't want to get stuck on the road."

"You won't. It's all up grade so you could coast back. There's your ticket."

"To where?"

"To Graydon Towers. Invite old Twambley to go along and stick with him like you were his guardian. If he sets right with Hybart, you're in."

Thus by suggestion of Jeff Gerster, Harry Vincent was soon bound on a new trip to Graydon Towers, driving a car that ceased its sputters as soon as it was out of sight of town and carrying a grateful passenger in the person of old Isaac Twambley, whose happy cackle took on a sibilant laugh as they sped along the high-road.

"Nice work, Vincent."

"Don't thank me, chief. Credit Jeff Gerster. He's the fixit boy in these parts."

"I knew he wouldn't waste much time."

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Harry gave a surprised stare from the wheel.

"Time is what Gerster is playing against," analyzed The Shadow, in Twambley's crisp tone. "Your first night's misadventures are sufficiently explained, Vincent. Jeff was trying to find a way into the Towers and Frisco's mob came to contact him."

"Only Jeff met up with Dodson first."

"Precisely." The word fitted Twambley's cackle. "Yesterday, Jeff got into the mansion for the first time. While he was there, I checked the old dirt road for tire tracks. I expected Jeff would contact his crew again, but I didn't count on Dodson's earlier arrival."

"Jeff says he went back to the mansion later."

"And we can believe him. He's pulling every string to work Frisco's outfit in there, even trying to use you."

"As a long shot?"

"Yes. He's getting desperate. Let's hope the same will soon apply to the real brain behind the attempt to reach and destroy the Graydon Archives."

Nodding, Harry pondered. Then:

"Even as a long shot, I couldn't be much use to Jeff."

"Not as an actual hand in crime," confirmed The Shadow, "but for some other purpose. Let us say to divert someone from the right trail or even to excite suspicion."

Those possibilities were more than likely. In fact, Harry had already been played to some extent by Gerster's string-pulling. Summed tersely, Jeff was all pie-fingers. That thought brought Harry's next suggestion:

"Why not clamp down on Jeff and make him name the higher-up?"

"Because if Jeff didn't lie out of it," replied The Shadow, "the big brain would. There's not a lot of evidence against the man we want. There will be, though, after he shows his hand, which will have to be quite soon."

The Shadow showed his own hand in Twambley style by giving it a gesture toward the side of the road, not far from the gates to Graydon Towers.

"Pull over here," came the Twambley cackle. "This ought to do."

Harry didn't ask "to do for what" because he knew he was going to find out. As he halted the car, he saw Twambley unfold a road-map, spread and check it by a compass.

First, Twambley pointed back toward town and Harry saw the peculiar cupola that represented the top of the Junction House, an excellent landmark hoisting above the trees. With a pencil, Twambley drew a straight line that direction; then another to the right spot on the old wood road that was shown on the large-scale map. Other lines followed, forming a triangulation to the distant road where The Shadow and Harry had seen the lights of Frisco's disappearing car. Around that spot, Twambley drew a circle, including all road ends.

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"That was once called Quarrytown." Twambley's sharp eyes studied the fine print on the map. "Any houses still there are probably abandoned. A nice safe place for Frisco and his crowd. They may even have found an old shack for their dynamite."

There was more than speculation in the distant gaze that Twambley turned toward the green-clad hill. The verdant setting showed a streak of jagged gray, representing the ancient quarry. It wouldn't be long, Harry was sure, before he would be making a trip to that terrain.

Twambley's hand waved the car onward. The big gates were open and Harry drove right through. Ahead loomed Graydon Manor, fantastic as ever, but somehow less ominous to Harry. Maybe if Harry had been thinking in terms of crypts and such, he would have felt the urge to shun the horrendous mansion.

But Harry's gaze kept drifting toward a far corner of the building, where the windows of a tower room were catching the sparkle of the sunlight. Turning Gerster's game against him wouldn't be unpleasant work for Harry Vincent.

Not while Linda Graydon was the issue at stake.

CHAPTER XII

OF course Isaac Twambley had to be shown to the crypt. What with his letters of recommendation, he couldn't be denied the privilege. For Twambley was neither an art dealer nor a collector, like Atmore and Huxford, who also happened to present at Graydon Manor that afternoon. He was an antiquarian, like Jerome Hybart.

It seemed that antiquaries formed an unlisted fraternity of men who spoke the same language, a jargon which no one else understood. They cared not who owned art treasures for they neither bought nor sold. It wasn't the price or rarity of an objet d'art that impressed them, but its age.

The great bronze Guardian Angel wasn't very old; in fact it had been cast especially for Gifford Graydon, but it had been designed to last forever, a thing that would impress the true antiquarian. For the first time, Hybart had found a visitor who really understood the sentiment behind the great winged statue. Here was antiquity in the making, a product that was meant for generations of a thousand years to come.

Leaning on his sturdy cane, old Twambley clanged his knuckles against the bronze and beamed as he reached higher to tap the spreading wing that carried his admiring gaze clear to the upper corner of the antechamber. He began to chatter in terms of ancient sculptures, Egyptian tombs, Assyrian bas-reliefs and statues of Atlas supporting the world until the others became bored and went upstairs.

Separately, of course. Elliot Huxford wouldn't tread the fan-staircase at the same time when Hugo Atmore did, so he let Harry Vincent serve as a stop-gap. When they reached the great hall, they went different ways; Huxford to examine art treasures because of their legitimacy, Atmore to wish that he could counterfeit some of these prizes and pawn them off on careless collectors.

Alone, Harry Vincent let his eyes rove up a certain stairway and stopped his gaze half way.

Linda Graydon was already coming down and she had never appeared more beautiful. Perhaps it was because the simple black dress that she wore had all the effect of a velvet background against a galaxy of jewels. The myriad hues of sunlight coming through the stained glass panes produced a scintillating effect that added to Linda's striking charm, and it couldn't be denied that the black dress befitted her trim contours better than any garb that she had previously worn.

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Yet Linda certainly wasn't creating this effect for Harry. Her eyes, when they met his, lacked the warmth that the sunlight should have given them.

"Up and around again, I see," remarked Harry. Bowing as he stepped aside, he gestured toward the front door. "Are you going out?"

"If you are referring to that other night," returned Linda, icily, "I can assure you that it was purely accidental. I am never allowed out."

"Yesterday you weren't even allowed up."

"Because I had caught a cold. I really should have stayed in bed. I am up today only because –"

"Only because you expected to meet someone?"

Linda's eyes stayed frozen.

"Not you, Mr. Vincent."

"Jeff Gerster then."

The girl stared as though she had never heard the name. It was quite possible that she hadn't, for Hybart had merely introduced the visitors as a group the day before.

"I talked to Jeff today," stated Harry. "He convinced me that there might be much in what you said."

"I said nothing to this man you mention."

"I'm referring to what you told me. I repeated it to Jeff."

There was a real blaze from Linda's eyes.

"I am asking favors from no one," she asserted angrily. "I gave you a chance to believe me, Mr. Vincent –"

"And I asked a simple question," interrupted Harry. "How and why did you disappear so suddenly? If you'll tell me that much, I'll –"

Whatever Harry's promise, he was unable to express it, for Linda turned very hastily and hurried upstairs. She was passing the turn of the upper hall when Harry saw Hybart arriving with Twambley from the crypt. Evidently Linda didn't want to risk another encounter with Hybart.

Sidling into a convenient alcove, Harry was admiring a suit of armor when the two men passed. He was quite sure that Hybart didn't notice him, but he was equally certain that he couldn't have escaped Twambley's amazing eyes. The two went into the library and Harry, about to leave the alcove, stepped back again as heavy strides sounded across the great hall.

It was Sheriff Dodson arriving for another visit and he was going straight to see Hybart. Confident that Twambley would cover Hybart's interview with Dodson, Harry resumed his stroll around the hall, occasionally looking hopefully towards Linda's balcony.

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When the rotund Mrs. Moffitt appeared and trudged up the stairs in the fashion of someone making regular rounds, Harry decided that Linda must have gone back to bed, rather than become involved in further argument about her state of health. If Harry could trust his judgment of persons, the amiable Mrs. Moffitt was too kindly a character to play party to any conspiracy against Linda.

The most that Harry could say in Linda's favor was that as a liar, she wasn't a practiced one. By her own admission she'd needed a rest cure for the cold that she had caught while voluntarily going outside a house which she still insisted she couldn't leave.

Meanwhile Sheriff Dodson was relating some outside facts to Jerome Hybart. Rufe didn't mind discussing them in Twambley's presence, because he didn't know that the new visitor was in the library. Twambley had literally buried himself in the massive volumes that gave the full history of all the art objects still in Graydon Towers and he was out of sight beyond those tomes.

"Came up to talk to you about the shooting," said Dodson to Hybart. "Thought you may have heard it."

"Of course I heard it," returned Hybart. "I reported it to you after it happened two nights ago."

"I mean last night's shooting down in the woods."

"I heard nothing last night. At what time?"

"Early. Just about dusk. Too far away I reckon, otherwise you'd have heard it. Anyway, Mr. Hybart, I'm taking good care of these premises."

Hybart expressed his thanks with a bow.

"Kind of a big job though for one man," continued Rufe. "considering how I'm working for the railroad part time. I thought maybe you ought to have your servants lend a hand."

"They're really needed indoors," considered Hybart. "Still, if I sent them out around the grounds, they would still be within call. Of course the woods are pretty far away."

"I'll take care of the woods. Only I'm asking you one favor, Mr. Hybart. If I disappear sudden-like, I'd want you to tell people what's happened."

"How would I know what's happened?"

"Because it nearly did last night. I met up with a gang of masked men that threatened to take me to see a friend of theirs."

Hybart gave his head a puzzled tilt.

"A friend of theirs?"

"That's right. Only who he was, they didn't say. But I'm reckoning what he's after – that bunch of papers down in the old crypt."

Hybart let a laugh tilt Dodson's way.

"It could never happen, sheriff."

"That's what people say about most everything until after it happens. Maybe with me as a hostage, they'd try to make you come to terms. Or they might knock me off, just as an example. It all depends on the man behind it."

"But who is that man, sheriff?"

Rufe shook his head.

"Search me, Mr. Hybart. Thought sure I had him labeled, only he didn't stay around. It must be somebody else and that's where you can help."

"Gladly, but how?"

"Keep an eye on these strangers, as much as possible."

Seating himself at a reading table, Hybart let his tilted head rest on his hand. His eyes sparkling keenly, he gave a slantwise nod.

"I'll invite them to stay here, sheriff," decided Hybart. "That is, the ones who are really interested in studying the art treasures. Atmore, Huxford, and of course Twambley."

"What about that insurance fellow, Gerster?"

"He just doesn't belong."

"Then I'll see that he's watched. Never mind about Vincent; he's just a salesman, stopping over while he gets his car fixed. He'll be going somewhere soon."

"Very well, sheriff." Lifting his head sufficiently, Hybart extended his hand. "Let me assure you of one thing." There was a steady, pointed emphasis to Hybart's tone. "Whatever I do will be with one purpose; to thwart anyone who may attempt to reach those archives."

That declaration brought a nod from Dodson along with his firm hand-clasp. Rising, the sheriff strode out through the great hall and through the front door, without once turning to look back. But during that progress, Rufe's long-jawed face took on a smile.

You could see the alcoves going out, better than when coming in, and Rufe hadn't needed more than a glance to recognize Harry Vincent staring at a tapestry.

Sheriff Dodson had stated that Harry Vincent was going somewhere soon.

He was right.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Jerome Hybart showed his new guests to their rooms, he took Harry Vincent along as a matter of courtesy. After all, Harry had brought Isaac Twambley here and Sheriff Dodson had later spoken a good word for Harry. Indeed, Hybart was very tactful in avoiding an invitation for Harry to stay.

Hybart phrased it as a proposition for those who were interested in the art treasures, which excluded Harry. He added that the guests would be welcome to remain until the Graydon Archives were brought from their

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crypt, a point which caused Huxford to accept the invitation a moment after Atmore did.

It was obvious that Huxford intended to watch Atmore as soon as the archives came back from their tomb. His beady eyes made sidelong darts the moment that this hint was given and without realizing it, he delivered an excellent imitation of a trapped rat.

What might eventually happen between these two men was something Harry Vincent wanted to be back in time to witness.

Through all this, Isaac Twambley beamed and talked in a happy quaver about the delights of being an antiquary. He was so anxious to be shown over the whole house that he scarcely noticed the room that Hybart pointed out as his.

It was a noticeable fact that Hybart chose the most remote room in the house for Atmore. He softened the fact by mentioning the room's merits.

"This is called the Oak Room," stated Hybart. "Notice its fine old furniture, the product of three generations back. It has a fireplace, you notice, in the far wall. The paintings are all portraits of the Graydon family. A trifle severe, the gray rug and window curtains; but they all make for simplicity."

Outside Atmore's room a stairway led directly to a side door of the house, heavily bolted on the inside. Leading the way down, Hybart threaded a course to the other side of the house, where he picked a room for Huxford. It was a modern type, furnished in mahogany, and it lacked the mellow effect of the Oak Room. It had one merit, however, that Huxford didn't overlook. It was just as far from Atmore's room as it could possibly be.

To be thoroughly polite, Hybart showed the visitors his own room, which was fairly close to Linda's tower. On the sunny side of the house, the room produced a dazzle the moment that Hybart opened the door. Furnished entirely in bird's-eye maple, the room couldn't help but be bright, even this late in the afternoon. The yellow wood glistened everywhere, from massive bookcases, bureaus, even the narrow picture frames which contained large colored prints of woodland scenes.

"The Maple Room," stated Hybart, as though nobody knew. "I prefer it bright in contrast to the library. The Chinese rug with all its yellow patterns is appropriate, don't you think? Too vivid, though, those golden curtains. I must have them changed. Or perhaps I shall move to the Oak Room for the winter. I like an open fireplace and this room lacks one."

Harry thought he caught a stir at Linda's door when they passed along the hallway, but it couldn't have opened any wider than a crack. Then Hybart turned to take them to the elevator, which was a large one, evidently built to accommodate bulky items like furniture and statuary as well as people.

It was an old-fashioned elevator and very slow. Hybart handled it so clumsily that he went waist deep below the first floor and had to work it up again. They stepped from the elevator into the music room and as they walked out to the great hall, Hybart gave Harry a tilted smile.

"Sorry you aren't staying overnight, Mr. Vincent," said Hybart, "but you'll have dinner with us, of course."

Catching a glance from Twambley, Harry accepted the invitation and in doing so hoped for another meeting with Linda on the chance that it might straighten out a few complications. But when one of Hybart's drab servants tapped the dinner chimes and ushered them into a huge dining room, the girl did not appear.

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Through a pantry door, Harry saw Mrs. Moffitt preparing a tray to take upstairs and Harry was struck by the sudden recollection that he had parked his car where it could be seen from Linda's window: That was how the girl had learned of Harry's arrival and he now had the very unpleasant hunch that she wasn't coming down to dinner because she knew that Harry still was here.

What softened that opinion was the fact that Linda might be playing policy. To keep up her pretense of Hybart's tyranny, she couldn't well afford to appear at the dinner table. If so, Linda had brought it on herself and Harry hoped that she was fuming over the fact that she had to play sick and stay in bed as a result of her deception.

After dinner, Harry found a chance to join The Shadow in the library. There, as Twambley, The Shadow mentioned brief facts concerning the sheriff's visit, chiefly concerning the fact that Hybart's servants might be on ground patrol and should therefore be avoided, if Harry found reason to return after leaving the Towers.

Having sized those servants during dinner, Harry wasn't worried, for they looked to be a patient, almost timid lot. Harry simply nodded, while looking over Twambley's shoulder at the big volumes that listed the Graydon treasures.

"Interesting, these," cackled Twambley, suddenly, referring to the books. "Look, Vincent! Here are photographs of every art item, with enlargements to show secret marks and other special features. Notice how thoroughly their history is listed. Gifford Graydon certainly had a pedigreed collection."

"And the Graydon Archives are like these?"

In answer to Harry's question, Twambley gestured to Hybart, who had just entered and was the cause for the switch to the present subject.

"Exactly like them," stated Hybart. "There are at least two dozen volumes filling the great coffer in the crypt."

"Something more for the Guardian Angel to look after," laughed Harry. Then, with a gesture to the books, he added: "Is he listed here, as to size, weight, wing-spread and other specifications?"

The jest didn't set well with Hybart.

"The great bronze is not an item in the art collection," declared the custodian, coldly. "Mr. Graydon had it cast to order, along with the other fixtures. I suppose it would be found in the architect's plans, but I believe that they were destroyed. Gifford Graydon was his own architect."

Harry could have tossed more banter at that one, but desisted, since Hybart wasn't in a mood for it. Indeed, Harry was dangerously close to wearing out his welcome, the way Jeff Gerster had.

"We are locking the mansion," declared Hybart, "and since you aren't staying over night, I must ask that you leave, Vincent. Of course we have enjoyed your visit –"

Hybart's pause was expressive. It seemed to say that Harry could come again, if he didn't overdo his present sojourn. So Harry bowed a polite good-night and strolled out through the great hall. At the front door, a tired, drab-faced servant was standing ready to close it, so Harry didn't tarry. There wasn't anything creaky about that huge door, the way it shut behind Harry. Maybe the creaks were in the old servant.

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Harry was chuckling at that thought as he groped toward his car. The night was cloudy and very dark, there being no moon to trickle through the overcast. But as Harry paused beside his car, he could make out the mansion very plainly. One jutting corner particularly interested him, the tower where Linda resided.

The windows of that high room were dark, indicating that Linda had probably decided to sleep off her mad. Or maybe she hadn't; for all Harry knew, she might be watching from the window. Maybe she'd relented and was ready to resume negotiations.

Most important, of course, was that matter of Linda's disappearance on the stormy night, which still rankled Harry because it had the elements of an unsolved mystery. So Harry slammed the car door loud enough to attract Linda's attention should she still be awake and as a follow-up, he began to blink the car lights thinking that she might answer the signal.

It didn't occur to Harry that he might be overdoing it. That notion belonged to someone else.

From the darkness of the seat beside him, Harry heard a stir. Before he could swing from the wheel, the cold hard snout of a revolver pressed against his neck. The icy sensation poured thoughts into Harry's startled mind, jogging his first recollections of Linda.

A repetition of the first night's mystery!

Having once slipped from the Towers without the knowledge of its other occupants, Linda could be staging the act again, gun and all. What a fool Harry had been not to guess that she could – and would – ambush him right in his own car.

All Harry hoped now was that Linda was in a forgiving mood, ready to be talked out of anything too drastic.

Whether she was or not, remained a question. Before the chill of the gun had eased, Harry learned that the weapon wasn't Linda's. The voice that spoke from the darkness was low, but gruff. Harry recognized it.

"Get moving," it said. "Drive right out through the gates and do it natural. Keep going where I tell you and don't give any argument."

Harry Vincent wasn't in the mood to argue; not with Rufe Dodson, sheriff of Beaverwood County!

CHAPTER XIV

GRAYDON TOWERS seemed to settle itself for a night's rest after the lights of Harry's coupe had twinkled out through the gates. Maybe the hush that gathered over the bizarre mansion was an outgrowth of the scene indoors, for there, everything had become deathly still.

No longer were the great hall and its adjacent rooms alight with the flicker of the numerous candles that amplified the sparse electric lights. The wicks had been snuffed by the stolid servants who never seemed to tire, despite their many rounds. Night lights were burning from a few electric lamps, but their glow was feeble.

Graydon Towers had become a manse fit only for ghosts to tread. Then a figure as noiseless as the darkness it matched, was moving invisibly throughout these weird preserves, the cloaked figure of The Shadow.

Occasionally, a tiny flashlight twinkled in odd nooks and alcoves, on stairways and beside the elevator door. More important, though, were the pauses that The Shadow made, for it was during one of those that he heard

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sounds so distant that only his keen ears could have caught them. Likewise it took The Shadow's keen sense of direction to locate the cautious footsteps that were descending one of the many stairways.

Threading a silent and unseen path through rooms and corridors that he remembered as though he had designed them, The Shadow indulged in the lightest of whispered laughs when he noted the sound of drawing bolts. Continuing his course he reached an obscure door that led outside, just in time to see it close.

Shortly The Shadow opened that door himself and closed it silently behind him. Next he was trailing a huddled figure that was hurrying out along the driveway, a shape that a cat's eyes could hardly have traced. The Shadow saw the man ahead at intervals only; mostly he checked the course by crunches from the gravelly drive that his predecessor was using as a guide.

Outside the gate a car with dimmers was waiting and it wasn't Harry's coupe. It was the rattletrap that belonged to Sheriff Dodson, but tonight its driver was the man that Harry had first pictured as the owner of the car: Jeff Gerster.

The Shadow saw Jeff step into the glow to greet the arrival from the Towers, who promptly revealed himself in the same style and proved to be the man The Shadow thought he was: Hugo Atmore.

Encroaching blackness enabled The Shadow to move close enough to overhear the guarded conversation of the pair. It was brief but pointed.

"You've done nothing, Gerster!" Atmore's voice was tense. "Nothing that I paid you to do and there are only a few days to spare!"

"Less than a few, maybe," returned Jeff, with a shrug. "I've got a hunch that Hybart can open that crypt any time he wants."

"Then why don't you act?"

"I can't get into the Towers. It's your turn to move things, Atmore."

"With the way I'm mistrusted?"

"You mean by Huxford?" Jeff's laugh carried contempt. "How does he rate?"

"He's watching me," returned Atmore. "Checking everything I do, listening to every word I say."

"Imagination, Atmore."

"Not where Huxford is concerned. He wouldn't stay within a hundred feet of me ordinarily. But he's even riding in the same car –"

"Not now he isn't. Climb into this trap and enjoy a trip that doesn't include snoopers."

Atmore accepted the invitation. So did The Shadow, without mentioning it. The clatter of the front doors covered the slight sounds that he made when he climbed into the rear.

Then the car was starting toward the Junction with The Shadow listening to the further conversation that Gerster and Atmore shouted above the pounding of the antique motor.

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"I still say Huxford doesn't rate," argued Jeff. "It's Hybart who has charge of those archives. Talk to him."

"Talk to him?" demanded Atmore. "What can I say?"

"The things you expected me to tell him. That he has no right to hurt the reputation of people who acted in good faith."

"Meaning dealers like me –"

"Of course. Who else could you mean?"

Atmore's head gave a shake in the glow from the dashlight.

"It wouldn't wash," he said. "Not coming from me, after the way Huxford has spread what people think about me. You've got to argue my case, Gerster."

"Can't do," returned Jeff, "but maybe you could argue mine."

"Your case?"

"Certainly. Look at the stew I'm in." Jeff gave a laugh as though he liked it. "If the archives prove that a lot of phoney art stuff was sold, what about the people who bought the junk? They've over-insured, haven't they?"

"I suppose they have."

"So I'll have to accuse them." Jeff's head wagged sadly. "I wouldn't want to do that, Atmore. Poor, innocent buyers, I'm so sorry for them. Aren't you?"

"I guess I am."

"Then tell them so. Wire them and sign my name. Ask them to express confidence in you. Say that I have it and hope that they feel the same."

"And when they wire back?"

"I'll turn the telegrams over to you. Better still, you can pick them up yourself. The station agent won't know that you aren't me. So why tell him?"

The rattles of the old car predominated for a while; then Atmore picked up the subject with a nod.

"It ought to work," he decided. "Provided that yap sheriff isn't at the depot. He knows everybody."

"He's off tonight," chuckled Jeff. "If he wasn't I wouldn't have borrowed this junk pile that he keeps in the coal yard. I'll drop you near the depot and you can do the rest. How long will it take?"

"At least an hour, to write all those telegrams. I'll have to word them according to the people who are to get them."

"It's ten o'clock now. I'll pick you up by the coal yard at eleven."

"Better make it eleven thirty."

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"Anything you say, Atmore. Only don't worry. I still have a few more ideas in the back of the bean."

The rattles were lessening for the car was pulling into Kanakee Junction, where the road was better. Easing the speed, Jeff aimed for the coal yard and The Shadow dropped off before they reached it. What Jeff thought was a jolt that made a fender clatter was simply The Shadow's weight leaving the car.

Knowing exactly what Atmore intended, The Shadow was soon beginning his return trip to Graydon Towers, this time on foot. He saw no need to visit the hotel and contact Harry Vincent, who by proper calculations was off duty for the night.

Only Harry wasn't off duty.

At that moment, Harry Vincent was just taking over.

Not that Harry had tried anything spectacular with Sheriff Dodson. Quite to the contrary, he had obeyed Rufe's orders to the letter. Having traveled half a dozen miles over some very bad roads, Harry was ready for anything, when the sheriff gave the sharp order:

"Stop!"

Harry stopped on a hump in the dirt road, somewhere up in the hills. Rufe put another question:

"Got a gun?"

All Harry could do was nod.

"See that sign?" Rufe pointed to the side of the road. "Read what it says?"

"Beaverwood County."

"On the other side, it's different," declared Rufe. "It says Romeo County. Leastwise I think it does" – with his free hand, the sheriff stroked his long jaw – "but it may be Havelock. Funny, I never did bother to find out what county Quarrytown was in."

That name shot home to Harry.

"Quarrytown?"

"Yeah. It's where I think that masked bunch is hiding out."

"What masked bunch?"

Harry's surprised tone brought a gruff laugh from Rufe. Right from his chin, he brought his big hand slantwise to lay a healthy, friendly thwack on Harry's shoulder.

"Listen, Rain-in-the-face," complimented Rufe. "You're all right. I play hunches, so I ought to know. You don't have to tell me it was you who helped me out of a bad jam on the wood road, last night."

Harry waited to hear more.

"I'm a man who trusts my own judgment," continued Rufe, "and I don't give orders or ask questions except in Beaverwood County, where I've got to act official. But if you'll just take that foot of yours off the brake –"

Up came Harry's foot and the coupe slipped a dozen yards past the signpost beside the road. Squinting through the rear window, Rufe read the legend by the red glow of the tail-light.

"Can you beat that!" exclaimed Rufe Dodson. "Tain't Romeo or Havelock, neither one. I'm busted if this isn't a corner of Swamp River County, poked right into where it never ought to be. Anyway" – with a flourish, Rufe pocketed his gun and thrust a brawny hand to Harry – "I'm not the sheriff here. I don't care, do you?"

"On the contrary, I do," returned Harry. "It's better for both of us to be unofficial, if we're going to work together cleaning up a bunch of –"

Harry paused, without defining them. He left that to Rufe, who knew a word that fitted.

CHAPTER XV

QUARRYTOWN consisted of just one house, quite visible from the edge of the quarry. The rest had gone the way of all houses in which nobody lived. But there were still shacks near the quarry proper, because, as Rufe recalled, it had been worked for a good many years after the settlement had been abandoned.

There were lights in the house, showing through chinks in the windows, and that was enough for the sheriff who was in the wrong county.

"A couple of hundred yards," Rufe calculated. "Not too much for a sneak across the open."

Drawing his gun, Rufe paused. Harry wondered why until he noted that his companion's head was tilted, listening to a distant sound. That sound was the heavy chug of a locomotive, carrying far from the valley that lay below an intervening ridge.

"Don't bother to look at your watch," declared Rufe. "We know just when we're starting this little expedition. That's the ten fifteen coming into the Junction on the L and M."

"Ten fifteen?" inquired Harry. "Shouldn't you allow about an hour for it being late?"

"Not Number Three," returned Rufe. "She's a slow freight. They're what we set the town clock by."

Harry was drawing his automatic as a mate for Rufe's revolver. Why he happened to glance down the slope, he didn't know, but what he saw was important.

"Look. Rufe!"

A light was blinking slow but definite flashes from beyond the lower slope. It gave the effect of a distant flashlight, sending signals.

"From Graydon Towers!" voiced Rufe. "It's right on a line from here. I laid it on the map today!"

Harry had seen it laid on that same map, only he didn't say so. On Twambley's map, the line had just grazed the Towers and Harry knew which corner. Much though he didn't like it, Harry realized that the blinking signals could only be from Linda's turret!

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

Signals meant for Frisco's Quarrytown crew!

Hardly were Rufe and Harry starting toward the old relic of a house when its door swung open and disgorged the crew in question. Too distant to be recognized, Frisco and his mob dashed around to the other side of the house. Taking it on the run, ready to match their two guns against four, Harry and Rufe were only half way when a rakish touring car shot into sight and took to an old road:

"There they go, the –"

Rufe's favorite word was drowned with the blast of his own gunfire, which Harry accompanied but to no avail. The car was out of sight and gun range so fast that there was only one thing to do. Rufe said it:

"Back to your car, Vincent! Here" – as they were starting, Rufe fished in his pocket and shoved an object into Harry's hand – "you can wear this deputy's badge. Only don't put it on until we're back in my county!"

It was a strange chase this, around by one road while the other car was taking another, through terrain where maps referred to conditions of twenty years ago. Who would reach the Towers first was a wide–open question, but Harry hoped to be the winner. He used the bright lights to make better time, but when they swung in through the gates, Rufe wisely called for the dimmers.

They pulled up underneath the hulking mass of Graydon Towers, which, except for dim trickles of light, could have been a mausoleum in its entirety, rather than having that term apply solely to its impenetrable crypt.

Rufe gave the orders.

"Take to the shrubs," he said. "Then dodge over to the little grove. And after that –"

"Down toward the stone wall," supplied Harry, "with the woods on the other side."

"You know your way around," conceded Rufe. "But it's still right with me, Rain–in–the–face."

"Except we don't have the rain –"

"And it will be somebody else's faces, masked."

"So where do we make our stand? Down by the stone wall?"

"Hold it here." Rufe preferred the grove. "Work over to the house and they won't see us if we play it right."

"You mean on account of the rolling lawn?"

"That's right!" Rufe was beginning a half circle, bringing Harry along. "We'll pop right out from nowhere –"

Only they didn't.

The men who popped wore masks and there were four of them. The masks were scarcely visible in the dark but the guns had plenty of glitter. They might have come right out of the mansion's wall, this crew, after managing to be on the ground ahead of Harry and Rufe. But they didn't waste time talking about what they intended.

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

This wasn't the woods, where Frisco Karlin felt free to speak his piece. Without ceremony, the masked outfit did to the prisoners what should be done to prisoners. So rapidly that they didn't like to think about it, Harry and Rufe were blindfolded with their hands tied behind them.

Then began something too much like a death march.

How far they circled around Graydon Towers, Harry couldn't tell, but the parade finally turned into a healthy pair of shoves that sent both prisoners across a stone threshold. Sprawling, they were hauled to their feet by their captors and forced to climb a concrete stairway, with Harry counting every one of the sixteen steps.

Sweet sixteen, thought Harry, a more youthful age than that of the red-haired girl who had flashed the word that produced this situation.

Through a doorway at the top and there the blindfolds were whipped off so that the prisoners could recognize their plight.

The room was thoroughly familiar to Harry, although Rufe stared in a way that proved he had never seen it.

It would have been a nice room under different circumstances, the Oak Room that was perhaps the greatest pride of Graydon Towers. Gray rug and curtains were plain in the flicker of the candles that had been lighted specially for this reception, but there was a greater glow from the crackling fire in the open fireplace.

Those heavy furnishings, all of deep-stained oak were augmented by the large-framed portraits that glared from the wall as though the Graydon ancestors were awaiting jury duty to decide the fate of two unwary men who had fared too deeply into the premises of the late Gifford, last of the direct Graydon line.

The four masked men who flanked the prisoners no longer counted. That crew, including Frisco, were only stooges in Harry's estimate. Most important was the master of the show, who stood with folded arms as though proud that he had produced this climax.

This was the Oak Room, where Hugo Atmore belonged, since he was the guest assigned here. But nobody could have proven that Atmore was the master in charge.

Over his head, the man with folded arms wore a hood, formed of a baize bag cut with eyeslits. Draped from his shoulders was an improvised robe in the shape of an oversized top-coat that could have been picked from any closet in the house. Probably it had belonged to old Gifford Graydon, which was appropriate, because its present wearer was certainly the present master of these premises.

A voice came muffled through the hood, delivering a verdict with its comment.

"I wanted to see who your prisoners were." The eyes from the slits turned toward the masked captors. "I have seen and learned. Dispose of them."

That was all, except that the masked men still awaited the drop of their master's hand. He held it, letting Harry and Rufe drink in every detail of the surroundings that they were to leave before they met an ominous fate. Then, as the hand descended slowly, the blindfolds were again applied to the eyes of the two prisoners.

It was truly a death march this time. Out through the door, down those fatal sixteen steps, with only a pause on the threshold below. Then the slow slog-slog across the turf on a circuit that gradually led downward to the old stone wall, beyond which lay the road to doom.

Off in the distance came the trilling blare announcing that the night freight had loaded and would soon be rolling over the trackage of the L and M.

Maybe Graydon Towers lacked a ghostly banshee, but that wail from the distant dark was a satisfactory substitute as a prophet of approaching death!

CHAPTER XVI

LINDA GRAYDON shuddered.

It was the weird repetition of that locomotive whistle that gave her the shivers, but Elliot Huxford thought otherwise.

"You are very foolish," asserted Huxford, with a shake of his bushy head. "You shouldn't have come down from your room wearing only that flimsy dressing gown. At least you might have had sense enough to put on your slippers."

"I couldn't find them," retorted Linda, "and besides, they make a lot of clatter on concrete."

"But concrete is cold on bare feet"

"You're telling me!" Linda was momentarily indignant. Then, with a smile, she said: "I still don't like clatter. Not when I'm trying to listen to other sounds."

"What sort of sounds?"

"Footsteps. I'm sure I heard them, at least ten minutes ago."

Huxford nodded at Linda's statement.

"So did I," he said. "That's why I got dressed and came downstairs to look around. The only part of the house that I knew how to find was this great hall –"

"And you found me with it."

Huxford nodded. Then:

"Those sounds you heard. What sort of footsteps were they?"

"Shuffly footsteps," described Linda. "It was difficult to locate them, but –"

The girl halted in new alarm. Those footsteps were becoming real again, approaching with a solitary shuffle that was accompanied by a strange tapping that she hadn't heard before. Coming up from her chair, Linda tightened her dressing gown and clutched Huxford with trembling hands. Against Huxford's wrist, the girl's gripping fist felt as icy as the metal of one of the silent knights that stood in their empty suits of armor.

"They're coming this way –"

The footsteps arrived as Linda spoke and with them Isaac Twambley, whose cane was responsible for the peculiar taps. Apparently old Twambley hadn't been sleeping either, for his face showed anxiety until he saw that humans, not ghosts, were occupying the great hall.

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

With a sigh of relief, Linda included Twambley in her further recollections.

"It couldn't have been you, Mr. Twambley," said the girl, apologetically. "These were a lot of footsteps that I heard. Where they came in, I don't know, but –"

Huxford picked up the theme with a smile.

"But you know where they went out?"

"I'm not sure they did go out," spoke Linda, quickly. "They were mostly in these lower rooms, but I was sure I heard the elevator start. It was just a short rumble, but it was repeated."

"And after that, nothing more?"

"Well – no. At least I'm not sure –"

"Suppose we call the servants and have them search."

Huxford was rising as he made the suggestion; he halted as a sharp tone interrupted him.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Huxford." It was Hybart who spoke; he had come from the stairway leading up to the Maple Room. "The servants have had a heavy day. They deserve some rest. We shall look into this ourselves."

Rather than risk another tiff with Hybart; Linda was leaving her chair to sidle up the stairway to her room, before Hybart could summarily order her there. But this was an occasion demanding a different treatment.

"I suggest that you come with us, Linda," said Hybart. "I want you to be sure that nothing is amiss in Graydon Towers."

The girl flashed a look of challenge.

"Is that an order, Mr. Hybart?"

"I give no orders here," returned Hybart, patiently. "If I have spoken summarily in the past, it was for your own good. So suit yourself" – Hybart gave a shrug – "and take my word for it when I say there are no prowlers in this house. Come, Huxford, let us see if the elevator is at the ground level where it belongs. I am afraid Miss Graydon is running a slight fever that is increasing her imagination."

As Hybart turned with Huxford following him, Linda glared fresh indignation. It was worse to be ignored than to be ordered about, so she decided to go along and call this bluff. By the time Hybart and Huxford had reached the elevator to find that it was actually where it belonged, Linda had paddled through the music room after them.

"You see?" queried Hybart. Turning to Huxford, he noted Linda and raised his tilted eyebrows in feigned surprise. "Nobody was using the elevator. Nevertheless, we may as well search the other rooms to make sure there are no prowlers."

By "we" Hybart no longer included old Twambley. He had hobbled off somewhere with his cane; probably back to the security of his own room where he could bolt the door and shudder until he was sure that all was safe below.

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

There was something about the shudder business where Twambley was concerned. However it was his policy to dish them out, those shudders, instead of experiencing them personally. To do that, Twambley had to become his other self. As The Shadow, he was on his way out through the door that Atmore had earlier left unbolted.

In picking up his hat and cloak from behind a door where he had parked them, The Shadow didn't leave his cane. Instead, he telescoped it with a crushing move between his gloved hands and dropped it, a cylinder some three inches in length, into a pocket underneath his cloak. That cane, styled like the conventional drinking cup, but in elongated pattern, was one of The Shadow's neat disguise tricks when switching characters.

Now The Shadow was crossing the sloping lawn, toward the ledge by the hump in the old dirt road. Talk of prowlers in and out of Graydon Towers was quite enough to call for rapid action, for The Shadow, returning by a short cut from the town, had spotted Harry's coupe parked empty.

Considering the area occupied by the ivied pile called Graydon Towers, The Shadow's own return through the mansion could have allowed time for a prowling crew to move out, taking at least one prisoner along.

The Shadow was thinking in terms of his agent, Harry Vincent.

And now to intercept what might be a death crew, traveling along the old dirt road!

The best place was the lookout ledge, but when The Shadow reached it, he saw no sign of car lights anywhere. A few minutes of observation convinced him that Frisco and his murderous mob couldn't be driving back to Quarrytown; but there was the other possibility that they had trudged somewhere on foot, taking their prisoner along.

If so, where?

A strange reply came to The Shadow's mental question, a weird proclamation that he had heard not long before, but now instead of coming from a set position, it was speaking on the rove.

The long shrill whistle of a locomotive was followed by the echo of approaching chugs, increasing in their speed like the clatter of the accompanying freight cars.

Number Three on the L and M was pulling out of the Junction and steaming with accumulating power toward the railroad cut that was marked on the local map as lying just beyond the most distant corner of the Graydon estate.

Instantly, The Shadow started a swift course from the ledge; reaching a remote section of the stone wall that flanked the Graydon grounds, he cleared it and raced like a living whirlwind through the long, uncut grass that marked the forgotten portion of the mansion's land. Again the locomotive wailed, this time for the crossing of the little used dirt road.

A few minutes more and that howl would be sounding ravenous and hollow when the night freight poured itself into the railway cut where murder might soon be due.

CHAPTER XVII

FRISCO didn't say: "Let 'em have it."

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

There was no telling which of the four masked men was Frisco Karlin, since all had been silent. Again, whatever anyone might have shouted could not be heard above the onrushing freight as it entered the cut.

On the very fringe of that man-made ravine, Harry Vincent and Rufe Dodson were faced by aiming guns. When those weapons blasted, their sound too, would be lost, but the result would not be changed.

Literally, a hail of bullets would wilt the two prisoners who were facing their execution squad without blindfolds. Along with those bandages, their bonds had been removed. Ropes wouldn't be the proper things to find with two mangled bodies hit by the night freight. Bullets would be bad enough, if located during an inquest, but they were necessary to wither the prisoners from the brink where they stood and topple them down into the path of the ploughing train.

Deluged with thoughts, Harry saw only one way to beat the shots. He took it as he saw the leader of the death squad slowly raise his free hand as a preliminary signal. Wheeling full about, Harry made a mad grab for Rufe and at the same time pitched himself headlong down the steep embankment toward the rails that glistened in the path of the approaching searchlight!

Harry didn't find Rufe with that grab.

The same idea had struck the sheriff and he was snatching for Harry in a simultaneous dive. Missing each other they went spinning downward through the soft dirt, carrying a miniature landslide with them. Amid their whirl they saw stabs of flame above them, belated shots from the brink.

Then, into the clay cushion that their own slide had provided, they struck the ditch and staggered to the middle of the track, landing there on hands and knees. Fast work, this, with plenty of time to spare. Ominous though the locomotive was, Harry and Rufe had beaten its plodding pace and only wished that the freight would speed its arrival.

What they needed was a line of cars between themselves and the brink that they had left, in case their ex-captors started pecking at them in the brilliant setting that the searchlight afforded. As they came to their feet, Harry not only shoved Rufe to the ditch on the far side of the track, but started him along that narrow pathway toward the locomotive, so that they could gain protection sooner. Rufe took the hint and went with Harry close behind him.

During their spill, the escaping prisoners had looked like crippled men, tumbling helplessly to doom. That was why another figure had started a similar slide from a further section of the brink. The Shadow was coming along the edge, intent upon taking a last-moment hand when Harry and Rufe acted for themselves. Seeing them appear like tumble bugs in the great eye of the locomotive, the cloaked rescuer had started down to their aid.

Digging hard into the dirt, The Shadow stopped his slide half way. He was still slipping gradually as he jabbed shots at an angle toward the brink above, aiming to clip any sharpshooters who might be leaning over to take pot-shots at the two men below. Maybe the whine of bullets scared the murder squad; at any rate, they didn't stay along the brink.

Hearing no more shots, The Shadow went champing upward, fighting his way against the sliding clay as the whole freight lumbered along beneath him with Harry and Rufe safely on the far side. At the top, The Shadow caught only a glimpse of disappearing flashlights, off among the trees that fringed the old stone wall between this spot and Graydon Towers. The squad that hadn't delivered was making itself scarce and in a hurry.

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

At least one thing had been gained. The Shadow had recognized Rufe Dodson along with Harry Vincent; both were very plain in the mighty glare. That recognition was the reason for the singular laugh The Shadow gave.

For the present, The Shadow's policy was to let Rufe Dodson and his new friend, Harry Vincent, unravel existing riddles in their own way. After the caboose had clicked past them, they came clambering up from the cut and started for Graydon Towers, followed by The Shadow. By the time Rufe and Harry reached the mansion, it was plain what they intended.

Going to the side door that offered access to the stairway leading up to the Oak Room. They found the door bolted, which to The Shadow – watching from the darkness – was sufficient proof that Hugo Atmore had returned. Circling the mansion, Harry and Rufe passed the inner corner where Linda had disappeared that first night; reaching the front door, they hammered until admitted.

The pounding had aroused the sleepy servants, who came in sight while Jerome Hybart was opening the front door. Behind Hybart was Elliot Huxford, ready to help in case of trouble. Linda was there too, her face very worried, but she joined the general relief when she saw Sheriff Dodson. In fact, Linda almost gave Harry a smile.

Then the whole story was being told; how the masked mob from the Quarrytown hill had captured Harry and Rufe and taken them to meet a hooded chief whose headquarters was in the Oak Room. Hearing this, Jerome Hybart gave the knowing nod that Harry Vincent expected and announced:

"Hugo Atmore."

It was just what might be expected. Hugo Atmore, unreliable, unscrupulous, unethical, had overshot his mark. Rating as the brain who wanted to get at the Graydon Archives, Atmore needed only to be accused of having ordered a double death warrant which his masked mob had been too slow to carry through.

As custodian of Graydon Towers, Jerome Hybart led the march to the Oak Room and knocked on the door. Scarcely had Atmore opened it, before the group pushed through and the crab-faced man saw himself surrounded by accusers, including old Isaac Twambley, cane and all.

In the flickery firelight, Atmore looked scared.

"It's not true!" exclaimed Atmore, hoarsely. "I never heard of these masked men you mention. I never summoned them here! I don't know anything about this hooded business –"

"They brought us to Graydon Towers," stormed Dodson, "and Vincent recognized this room. I recognize it too, being back here again. It's your room, Atmore –"

"And the only Oak Room in the mansion," put in Hybart. He turned to Linda. "I am sure Miss Graydon will corroborate that fact."

Linda nodded.

"Then somebody else was here!" began Atmore. "Somebody else, I tell you –"

"Who else?" interrupted Hybart. "This is your room, Atmore."

"But I wasn't here –"

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Hybart's tilted lips interrupted with a dry laugh.

"A preposterous argument," put in Hybart, "but even if true, it could hardly shift the blame. Neither Huxford nor Linda could have been here, for they were in the great hall." He turned, looked around the group, and gave a nod of recollection. "And Twambley, too, I believe."

"As for myself" – Hybart was stating his own case methodically and impartially – "my room, the Maple Room, is so located that it would be impossible for me to come here to the Oak Room without passing through the great hall. The others will testify that I came from there when I entered the hall and found them. And so –"

"And so," put in Rufe Dodson, "as sheriff of Beaverwood County, I am placing Hugo Atmore under arrest. Come along, Atmore."

Compressing his lips very tightly. Atmore decided to go along. But as he reached the stairs, he turned around and mouthed accusations of his own.

"You'll regret this, all of you!" stormed back Atmore. "You think you can prove a case against me, but you can't! You will soon see!"

Finishing his shout as he reached the bottom step, Atmore was dragged along by Rufe, who gestured for Harry to unbolt the outside door. With their prisoner between them, Harry and Rufe started for town in the coupe.

Back at Graydon Towers, the occupants were returning to their various quarters with one exception: old Isaac Twambley. Again, the elderly guest was switching to his character of The Shadow; clad in his favorite guise, he glided out through the same door by which Harry and Rufe had left with Atmore.

The Shadow was a full minute ahead of the servants who came to bolt that door, and as he crossed the lawn he heard the peculiar chug of an old motor starting from somewhere off the driveway. It was Rufe's car, with Gerster at the wheel; having delivered Atmore back at the Towers, Jeff was taking the borrowed vehicle down to the coal yard.

Continuing across the lawn, The Shadow took his own short cut toward the Junction.

There, new surprises awaited.

The first was sprung by Atmore. As Harry's car neared the depot, the prisoner began a long and healthy laugh.

"Better talk to the station agent," Atmore told Rufe. "He'll tell you that I wasn't up at the Towers. Ask him, sheriff."

Rufe ordered a stop at the depot to learn what this was all about. There, Jerry the station agent acknowledged Atmore's claim.

"Reckon he's right, sheriff," nodded Jerry. "He was here from ten o'clock on past eleven. Sending this batch of telegrams, he was."

Staring at the telegrams Jerry shoved through the window, Rufe saw the signatures. All bore the name of Jeff Gerster.

"So you're in cahoots with Gerster!" exclaimed Rufe to Atmore. "What's the game?"

Atmore shrugged.

"Why not ask Gerster, sheriff?"

"I will!" retorted Rufe. "And you'll be there when I do! Come on, we're going over to the hotel."

At the hotel, the clerk shook his head when asked about Jeff Gerster.

"Haven't seen him, sheriff," said the clerk. "Not since he went upstairs about quarter past ten. He was acting kind of funny though. That's why Mr. Swink went up – and he didn't come down nuther."

Jeff wasn't in his room, nor was there any sign of Swink, at least not until Rufe noticed an open door with steep stairs beyond it. As the sheriff recalled it, that door was seldom open, so he decided to investigate, taking Atmore along with him, while Harry followed.

The stairs led to the odd-shaped cupola that marked the top of the old-fashioned hotel and there they found why Tobias Swink, proprietor of the Junction House, had not returned downstairs.

Tobias Swink was lying crumpled in the cupola, very dead from a bullet through his heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

FURTIVELY the figure crossed the open stretch from the clustered trees near Graydon Towers. Nearing a corner of the mansion, it paused. A flashlight blinked, not in code, but merely with quick, repeated signal.

It wasn't long before a faint, grating sound came from amid the ivy of an inset wall.

The ivy itself spread with the sliding door that opened and the furtive figure hurried across the threshold into the glow of a lighted candle. The furtive man was Jeff Gerster and his voice was excited but low:

"Douse it – quickly!"

Linda Graydon blew out the candle flame.

"Get the door shut!" exclaimed Jeff. "Hurry – where's the switch?"

"I'll find it," said Linda, quietly. "Don't be excited. Here it is."

Another figure had entered during that brief interval, an invisible shape that arrived with a glide. The Shadow had profited even more than Jeff by the extinguishing of Linda's candle.

"Is the way clear?"

Jeff's query came anxiously as the sliding door went shut under Linda's pressure of the wall switch.

"Of course it is," laughed Linda, lightly. "I couldn't have come through Hybart's room if he'd been there. Come on, here are the stairs; just sixteen steps to the top."

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

Waiting in the lower darkness, The Shadow checked his facts. He didn't blame Linda for cooperating with Jeff. The news of Swink's death hadn't yet reached Graydon Towers. All Linda wanted was someone to help her check on Hybart whom she almost openly mistrusted. Having doubted that Harry would help her, Linda had put the same proposition to Jeff, the time he had come back to the Towers after Frisco's mob had tried to bag the sheriff.

All that had pieced itself from Harry's reports to The Shadow, who had added some analysis of his own while a guest in Graydon Towers.

Singular elements were at work within those age-stained walls. Down in the great hall, Jerome Hybart was standing in the dim light of an alcove, his hand raised to the shoulder of a suit of fancy armor. The custodian's head was at its habitual tilt but the sharp gleam from his keen eyes told that he was listening attentively for distant sounds.

Hybart could hear them; the sounds he didn't like, muffled scrapes like the gnawing of so many rats, but almost impossible to locate. Then, stealing from his alcove, the custodian crossed the floor to the music room. He was strangely crablike, this man with owlish eyes. No longer wearing the big lensed glasses that seemed part of him, Hybart was relying more on hearing than on sight. He was still wearing his skull cap, however, and like the rest of him, it was swallowed in the darkness of the music room.

Almost immediately, Jeff Gerster came tiptoeing down the stairs from the direction of the Maple Room. Having glimpsed Hybart, he followed after the man, but half way through the music room, Jeff halted. Conscious of something bulking toward his right, Jeff squinted into the darkness. His eyes, widening, showed a white glint in the dim light that trickled from the great hall.

Then, with a low intake of breath, Jeff groped to the fan staircase that led down to the antechamber outside the famed Graydon crypt. On those steps, Gerster listened and what he heard, he understood. Drawing back, Jeff was waiting in the upper darkness when Hybart came plodding upstairs. Never suspecting Jeff's presence in the dark, Hybart continued out to the great hall and up to the Maple Room.

Soon, other footsteps clicked on the concrete. By the light from a door that he opened in a corridor, Elliot Huxford entered the music room from the far side and strolled across, pausing only to admire the colorful glitter from the tiled mosaic in the center of the floor. Coming into the great hall, Huxford glanced casually upward and saw Linda on her balcony.

"Hello," greeted Huxford warmly. "Can't you sleep either?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Linda, wearily. She drew back into the darkness so that Huxford wouldn't see that she was still fully dressed. "Are you going to sit up long?"

"Not very," replied Huxford. "Want to come and chat a while?"

"No thanks," said Linda. "It might mean another reprimand from Mr. Hybart. He was forgetful, not giving me one the last time."

Around the corner of the upper hall, Linda hurried toward her own room. Pausing for a moment by the hallway window, she looked out and stared into the first faint glimmer of the dawn. Figures were weaving, so Linda thought, until she decided she must have been deceived by the motion of the clustered trees.

They couldn't have approached the mansion and vanished. The only people who could manage that were those who were in the know. Outsiders weren't familiar with the secret portal leading into Graydon Towers. It

GUARDIAN OF DEATH

had taken Linda a long while to learn that riddle for herself and then only because she had once caught Hybart working it when he didn't know that she was watching him.

It happened that the secret was really out.

Thanks to The Shadow, two men had just gained entrance through the sliding door which lifted the segments of ivy with it. As they heard the door go shut with a muffled grate, Harry Vincent and Rufe Dodson turned on their flashlights.

"No wonder Linda disappeared that night!" exclaimed Harry. "I should have known that she used some stunt like this. I ought to have reasoned it out for myself."

He didn't add that somebody else had reasoned it out for him, namely The Shadow, at whose order Harry had brought Rufe here.

"Look at those steps!" Rufe threw his flashlight upward. "Sixteen of them. That's the number you counted, Vincent!"

"Which means this is the way those maskies brought us in," declared Harry. "There were more than twenty coming down from the Oak Room. Remember how Atmore practically counted them with words when we brought him out?"

Harry could have said that he had told all this to The Shadow in a secret meeting outside the Junction House after the discovery of Swink's body in the cupola.

"There's our door, right at the top," asserted Rufe. "Come on, Vincent – let's learn who's behind it!"

At the top of the stairs they shouldered the door open, swinging a heavy object with it. A man came lunging at them with tigerish fury only to be met by the swing of their guns. A few moments later, Jerome Hybart was sagged in a chair, his bald head glistening where his skull cap should have been.

"The Maple Room!" exclaimed Harry. "But how –"

A strangely whispered laugh came from the doorway through which Harry and Rufe had barged. Into the Maple Room stalked The Shadow, gesturing back at the doorway where none should have been. The Oak Room, though, had such a doorway in that very wall!

Then, with Hybart glaring from his chair, The Shadow began a transformation that was the custodian's own specialty.

The thing that had swung with the door was a maple bookcase. Unhooking it from the door, The Shadow closed the latter. The back of the maple bookcase proved of oak, with dummy doors that gave it the appearance of an old-fashioned wardrobe chest!

That was just the beginning. Swinging other bookcases The Shadow changed them into oak furnishings. Taking chairs, he tipped them back and the spaces beneath appeared as oaken seats. Rolling the rug and unrolling it, The Shadow brought up its underside, drab gray instead of bright yellow. The window curtains proved reversible, losing their golden glitter for a darker hue. The pictures on the wall, when turned around, showed as heavy-framed portraits instead of narrow-framed prints.

The pay-off came when The Shadow converted a sizable maple desk into a high oak secretary by swinging it to another wall and raising a folded back that had been hanging out of sight. Instead of a solid wall where the desk had been, Harry and Rufe saw an open fire place filled with ashes.

The sheriff was clamping handcuffs on Hybart; locking him to the only chair that still looked like maple. The glare fading from his eyes, Jerome Hybart sank back in the fashion of a man who had run a race and lost.

In weary tone, Hybart declared:

"All right, sheriff. I'll tell all."

CHAPTER XIX

TELL all, Hybart did, so far as he wanted, which at least covered the mystery of the hooded master and the four masked men.

"I was afraid for the safety of the archives," insisted Hybart. "I was sure Atmore was the one man who would try to get at them and I knew that Gerster was probably working for him."

"At least they were framing something," put in Rufe, "but it didn't seem to be criminal, not where Atmore is concerned. Go on, Hybart."

"Gifford Graydon fixed these interchangeable rooms as a hobby," proceeded Hybart, "so I saw a chance to use them. When you spoke about masked men down in the woods and suggested that my servants help patrol, I decided to frame Atmore. The men who trapped you and Vincent were the servants; they brought you here to me.

"They had orders to let you go, which they did at the railroad cut, though maybe they overdid it. I wanted you to come back safely, sheriff, so you would arrest Atmore when you recognized his room. With Atmore in jail, I felt sure the crypt could be opened and the archives produced without any interference."

"Atmore is in jail all right," asserted Rufe. "Now we're looking for Jeff Gerster. Have you seen him?"

Hybart shook his head.

"Any signs of the real masked mob?" persisted Rufe.

Hybart stroked his head with his free hand. He glanced about for his skull cap so Harry picked it up for him.

"I've heard odd sounds around the house," admitted Hybart. "Odd sounds, like rats –"

"Human rats?"

"They might be, sheriff."

"Look at this map, Hybart." Rufe spread it. "See how the old quarry is on a line with the Towers? Who flashed the signals that came from here? Vincent and I saw them up in Quarrytown."

There was a whispered laugh from The Shadow; one that made Hybart give a nervous blink as he looked up from the map. Oddly, though, it was Hybart who caught the real significance of the tone. It called for truth without expressing doubts of Hybart. Staring at the map again, Hybart understood.

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"Those contours, sheriff?" exclaimed Hybart. "The curved lines that represent slopes in the ground."

"I see them. What about them?"

"Notice how thick they are just above Graydon Towers? There's a ridge at that spot. It hides the Towers from the quarry. If you saw signals blinking, they must have come from somewhere down near the Junction."

"The cupola!" exclaimed Rufe to Harry. "That's what Jeff was doing up there while Atmore was sending those telegrams. Swink spotted him and got killed for it. Say – that clears the girl entirely!"

"You mean you suspected Linda?" Hybart leaned his head back and gave it a slanted shake. "She's entirely honest, sheriff. So honest that she mistrusts me, simply because I prefer to be mistrusted rather than say too much."

"It's in your hands now, sheriff." Hybart spoke as though he meant it. "Clean out those rats if there are any. The servants will help if you need them. Good luck to you."

Turning, Rufe gestured to Harry and led the way out through the proper door, leaving Hybart in The Shadow's custody. Coming to the stairs that led down into the great hall, Rufe kept on beckoning but motioned for a minimum of noise. Only momentarily did Harry catch what he thought was a distant rumble as they sneaked down the stairs.

The great hall was empty. Linda, too, noted that fact as she peered suddenly from her corridor and recognized, with some amazement, the two men who were coming from Hybart's room. Huxford had apparently retired and Gerster must have slipped to parts unknown. Still not understanding what was going on, Linda was due for plenty more astonishment.

Both Harry and Rufe had caught creeping footsteps coming from the music room and were pausing at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for them. Then, out into the great hall stole four men with masks, darting looks from left to right, preparatory to their final sneak toward the front door.

They never made it.

Sheriff Dodson barked an order for the men to halt. Not sure whether they were desperate crooks or masquerading servants, he found out soon enough. The fierce snarl that came from the leader of the four was the tone of Frisco Karlin.

Guns let rip.

Harry's quick shove sent Rufe into an alcove and Harry himself dived for the next. The arrangement of the hall was in their favor, giving them a chance to clip the crooks who darted back and forth; but Harry and Rufe would have been outgunned, except for The Shadow.

From a balcony came a strident, challenging laugh that made Frisco's men forget the fray below. Aiming upward they fired wildly at a weaving shape that vanished as their revolvers blazed only to reappear on the stairs.

Murderers by trade, Frisco's tribe was ready to fight to the death. And death it was, though not by The Shadow's design. He wanted to take these rats alive, though they might be damaged in the process, and both Harry and Rufe were similarly inclined. But when the servants came rushing in to help suppress the invaders, there was no further chance to give quarter.

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Earnest though they were, the servants were sure to be outgunned at close range, even though the crooks were crippled. Rather than see innocent men die, The Shadow, made his shots more telling and the hint was taken by Harry and Rufe. Added to that were the shots that the servants delivered, easily enough, since Frisco and his pack were already on the sprawl.

When Sheriff Dodson reached the dying crooks and demanded to know why they had come here, all he received were gasping sneers.

It was The Shadow who provided the right answer.

In response to a low-toned command, Harry turned and saw his chief pointing through the music room. Harry spoke to Rufe and the sheriff left the servants the task of carrying out the remains of Frisco's unsavory crew. Through the music room, Harry and Rufe reached the elevator and there a riddle was explained.

Earlier, Linda had said something about brief rumbles of the elevator. Harry too had heard such a sound just prior to the sudden appearance of the missing crooks. Now the elevator was showing itself a few feet above floor level, the door of the car wide open.

Frisco's outfit had been hiding out beneath the elevator, down in the lower shaft!

Why?

The way to find out was to go below, which Harry and Rufe did. Dropping some six feet, they discovered a front wall of old bricks, some of which had been removed. Dirt was piled there proving that Frisco's squad had been hard at work, digging a tunnel through the soft clay under the crypt.

It was Harry who wormed through the hole and came out carrying something which he handed gingerly to Rufe.

"Careful with it, sheriff. It's dynamite."

Dynamite it was; enough sticks to blow up the mansion along with the crypt. The job included a fuse with an old alarm clock set to blow the works at nine. Detaching the fuse and setting the dynamite in a safe corner, Harry probed into the tunnel again and then came crawling backward.

"Take a look, Rufe," he said. "You'll see that the floor of the crypt hasn't stood up as it should. The soft earth made it sag."

Rufe worked in and came out nodding.

"Cracked," he nodded, "but it's still intact. It can be reenforced after it's opened and those archives are brought out."

"Why don't we do a little more cracking right now?"

"You mean so we can break up through?"

"That's it," declared Harry. "You represent the law, so you've got the right."

"So I have," acknowledged Rufe, "and a look at those archives wouldn't be out of turn. Let's try it, Vincent."

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Try it they did and with success. Working with tools that Frisco's bunch had left behind, Harry and Rufe took turns at hacking the concrete until finally a big chunk gave. After hauling it out through the hole, the two men crawled up through and into the musty silence of the tomb that housed the body of Gifford Graydon.

There was a great stone coffin, sealed like a catafalque that bore Graydon's remains, but of more interest was the huge iron chest that met the glitter of two flashlights. This was the famous coffer that held the priceless records known as the Graydon Archives which threatened ruin for certain questionable dealers, most notoriously Hugo Atmore.

"It's what Jeff Gerster was after," declared Rufe, "whether or not he was taking orders from Atmore."

"And we've found it ahead of Jeff," rejoined Harry, turning his flashlight all about the crypt. "Look at that bolted door and those solid walls. We're here ahead of everybody!"

"Let's check on the archives," decided Rufe, "so that we can remember them later."

"A good idea," said Harry. "Get hold of the other end of that lid and – let's heave."

Heave they did and up came the coffer lid. In poured the glare from the flashlights to reveal the contents. Like the men themselves, that glow seemed frozen by the sight that it revealed. The thing was incredible, yet in the hush of this underground vault, the fanciful could be expected.

Until this moment, both witnesses had deemed it impossible that anyone else could have entered or left this crypt before them. If the Graydon Archives were missing – and missing they were – it would simply mean that they were a myth that had never been planted here.

Such would have been the message of an empty coffer; but this coffer wasn't empty.

Twisted within the great iron chest was the body of a man, whose dead face, contorted and glazed of eyes, was staring sightless up into the light.

It would have been amazing to find a dead body so well preserved after all the years the crypt had been sealed; but this corpse hadn't been here that long.

This was a question of minutes, not of years. The dead face that was glaring from the iron coffer was that of the missing murderer, Jeff Gerster!

Another witness had arrived to view this most astounding discovery. Over the shoulders of Harry Vincent and Rufe Dodson came a whispered, mirthless laugh that carried the solemn tone of a knell.

The Shadow's answer to the riddle of the impossible, a new and singular mystery that he now must solve!

CHAPTER XX

BREAKFAST was at seven thirty in Graydon Towers. The rule held, even though everyone had been up most the night. Jerome Hybart was present, no longer handcuffed, by special request of Sheriff Dodson, who hadn't told him about the find in the crypt.

Nor had Linda Graydon been told. She was as much in ignorance as the guest who sat across from her at the table, Elliot Huxford. Though a bit tired from lack of sleep, Huxford was still his genial self, though he was a bit inquisitive on the matter of Hugo Atmore.

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"I'd like to talk to Atmore, sheriff," declared Huxford. "I might convince him that he ought to tell the truth. After all, the man was desperate, with a million dollars in lawsuits threatening him if the Graydon Archives prove he sold false art treasures – which they will."

The sheriff affirmed that it would be a good idea for Huxford to talk to Atmore.

"I'll have time before I take the train to New York," continued Huxford. He turned toward two other guests. "Are either of you going along?"

The other two were Isaac Twambley and Harry Vincent. Old Twambley shook his head as he arose and leaned on his cane.

"I still have much more to do here," he crackled. "I am an antiquary and I love things that are old – even new things that may some day be old."

Twambley specified no further, but merely went chortling from the dining room, presumably bound for the library. It was Harry's turn to answer Huxford's query.

"I have my car," stated Harry, "so I won't be going by train. Of course, I can drive you down to the Junction."

"Very good," decided Huxford, accepting another cup of coffee that a servant offered him. "It's now eight o'clock. Suppose we leave in half an hour?"

"But Mr. Huxford!" exclaimed Linda. "Don't you want to be here when the crypt is opened and the archives brought to light?"

Linda's question was really meant for Harry, since she felt that he should stay and resume the friendship which unwarranted events had cut short with a misunderstanding. But Huxford took it literally.

"No need now," smiled Huxford. "I only wanted to be certain that Atmore did not try to steal the archives. Since he is in jail, he can't attempt it. Those criminals who worked for him are dead and Gerster has disappeared. Justice has prevailed and therefore truth will out."

Old Isaac Twambley was seeking truth at that very moment, but he was applying the process elsewhere.

In the center of the music room, old Twambley was tracing pictures with his cane, running its tip across the fanciful design in the tile-work that represented past, present and future as they had befuddled the brain of the late Gifford Graydon. As he slid his cane out of the circle, he dragged it back again and the ferrule did a tiny hop.

That jump pleased Twambley. He tried it elsewhere and it worked again. Always the loosely dragged cane tip went click-clack, when it reached the black circle that formed part of the three-colored frame around the symbolized pattern of eternity.

Thinking in terms of Gifford Graydon, old Twambley remembered something else. Going to the fan staircase, he descended to have a last look at the eight-foot Guardian Angel with the twelve-foot wings. In the dim light, Twambley chuckled when he saw the statue. It was like himself, in that it carried a cane.

Of course the angel's cane was technically a staff, a long bronze rod that went loosely through its partly closed fist. Twambley found that the bronze staff turned when he tried it; moreover, he noticed some slight scratches in the bronze. Collapsing his own cane, Twambley pocketed it in the brisk style of The Shadow;

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then, rapid as well as active, he pushed the bronze staff upward until it toppled from the angel's hand.

Catching the staff deftly, Twambley stooped and studied the half globe on which the angel stood. He noticed shiny spots in two of the opposite holes that pierced the bronze hemisphere. Through those holes, Twambley thrust the staff. Spreading his arms, he began to turn the staff like a lever.

Under the angel's feet, the bronze half-globe revolved. As that happened, the huge statue rose slowly but with a steady upward glide. The interior of the revolving globe was a screw-lift, a powerful jack easily and smoothly operated by the handy bronze lever. But the Guardian Angel wasn't all that rose.

A circle of the ceiling went with it. That ceiling was solid enough, for it rested on the wall of the crypt, which cut a straight path across it. Thus it made a firm part of the floor above, but it still remained solid when it rose. During that process it was supported by the flattened tips of the bronze angel's wings that ran right up to the top of the vault wall and now were rising still higher.

Reaching the proper limit, Twambley stopped his operations and left the antechamber, going up by the fan staircase. His keen brain had solved the real riddle of the crypt, by testing the floor above it in a unique but effective way. Isaac Twambley now had other work awaiting him – as The Shadow.

In the dining room, Elliot Huxford was becoming impatient at the way the others lingered, particularly Harry Vincent, who was suddenly becoming charmed by the effect of the morning sunlight when it cast its burnish onto coppery hair. Harry's admiring gaze was getting a blue-eyed smile from Linda and with each succeeding minute, Harry was becoming less anxious to leave Graydon Towers.

Suddenly suggesting that they go out to the great hall, Huxford started the exodus; thinking he could win his point.

Huxford was wrong, far wrong.

The way led through the music room and there the whole group stopped. Jerome Hybart was wearing his thick glasses this morning and his eyes glared angrily at what they saw through the helpful lenses. As for Linda, she riveted with a really startled gasp.

The eight-foot circle that represented the whole expanse of time, was hanging shoulder high in midair, a great flat disc of tiling set in thick, but even concrete. Supporting it were two great bronze triangles, canted at an angle through the floor, like the wings of some Arabian genii jutting from a pit to which the monster had been consigned.

Wings they were, those of the bronze angel that could come no higher, because its head had reached the ceiling of the antechamber below. But that was only part of the amazing situation. The pit itself told more.

Directly across the middle of the gaping circle was the top edge of a wall. To the front of that dividing barrier was the antechamber, to the rear the crypt.

The Shadow had laid bare the most cherished secret that Gifford Graydon had built into this curious mansion of his. The crypt, which all the world believed could be entered only when its much-sealed door was opened, had offered secret access to any who might know.

And only one man could have known.

Huxford swung to Hybart.

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"So you knew this, Hybart! You were the custodian here. You had Graydon's confidence –"

"Of course." Hybart hurled back the words. "But I promised never to enter the crypt except in an emergency. I destroyed the plans of the mansion on that account."

"Another form of your deceit!"

"Deceit?" Hybart shook his head. "The fact that the archives could be reached does not decrease their value. The evidence of their own pages will prove their authenticity."

"Where are they now? Down in the crypt?"

Hybart smiled and shook his head.

"I removed them last night. I placed them in the suits of armor in the great hall. I knew that criminals were seeking them."

"What did you put in their place?"

"Nothing. What you see below is simply an empty coffer. I did intend to replace the archives so they could be officially exhumed, but since someone has discovered the secret of the crypt, that is unnecessary now."

Hybart turned as though intending to go to the library; then with a change of mind, he started toward the fan staircase, planning to lower the statue with which somebody had meddled. Looking at his watch, Harry Vincent nodded to Rufe Dodson.

It was getting close to nine o'clock. It would probably take Hybart the remaining minutes to lower the bronze angel. Hybart was all right.

Huxford too was glancing at his watch.

"Come, Vincent!" exclaimed Huxford, suddenly. "We must get down to town. My mission here is ended."

"Not quite."

The voice that spoke came from the doorway leading to the great hall. As yet the sunlight had not reached the stained windows, so the figure that stood there was shrouded in a dim light.

The cloaked figure of The Shadow!

"Suppose you open that coffer, Huxford," spoke The Shadow. "Perhaps it is not so empty as Hybart believes."

"Why open the coffer?" demanded Huxford. "It would be a waste of time!"

"And very important time, Huxford."

Beads of sweat were beginning to trickle into Huxford's beetling eyebrows.

"Your mission was to see that Atmore did not reach those archives," accused The Shadow, "because you wanted to reach them yourself. You wanted to destroy them, Huxford, and place the blame on Atmore!"

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Huxford snarled a wild, incoherent denial.

"Atmore feared that the Graydon Archives would prove that he had sold a vast amount of false art treasures," continued The Shadow. "Atmore was a dealer, but you were a buyer, Huxford. Still, what would a buyer's position be if he learned that he had accumulated a worthless collection?"

"You as a collector had as great a risk as Atmore, the dealer – and more. He could have fled the country with the money he had gained; but your money, Huxford, was gone. All you have in the way of a fortune consists of art treasures – genuine or spurious. Your great fear is that they may prove to be the spurious type."

With minutes pounding at his heels, Huxford threw aside all further pretense.

"All right, I hired Gerster!" stormed Huxford. "But he double-crossed me!"

"Not because he talked to Atmore," put in The Shadow. "That was part of the game you ordered him to play."

"But he was to get the archives! If he couldn't, the job was up to Frisco. Last night, Gerster saw this raised floor" – Huxford gestured from his shoulder as he spoke – "and he watched Hybart close it –"

Hybart was beginning to close it again, for the floor started an inching descent as Huxford spoke, but the big-browed man didn't notice it.

"I told Gerster to open it. He said it would be foolish." Huxford was racing time as he talked. "Frisco was set to fix things anyway. I made Gerster open it. I went into the crypt with him. The archives were gone."

"Because Hybart had taken them," declared The Shadow, "but you blamed Gerster. You thought he'd turned them over to Atmore to be used against you, so you murdered him and thus disposed of the only man who could link you to Frisco. Using Jeff Gerster as a go-between you had never revealed yourself to Frisco Karlin."

It was the perfect analysis, founded on the facts that The Shadow had uncovered. Those pointed references, however, added to Huxford's frenzied sweat. He'd exposed himself by his efforts to be gone by nine o'clock from a mansion which he still thought would be blasted at that crucial hour.

Now, like a chiming sequel to The Shadow's words, a great clock in the music room was striking nine!

Huxford's frenzy called for deeds instead of words. Sidling madly, he whipped a revolver from his pocket while with his other hand he tried to grab Linda as a shield.

Other guns spoke ahead of Huxford's. Harry and Rufe were diligent, but too hasty. It was The Shadow's shot, straight from a gun that pivoted from his cloak with a simple wrist action, that clipped Huxford's own gun and staggered him.

The sequel was fitting but unscheduled.

All Huxford wanted was escape. Reeling, he sought it blindly, not thinking of direction. Until he was almost there, he didn't see that he was lunging toward the space beneath the slowly sinking circle in the middle of the floor. Huxford tried to make a turnabout and tripped.

Head first, this man who still wanted others to die, was pouring himself into the gaping floor. Throwing his hands wide, Huxford tried to clutch the angel's wings. One hand succeeded, but it was the wrong one. That

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crippled gun fist couldn't hold. Before anyone could reach him, Huxford disappeared.

It was only a twelve-foot drop but there was concrete at the bottom. A cracking sound with a popping echo told that Huxford's skull had taken all the brunt. Silence followed, undisturbed by the sound that Huxford only had imagined would come; that of an explosion that wasn't going to occur.

The bronze wings of the Guardian Angel finished their descent. Again, the fantastic tiling was glittering from the center of the floor, having absorbed a trifling episode in the history of endless time. Fate had liquidated Elliot Huxford, the man who had joined his victim, Jeff Gerster, in a tomb that formed a fitting resting place for a murderous pair.

A strange laugh spoke with a parting note, symbolizing its author's triumph over crime. With one accord, the eyes of a solemn group turned toward the doorway.

The Shadow was gone, and the rising sunlight was bringing a new day to Graydon Towers.

THE END