

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Maxwell Grant

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MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Maxwell Grant

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I

EVERYBODY on the crowded subway train seemed to be reading newspapers: their own or other people's. That was what bothered Diane Marlow, the fact that somebody was looking over her shoulder, scanning the very headlines that held her own eyes.

The headlines read:

POLICE LINK BOND AND JEWEL ROBBERIES

Promise Immediate Arrest

GIRL AIDED GEM GRAB

The first two headlines didn't worry Diane; it was the third that bothered her, because she happened to be the girl it meant. That in turn cast doubt upon the second headline, which didn't specify who was to be arrested,

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the robber or his feminine accomplice.

Silly, this whole thing, but frightening. Diane's gloved hand clutched tighter on the subway strap and she found herself gripping the newspaper so hard that it crumpled in her other hand. Hastily relaxing, she opened the paper and lifted it to hide her face.

Fortunately, this attracted no attention because of the lurch of the train. They were coming to a station and Diane decided she could hang on for one stop more – her stop. She was feeling faint, but that didn't matter. You just couldn't collapse in a subway car jammed as this one.

Besides, Diane was realizing that she had more to learn and no time to waste in doing so. She needed to know what details the newspaper contained, whether they were facts or not, so she steeled herself to the effort during the hop to the next station.

Maybe the facts were right about the robber, but they didn't apply to the girl, as Diane could vouch if anyone would believe her.

According to the newspaper, the police defined the robber as the same masked man who had entered a brokerage office two days ago and forced the owner to hand over a batch of securities that were in his desk drawer.

Of course the robber had backed the operation with a gun, and this very afternoon he had repeated the process by stalking into a jeweler's private office and demanding a very special jewel case, with its contents, which had been delivered only a short time before.

In each instance, this daring character had made a very hurried departure, picking up a taxicab by flourishing the gun in the driver's face. Outside the brokerage, however, he'd been forced to run half a block in order to commandeer the cab, and he had evidently remembered that experience when he tackled the jewel job.

A cab had been waiting outside the jewelry shop. It was waiting because it had arrived with a passenger, a girl who had offered the cabby a ten-dollar bill which he couldn't change. The girl was holding the cab while she fumbled in her bag to find smaller money. The cabby hadn't suspected that the girl was stalling until the masked man appeared, hopped into the cab with the girl and said to get going.

They'd dropped off together, those two passengers, which made the cabby's theory valid. Except that the cabby hadn't waited to see that the girl and the masked man hurried away in opposite directions, the gun spurring the girl's flight. That part wasn't mentioned in the newspapers.

The girl was described as a fluffy-haired blonde attired in a fancy blue sport suit. At least none of the subway passengers would tag Diane from that description, for it was raining outdoors and her hair had lost its fluff; furthermore, Diane had changed from her sport outfit to an older, dark-brown dress that she reserved for bad weather.

Besides, Diane wasn't smiling and jolly as she'd been early that afternoon. Right now, in the last minutes of the rush hour, she wore a serious frown that gave her the tired look that only long office work can produce. In fact, Diane was more than tired; she was grim, very grim indeed, as she left the train at her station, tucked the newspaper under her arm, and started up the steps to the street.

This couldn't really be called Diane's station; it just happened to be the nearest stop to the address of Joey's Shoe Parlor, the name on the card that Diane had scooped into her bag along with other things that were lying on the cab seat. Since Diane had never before heard of Joey's Shoe Parlor, she was playing the hunch that the

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slip of cardboard had dropped from the masked man's pocket.

And right now, the stakes had doubled where Diane Marlow was concerned. She'd started on this journey hoping to gain some first-hand information before notifying the police regarding the jewel robber. Now she wanted those same facts in order to clear her status as the unknown woman in the case.

The shoe parlor was the sort of basement establishment that Diane expected it to be. Joey also came up to specifications; he was busy at his task and mumbled because his mouth was full of hob-nails. Diane was trying to smooth her hair and bending her head so the rain would drip from her hat; hence Joey didn't see her face. Besides, all that interested Joey was the receipt that Diane showed him.

"Not ready yet," declaimed Joey. "I said tomorrow I deliver. Me, I'm always prompt, I never kid a customer. Besides, I say I deliver and that means I deliver. My boy Marcus, he'll be around tomorrow after school with those shoes all fixed."

To prove his point, Joey not only gestured to the shoes but picked up the stub that was with them. Before Diane could figure how to phrase the question she wanted to ask, Joey answered it.

"Apartment Number Two, Letter D, the Cedarcroft," announced Joey, referring to his scrawl on the stub. "I keep good check on all repair jobs and satisfied customers will tell you same. New customers get good service too – you see?"

The thump of the closing door and the jangle of the old-fashioned bell above it were the only answers that Joey received. Diane was on her way, hoping to find the Cedarcroft within the next few blocks, which she did. The apartment house consisted of two old residences converted into apartments and as Diane hoped, the front door wasn't locked.

Taking the walk-up to the second floor, Diane found Apartment 2-D at the back of the building, its number showing under the mediocre glow of a light in the hallway ceiling. Firmer than ever, Diane tightened her hand on the knob and slowly tried it, only to find that the door was locked.

There was a transom above, but no light showing from it. The wild notion of wriggling through that transom crossed Diane's mind, but didn't make a dent. She'd been silly enough in the taxicab today, in an involuntary way. No use of getting into trouble purposely. Visions of being stuck half way through the transom were something Diane didn't like.

Still, it seemed foolish to have come here all for nothing. On that thought Diane decided that maybe the downstairs vestibule would hold the answer. She hadn't looked for the name plates when she hurried through the door; now it would be a good idea to go down and study them. But as Diane turned reluctantly toward the stairs, she threw back a glance at the door of Apartment 2-D and what she saw there halted her.

A bit of white was projecting from under the door and it looked like the corner of an envelope. Diane pounced for the object, drew it her way and found that it actually was an envelope. In fact it was a letter that the obliging janitor must have put under the door as part of the Cedarcroft service and it gave Diane her first good clue as to the masked man's identity.

The envelope was addressed to one Lee Quade and it was specifically marked Apartment 2-D. Hesitating only briefly, Diane tore open the envelope, blew into it, and extracted its thin contents.

Thin, because the envelope didn't contain a letter; what it held was a slip of paper that Diane thought at first must be a newspaper clipping until she discovered instead that it was part of a page cut from a child's book.

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Even in the poor light, Diane could easily read the large-print words that were common to most editions of "Mother Goose."

The rhyme was a familiar one that Diane found herself reading half-aloud, as a flash-back to one of her own childhood habits.

This was the verse:

Old King Cole

Was a merry old soul

And a merry old soul was he.

He called for his pipe

And he called for his bowl

And he called for his fiddlers three.

Smiling as she finished the rhyme, Diane realized that this wasn't the time for smiles. Whatever he was, other than a masked robber, Lee Quade wasn't the sort to be receiving nursery rhymes except as a gag; and anyone who knew him well enough to joke with him, might well be the next stop along the trail that Diane had started.

Staring with distant eyes below her furrowed forehead, Diane spoke slowly:

"Old King Cole! It may mean the next person on the list! The next person that Quade is supposed to rob –"

If Diane's eyes had been as busy as her thoughts, she would have noticed the darkness that was gradually moving across the slip of paper that she held upon the opened envelope. But she saw nothing, heard nothing, not even the slight creak beneath the frayed carpeting of the hallway floor, as a figure loomed behind that spreading darkness.

Then came the sudden swoop of a hand, the clamp of a fist upon Diane's wrist. Before the girl could give more than a startled gasp, a low snarl ordered silence.

There was more than a snarl to support the order. Turning, Diane stared into hard eyes and recognized their cold glisten as something she'd seen through the slits of a mask, that very afternoon. Even colder than the eyes was the more potent silencer that Lee Quade had previously handled.

That silencer was the muzzle of a .38 revolver, aimed squarely between the eyes of Diane Marlow!

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CHILLED quite out of her wits, Diane couldn't even quiver at sight of the gun. She went numb all over and Quade wasn't slow to recognize it. Disdainfully, the fellow dropped the girl's limp wrist and caught the envelope with its attendant slip of paper, before the objects could drop from Diane's falling hand.

In professional style, Quade stepped back, keeping his gun trained on Diane, but at the same time he made a half turn so that he could read the slip of paper. Evidently Quade understood the significance of the verse and

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gave it a criminal interpretation, for he gave an unpleasant laugh.

In her turn, Diane interpreting Quade, her stressed mind going in heavily for detail, curiously enough. He was like something all off-key, this man Quade. He was handsome, but with just a brutal touch; dark, but with a trace of the sallow. His eyes, though keen, were suspicious, while his smile had a bitter curl.

Those features were still evident, even when Quade turned his back to the light to focus fully on Diane. Oily though the man's speech became. Diane still caught the hard note in it.

"How did you find me?" queried Quade. "And why?"

After a few lip motions, Diane found her voice. It came in whispery blurt.

"You dropped a stub – a shoe receipt – I read the name on it. It was – it was –"

"Joey's Shoe Parlor," interrupted Quade. "You don't have to cover up for him – unless you told him something."

Emphatically, Diane shook her head.

"I haven't told anybody – anything."

It was the truth and it seemed the safest thing to say, for Diane could picture Quade's gun pumping away so often that she'd no longer hear it, if he even suspected that she had blabbed. Quade's satisfied smile relieved Diane somewhat, until he asked sharply:

"Where did you find this?"

Diane pointed feebly to the bottom of the door.

"Do you know what it means?"

To that, Diane shook her head, but Quade must have caught some hesitancy, for he snarled, low:

"Out with it! What are you thinking?"

"The only thing," replied Diane, surprised at her automatic answer. "It means somebody else you're supposed to rob, like the broker and the jeweler."

Quade's smile had much of the leer as he nodded his agreement.

"You're a cute guesser," confirmed Quade, as he thrust the envelope and the printed paper into his pocket. With his same hand he brought out a key. "Only don't worry, kid. You're my accomplice – or didn't you know?"

"I know."

"Then let's go in the apartment." Quade was unlocking the door, but keeping the gun well in hand. "We can talk it over there. After all, you're in a jam like I am, even if it doesn't apply."

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Why Diane hesitated on the threshold, she didn't quite yet realize. However, hesitation didn't help, for Quade's gun muzzle found the middle of Diane's back with a nudge so earnest that she stumbled hastily across the threshold. Next, Diane was in a corner where Quade gestured her as he nudged the door shut with his elbow. Pocketing his key, he deftly transferred the gun from his right hand to his left and sat down at a telephone, which had its dial turned away from Diane's view.

Juggling the gun lightly with his left, Quade dialed a number with his right. Then:

"This is Lee..." Quade evidently recognized the voice across the wire. "I'm back at my place... Yeah, I'm all right, but the dame is here... The dame that was in the cab this afternoon... Yeah, she found out who I was..."

"No, she says she hasn't blabbed... I guess if she had, the coppers would have shown here instead of her... Of course she knows I pulled the jewel job, but she found out something else... That's right, she found the letter with the King Cole verse..."

There, Quade paused to let the other speaker have a chance. Diane could see the pleased glitter that swept the man's hard eyes, in the light from the table lamp. At last, Quade's spreading grin seemed to set itself in ugly style.

"You know," said Quade, into the telephone, "you hit it right on the nose... That's right, the dame figured it meant the next job I'm to do... Let the other boys handle it? Sure I will... A cinch, because the dame hasn't any idea who King Cole is... But she knows who I am..."

Quade's final tone made Diane very uneasy, particularly when he hung up with a slam. Switching his gun again, Quade gestured to the telephone with his left hand.

"You know what he said?" demanded Quade. "He said it didn't matter, your finding that letter. The boys will clean up the next job before you can even tell the police to start guessing about King Cole. As for me, I'll have time to lam before you can tell them about me either. They're likely to have me tagged pretty soon, anyhow."

"So all I'm going to do is tie you up, nice and tight. That dress you're wearing looks strong enough to do for rope and your scarf will make a good gag. Maybe you can work loose by morning and meanwhile you can thank yourself for not talking to the coppers. Otherwise –"

There was no reason for Quade to continue. Diane not only understood but realized now why she had faltered when he started to shove her into the apartment. In here, shots would be muffled, which they wouldn't be in the hall. All Quade would have to do would be to close one window which Diane had noticed was open.

Quade's last words across the telephone fitted. The phrase, "But she knows who I am" could well have been Diane's death warrant. It wasn't mercy on Quade's part that Diane was going to live, but just simple common sense, plus efficiency.

"I'm to use my own judgment," stated Quade. "That's what I was told over the telephone. Since my own judgment says it's quieter to tie you up than shoot you, I'm letting you live. Only remember, screams make more noise than gunshots."

This time, Diane was observing the blackness that accompanied Quade's approach. His back was toward the lamp, blocking off its light and the whole room seemed to darken, including the open window. Maybe Quade had forgotten that the window was open, but it wouldn't help if he had. Diane didn't care if people heard gunshots, because by the time they did, she would be full of bullets.

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There was something monstrous, grotesque about Quade as his hand stretched out in the darkness that his bulking form produced. Just managing to repress a scream, Diane wrenched away instinctively as that hand clutched the neck of her dress. The result was that Quade's grip produced a ripping tug and he snarled again as he pounced forward to make sure that Diane didn't tear herself free.

It was then that the shriek came.

Not from Diane, but from somewhere in the outer darkness, a screech that transformed itself into the long, troubled wail of a police car's siren!

Diane came full about at that, horrified and rigid, with her arms spread against the wall. Quade saw her as a figure hung with tattered sleeves, then lifted his gun toward the girl's wide, frozen eyes that looked like a double target calling for a shot midway between.

Quade's judgment now was death, for that approaching wail symbolized that Diane had lied when she said she hadn't told; and having told too much too soon, she could tell something more – and also too soon – should she live. A spurt of flame was due from that gun muzzle that barely glittered as it thrust forward from the darkness.

A death spurt would have flashed if the surrounding blackness hadn't hurled itself more swiftly. To Diane, what happened seemed the result of her own mental whirl.

Quade's aim ended with a jolt that sent him flying upward, backward, gun first. By the time he tugged the trigger, his gun merely spouted, for its target was the ceiling. Writhing, flaying madly at nothingness, Quade seemed a portion of Diane's distorted notions until he finished with a sideward reel that took him from the path of the lamplight.

Then Diane saw that blackness was alive. It had transformed itself into a cloaked figure of a tall, limber fighter who wore a slouch hat, and who was swinging a heavy automatic with a gloved fist, to meet the wild downward slash of Quade's revolver.

Loud came the wail of the approaching siren, like the howl of some wandering banshee, announcing that the impossible had become real. Such was Diane's impression of her first meeting with this rescuer known as The Shadow!

III

GROTESQUE against the lamplight, Quade and his half-visible antagonist gave the slow, dreamlike effect of figures cavorting in the glare of a blinking spotlight. The Shadow's turns and twists were responsible for the blinker illusion, but the process operated in reverse.

Every time The Shadow came in front of Quade, the latter disappeared, only to come in sight again, like something disgorged by space, whenever The Shadow completed the roundabout. Of course then The Shadow vanished so that Quade seemed to be struggling with thin air.

Thus it was from Diane's outlook and with her distorted view came the equally fantastic accompaniment of arriving wails that no longer seemed like police sirens, but rather the cries of ghouls, penetrating to what had become Diane's own little world.

Sirens they were, however, and Quade knew it, which was why he kept punctuating his struggle with gun-shots that The Shadow constantly diverted toward the ceiling. Along with the low, taunting laugh that

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The Shadow used as a retort for every shot, the figure in black was becoming snowy.

The reason was the plaster that showered from the ceiling under the urge of Quade's wasted bullets. It was indeed odd, the way The Shadow was becoming a living statue, growing out of nothingness. Quade seemed to be struggling with a granite bust that laughed.

Shrill whistles now, and shouts. The pound of footsteps coming up into the apartment house. Quade's shots had been heard, the police weren't losing time in getting to their goal. True to Quade's own fear, as expressed to Diane, the law had found the criminal.

And Quade was desperate.

Slugging hard with his now empty gun, Quade missed The Shadow completely. In fact, The Shadow wasn't there at all; the object that stopped Quade's lunge was the table with the lamp. Both crashed and as the light vanished, the clatter in the room was drowned by a louder smashing at the door.

The police were here.

In that last fleeting moment, Diane saw a huge mass of blackness grow in her direction. It loomed to vast proportions, only to be suddenly absorbed by the complete darkness that filled the room. Diane forgot that The Shadow was a friend and began the long-restrained scream that Quade had warned against.

The scream was smothered and Diane was whirled by swift, powerful hands, over to the window, where, suddenly released, she found herself teetered on the sill, aimed for a forward pitch into the drizzly darkness of the courtyard below. Something vaulted past her, but Diane didn't realize it in her mad effort to halt her topple.

Diane failed. Overbalanced, she went headlong, delayed but briefly as her torn dress caught on a window catch and then gave. She landed squarely in the same strong arms that had hauled her to the window, for it was The Shadow who had gone past her, to be ready below. Then, like something she seemed to be leaving behind her, Diane could hear the clicks of her own high heels as The Shadow rushed her out through a narrow passage which he seemingly discovered through some radar sense that was peculiarly his own.

As if on schedule, a taxicab rolled up, took Diane as a passenger under The Shadow's rapid urge, and whisked away, picking a zigzag course through the next few blocks, to avoid converging police cars. All during that mad race, Diane thought she could hear the echoes of The Shadow's parting laugh, a tone so encouraging, that the girl supposed her rescuer had accompanied her.

Amazement was Diane's when the cab reached a lighted avenue and she looked for the mysterious personage called The Shadow but the seat was vacant beside her.

There was still work for The Shadow, back at Quade's. This was one of those instances where the police, gaining a lead to a suspected criminal, had started on their quest only to be preceded by The Shadow. In rescuing Diane, The Shadow had let the law catch up; now his purpose was to block off Quade should the fellow try to escape by the route along which The Shadow had piloted Diane.

Except that escape was no longer Quade's idea. Climbing from the wreckage of the table, he was gripping the heavy metal lamp that his hand had found in the darkness. The door was crashing under the ramming efforts of the police and Quade's mad, vengeful mind was concentrated on repelling those invaders.

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As the door burst, hurtling men inward with it, Quade sprang into the light that poured dimly from the hall and swung the lamp like a great bludgeon, intending to brain a few adversaries before they could stop him. Cloaked shoulders were coming up above the window-sill and with his timely return The Shadow despatched an equally timely shot that jolted Quade's arm in mid-air, diverting the downsweep of the lamp.

The invading police were timely too; their shots came a few split seconds after The Shadow's. But as the persons menaced, the police didn't draw a line at merely stopping Quade's swing. They stopped him with it, riddling him with close-range fire that crumpled him upon the floor.

The Shadow eased down into the darkness, listening intently to what followed. The police were dragging Quade into the light; in searching him for a reserve gun, they found the envelope and its printed slip pertaining to King Cole. His head half-lifted, Quade stared with glazed eyes and coughed spasmodic words.

"Try and help King Cole." The broken tone still carried Quade's characteristic snarl. "It won't do any good – not even if you find him. Not now, it won't – it wasn't my job – not this one –"

A sturdy police inspector was hauling Quade's ashen face up into the light. From the window, The Shadow recognized the swarthy, dead-pan countenance of Joe Cardona, top man among inspectors.

"You're going to live, Quade," Cardona emphasized. "So whatever you tell us now may be used for you, instead of against you. We figured there were others beside you. If they're aiming to rob somebody tonight, tell us who he is. If we stop them, it goes to your credit."

Quade's curling lips set tightly; then relaxed. His eyes went shut and his voice came with a wheeze.

"You're lying, Joe," gasped Quade. "Lying – and you know it. I'm through – so it won't help me – whatever I tell you. But it won't hurt – won't hurt my pals – if I tell you –"

"Go on," prompted Cardona. "I want to know about the job. Who's this King Cole that's being robbed tonight?"

Quade's lips opened for the last time. All they said was:

"Wouldn't – wouldn't you just like to know!"

Letting Quade's stiffening body thump the floor, Cardona pounced for the telephone and called headquarters. He began giving orders and brisk ones.

"Instruct all patrol cars," announced Cardona. "Tell them to check all neighborhoods for clues to a robbery that may be under way right now, if it isn't already done. Particularly wealthy neighborhoods – and another thing – check on apartment houses and hotels, in case the crime is happening there.

"Pay special attention to any phone calls that come in, even if they do sound screwy. Somebody may spot something and try to inform us. Let me know of any developments. I'll give you the number where you can reach me."

Reading off the number of Quade's phone, Cardona hung up and gave a stolid stare at the dead man. Quade wouldn't have liked that look if he'd been alive to see it. Mechanically, Cardona flipped the paper that bore the printed verse.

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"Like finding a needle in a haystack," gruffed Joe, "and the only man who can tell us what it's good for, can't talk." Wheeling to the surrounding cops, Cardona snapped the order: "Search the place! Look for the stolen stuff if it's still here. But more important, see what you can find that will give us a lead to the next job!"

The police were ransacking the room with no success when the phone bell jangled. Cardona caught it at the end of the first ring. The call was from headquarters and what Cardona heard put him into prompt action.

"Let's go!" Joe told the officers. "They just got word of the robbery that links with the King Cole message. Old Artemus Hapwood, the chain store owner, found bound and gagged in his house off Park Avenue. His safe was rifled" – Cardona stared again at Quade – "and I'll bet it traces to this guy and his crowd!"

By the time the police were on their way, the courtyard was as vacant as the window above it. As before, The Shadow was profiting by information that had reached the law.

Crime's latest scene was due to receive a visit from The Shadow!

IV

THE Hapwood residence was ablaze with light when Inspector Cardona reached it and outside was standing a big official car which belonged to Police Commissioner Weston. Swarthy-faced Joe wasn't pleased when he saw the Commissioner's car, but he contented himself with the thought that he would have his innings later.

Entering the house, Cardona reached the living room and found Commissioner Weston already in conference with Artemus Hapwood. The living room was ample and so was Hapwood, but Cardona was more interested in the circumstances of the recent robbery.

That pleased the commissioner, because he had expected it. A man of efficiency to the points of his military mustache, Commissioner Weston liked his subordinates to be thorough in their work and Cardona wasn't disappointing him. Eyes roving the room, Cardona took in everything and finally settled on the chair where Hapwood was seated.

"Very good, inspector," approved Weston, briskly. "I expected you here, so I preserved the scene intact. Mr. Hapwood was right where you see him now when we released him." Big and portly, Hapwood was occupying the only chair that was really large enough to hold him. It was a heavy chair and well upholstered, but the arms were separate, not part of the chair proper. Noting trunk straps lying beside the chair, Cardona recognized that they must have been used to bind Hapwood's arms and legs, while a large silk handkerchief, tightly knotted, had obviously served as a gag.

Beside the chair was a table with a telephone, but that didn't interest Cardona as much as a low-built serving stand on which stood a bottle with a huge brandy glass and an oversized meerschaum pipe beside it, plus a tobacco humidor.

Weston seemed annoyed when Cardona neglected the telephone. To Hapwood, the commissioner said:

"Tell the inspector everything that happened and how you managed to call for help."

"The bounders caught me unaware," boomed Hapwood, lifting his double chin. "There were two of them, brawny brutes, both wearing masks."

Cardona nodded, still staring at the serving stand.

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"I'd just finished a phone call," announced Hapwood. "Not here, but upstairs. Talked to a couple of business associates, you know, like I often do. I came downstairs wanting a drink and a smoke, never thinking the servants had all gone out."

Cardona put a prompt query.

"How many servants?"

"Three," replied Hapwood. "They'll all have excuses, I'm careless that way. However, while I was shouting that I wanted a smoke and a drink, who answered but these masked chaps. I looked up and there they were."

To illustrate, Hapwood looked toward the door and fixed his gaze there. Weston turned to see a tall man who had just entered.

"Hello, Cranston!" exclaimed the commissioner. "I was sure you would get the message that I left at the club. A very interesting case, this."

Hapwood lifted his heavy eyebrows and queried:

"Lamont Cranston?"

With a nod of acknowledgment, Weston completed the introduction. Hapwood, a man of big business, had naturally heard of Cranston, the gentleman about town who had a singular ability for investing in curious enterprises that always paid off. But Hapwood and Cranston formed a striking contrast.

Big of neck, paunch, face and hands; Hapwood had all the makings of a jolly fat man, except that he was very serious at present, though he did allow a smile to spread across his massive face at the rare privilege of being introduced to the famous Mr. Cranston.

In his turn, Cranston was tall, with a calm face that was as impassive as a mask. He looked positively thin at the present moment, but that was only because of the contrast with Hapwood. When Hapwood extended his hand like a seal's flipper to receive Cranston's long, thin-fingered shake, Cardona wasn't surprised to see the fat man wince. There was plenty of steel in that grip of Cranston's, as Cardona knew from experience.

Since Weston often called Cranston in on cases like this, Cardona didn't connect the commissioner's friend with events at Quade's. There was a link, however, in the form of a long stretch of blackness on the floor, ending in a hawkish silhouette. But Cardona wasn't thinking of Cranston's shadow in terms of a personage called The Shadow, who – so far as Cardona knew – hadn't figured in connection with the recent robberies.

Cardona didn't know that when he'd phoned Weston very recently regarding the lead to Quade, that Cranston had just been leaving the commissioner's office. The lead had come from a stool pigeon and Cranston often checked such information when it was relayed to Weston, but on that point too Cardona was ignorant.

His introduction to Cranston complete, Hapwood continued with his story.

"There's the smoke and the drink" – Hapwood pointed to the pipe and the brandy – "but I wasn't to get them. The masked men threatened me with guns as soon as I shouted for my three servants. Then they bound me in my chair and gagged me.

"After that, they broke open my safe" – Hapwood gave a depreciating gesture to the item that he named – "and took everything that was in it. Nothing of value, however, because my business associates hadn't

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delivered the cash that went with our deal."

Cardona studied the safe and understood why Hapwood didn't rate it highly. The thing looked more like a phonograph cabinet than a safe, and it conformed to the furniture in the room. Three good prods with a jimmy had been enough to settle it.

"They took a lot of papers," remarked Hapwood – "Letters, estimates, price lists – but mostly old stuff. They cleared out, those big fellows, and left me wondering how I could help myself."

Pausing, Hapwood leaned from his chair and thumped the telephone angrily.

"The old-fashioned kind were better," he argued. "The type without dials. I lifted the phone off the hook with my teeth and in the old days, I'd have gotten the operator. This time I had to dial.

"I did it, though." Hapwood swelled with pride. "I did it with my nose. The silk gag is thin, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to use my teeth to lift the phone, and being thin, the gag was something I could mutter through. I kept saying 'Police – police –' until the operator understood."

With that, Hapwood relaxed in his chair, picked up the silk gag and rubbed his forehead with it. Reaching for the brandy, the big man poured himself a drink which, though sizeable, looked pitifully tiny in the mammoth brandy glass.

Cardona was making notes.

"At what time did this happen, Mr. Hapwood?"

"I made the call upstairs at eight o'clock," stated Hapwood. "Tarval and Alcott – they're my associates – were at the Hotel Metrolite. I told them to keep the money until tomorrow. When I came downstairs it was about ten minutes after eight. I guess I was all trussed up by quarter-past and those robbers couldn't have stayed more than five minutes after that. Anyway, it was half-past eight when I put the call through."

"The operator checked the time," put in Weston. "You can make a note of that, Inspector."

Jotting with his pencil, Cardona was watching Hapwood finish his brandy. With his other fat hand, the big man was reaching for his pipe. Then, laying the glass aside, Hapwood opened the humidior and stuffed tobacco into the meerschaum. Lighting the pipe, he drew a good supply of smoke and sat back quite contented.

"All's well that ends well," decided Hapwood. "I'll leave the capture of those criminals to the law. Only there's one thing" – he tilted his head and narrowed his eyes to a twinkle – "don't try to connect this case with those other robberies you're tracking down, those stolen bonds and jewels. There wasn't just one masked man here tonight; there were two. What's more, they didn't get what they came after."

"I get it, Mr. Hapwood," returned Cardona, displaying a rare thing for him, a grin. "It's funny, isn't it, the way we police always follow the same old line."

"Yes, very funny."

"And we never think we're wrong, do we?"

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Cardona was actually laughing now and Hapwood was catching the mood. Once Hapwood started to laugh, he couldn't stop, as he demonstrated.

"Nobody ever thinks they're wrong." Hapwood was shaking, undulating from his fat paunch up to his heavy jowl. "That reminds me of a very funny story, if you want to hear it. It's about a king who could do no wrong –"

"Not King Cole," interposed Cardona. "You've heard of him, haven't you?"

"This wasn't King Cole –"

"The merry old soul," broke in Cardona. "He called for his pipe" – Joe pointed to the meerschaum – "and he called for his bowl" – here Cardona gestured to the brandy glass – "and how many servants do you have, Hapwood?"

"Three." Hapwood began to control his laughter. "Why do you ask?"

"Because they're the Fiddlers Three," returned Cardona. "You called for them like you did for your meerschaum and your brandy glass."

It was Weston's turn to interrupt.

"Look here, inspector," began the commissioner, "when you start analyzing crime in terms of nursery rhymes –"

"Only I didn't start it," returned Cardona. "Somebody else did, the man behind these robberies, in other words, the brain. Here's the message that he mailed to Lee Quade, covering tonight's job, commissioner."

A full minute later, Weston was still staring at the clipped page of the Mother Goose book, while Lamont Cranston, calm and impassive as ever, was gazing at Cardona, who stood with arms triumphantly folded.

There was approval in Cranston's eyes, those eyes that were really The Shadow's, a commendation of the work that Inspector Cardona had so far accomplished.

V

LATE the next afternoon, Diane Marlow had a date with a gentleman named Lamont Cranston. It was a very important date, as Diane had learned through devious channels. Technically, Diane was still a fugitive from justice, which had a great deal to do with her acceptance of certain terms now in force.

As she sat with Cranston over cocktails in the lounge at the Hotel Metrolite, Diane briefly reviewed events since her departure from Quade's last night.

Diane wasn't stopping at the Metrolite. The cab had taken her to another and quieter hotel, where the cabby had told her she was expected. In the room reserved for her, Diane had received a mysterious phone call stating that "our man" would phone her before noon the next day and would help her with her problems.

Today the call had come from "our man" who had turned out to be a gentleman named R. Mann, the initial standing for Rutledge. He was an investment broker who told Diane that he could recommend "certain securities" which was another statement that could be taken two ways. So Diane had gone to Mann's office, found him to be a methodical, owlsh person who talked in encouraging terms and finally arranged her

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appointment with Cranston.

All this, Diane was sure, had been engineered by the mysterious rescuer known as The Shadow, a descriptive term that Diane automatically applied to him. Diane had proven so willing to accept guarded advice, that by now Cranston was coming straight to the point.

"Three robberies," reviewed Cranston. "The police found the important link and broke it; Lee Quade."

Nodding, Diane furnished a whimsical smile.

"You don't think I'm an important link?"

"You might do as a temporary," replied Cranston, blandly. "You don't link with crime, but you do link with Quade. Perhaps that will bridge the gap."

"How?"

"Because Quade knew too much. The police did his associates a favor by eliminating him. But for all Quade's associates know, you may have been his actual accomplice."

"But they don't know who I am!"

"Then they should find out," analyzed Cranston. "That will make them show their hands. You will then prove instrumental in bringing them to justice and that will clear you of any suspicion of complicity, in the mind of the law."

This made excellent sense to Diane.

"How do I go about it?"

"Very simply," Cranston replied. "Forget the first two robberies for the present. Somebody's bonds were stolen from a broker's office; somebody else's gems taken from a jeweler. There's a bit of a mystery in both cases; the owners of the stolen goods claim Quade didn't take much of value. Description of the loot is vague and Quade didn't have any of it at his place. Therefore we can assume that he passed it to his two confederates."

"The pair who robbed King Cole?"

"That's right," smiled Cranston. "But let us refer to him as Artemus Hapwood, since the Mother Goose angle is still unknown to the public. I was just fortunate enough to hear about it through my friend, the police commissioner."

The reference to the commissioner pleased Diane. It made her feel that her future task would be semi-official at least and that Cranston would vouch for whatever she did, should the law prove quizzical.

"Robbery failed at Hapwood's," continued Cranston, "because two men had not yet delivered certain funds that they owed him. The names of those two men are Roy Tarvel and Oscar Alcott. They are staying here at the Hotel Metrolite."

"Then the money is here too?"

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"Possibly. Tarvel and Alcott are buying up some of Hapwood's chain stores, since he has decided to retire from that business. Only I am not too sure that Tarvel and Alcott intend to go into that business themselves."

"No?" inquired Diane. "Why not?"

"Look over there," responded Cranston, "and you will see why."

Diane looked in the direction that Cranston indicated with an ash-flick of his thin cigar. She saw two men chatting at a table; one middle-aged, the other youthful. They were distinctly different, for the older man was serious, bushy-browed and glowery, while the younger looked genial, handsome and carefree.

Nevertheless, they had one quality in common. Both were brawny of build. The older man looked like a football coach who had been a star fullback in his day, talking to a protege who rated as a modern gridiron ace. Diane's mind was running to such terms when Cranston interrupted her thoughts.

"The older man," stated Cranston, "is Winslow Thorne, who hopes to build up a chain store empire larger than Hapwood's ever was. He is worth a few million dollars and that is why he looks so grouchy."

That brought a smile from Diane as she nodded.

"The younger man," added Cranston, "is Rex Cardiff, the black sheep who squandered his share of a very large family fortune. He is broke and therefore looks happy."

Laughing lightly, Diane halted suddenly, realizing that this might be much more serious than she supposed.

"It has been hinted," continued Cranston, "that Tarvel and Alcott, the men who bought some of Hapwood's chain store holdings, are merely middle-men – or more crudely, speculators – who intended to unload at a profit."

That rang home to Diane. Her eyes drifted in the direction of the glowery man, while Cranston, his words in keeping with Diane's thoughts, calmly continued:

"Winslow Thorne would be a logical buyer, since he has always envied the Hapwood chain. But we mustn't forget that Artemus Hapwood is a rather cagey gentleman himself. He certainly didn't build his enterprises for Thorne's benefit."

"I see," said Diane slowly. "He may have sold those few stores just to see where they eventually wind up."

"Exactly," agreed Cranston, "and if they landed with Rex Cardiff, member of a very wealthy family, it might look as though Cardiff's relatives were financing the deal."

"Then Rex Cardiff is simply fronting for Winslow Thorne!"

"Something of the sort is in the wind. I can't see any other reason why those two should be together."

Neither could Diane, the more she looked at them. Thorne was all business, vehemently so, as he leaned across his table and pounded a healthy fist against the flat of his other palm. Cardiff, in contrast, looked carefree and indifferent, wearing a smile that reminded Diane of the Jack of Hearts, the sort of smile that was polite but empty.

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"Conclusions are dangerous things," came Cranston's calm-toned opinion. "There could be another reason behind that curious association of Thorne and Cardiff, something else that they might be trying to cover up. In any case, it brings us back to Tarvel and Alcott" – there was a slight pause in Cranston's voice – "and their money."

Before Diane could begin new calculations, Cranston carried his own theme further.

"They are holding a dinner tonight," stated Cranston. "Tarvel and Alcott. It will be your opportunity to meet them."

"You mean I'm invited?" exclaimed Diane.

"You will be," assured Cranston. "They're important people now, those two. You'll realize it when you see them. At least they'll look important; that's part of their business."

"Will Thorne and Cardiff be there?"

"Of course. They represent money – either their own or someone else's – and those are the kind of guests who are wanted."

"Including yourself?"

Diane's query brought a slight smile from Cranston. His response simulated indifference.

"I have another engagement," he declared. "A very important one; I might even term it a mission. However I have delegated a certain gentleman to meet you at the party. He will introduce himself."

"But how will he recognize me?"

"By the flowers you will be wearing. They are waiting at this shop" – Cranston handed Diane a florist's card – "and you can stop by for them, or have them delivered to your hotel, as you prefer."

They were leaving now, Diane and Cranston at the latter's gesture, and it seemed good policy, since so far neither Thorne nor Cardiff had looked their way and it would be better that they should not recall Diane as somebody they had seen, when they came to meet her at the party. As they reached the street, where Cranston turned to hail a cab for Diane, the girl asked:

"That mission you mentioned, is it very important? I think you said it was –"

"And it is," interposed Cranston. "Very important."

"More so than the party?"

"Of course, otherwise I would be there. It is important to you, by the way."

"If you mean you're investigating those robberies" – Diane's tone was breathless – "you certainly should tell me where you intend to start."

"At the public library."

Diane's eyes widened as Cranston helped her in the cab that he had just captured.

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"Looking through old documents?" she queried in parting. "The sort that might provide a new clue?"

"The very sort," assured Cranston. Then, closing the cab door, he added through the window: "If you need me, I can be reached in the children's section, looking over the various editions of Mother Goose."

To anyone else, that might have seemed a jest, but Diane heard it with a shudder. It was a reminder that crime still might be near at hand, ready to strike again tonight.

If crime did strike, Diane could only hope that she would have another meeting with The Shadow!

VI

THE attractive brunette who entered the florist's shop gave a pleased glance at the corsage of violets that was lying on a certain shelf. The brunette's name was Margo Lane and she was very fond of Lamont Cranston, except at intervals.

This was one of those intervals.

Not having seen Lamont all day, Margo had heard about him from friends who had seen him. Those friends had made slight mention of a blonde in Cranston's company, hoping no doubt to stir Margo's jealousy.

They had succeeded, but in a way they didn't recognize.

With robberies rampant, Margo knew that Cranston would be on the trail. When it came to adding the feminine touch to crime hunting, Margo felt the privilege was hers. It looked as though she had been shelved, just like a bunch of violets; therefore, something should be done about it.

Margo took the violets.

"Sorry, Miss Lane!" The fussy florist was there in a jiffy. "Those weren't left for you. Someone is stopping by —"

"For violets?" Margo gave a surprised stare. "You must be mistaken."

"No, Mr. Cranston said —"

The florist halted, very much confused. Margo straightened everything with a light laugh.

"I know all about it," she said. "The girl is a friend of mine. I told Lamont to order some flowers for her, but never violets! Those miniature roses would be much better. She really loves roses, but of course Lamont wouldn't know."

So the miniature roses went on the shelf where Cranston's orders were always placed, but Margo didn't wait to meet her friend. Instead she stayed across the street, watching for the first blonde customer who came out wearing a corsage of roses.

Thus Margo took up Diane's trail, right to the Hotel Metrolite and up to the private dining room where Messrs. Tarvel and Alcott were giving their party.

It wasn't difficult to crash the gate, not for anyone like Margo. In fact, she was promptly welcomed by a dapper gentleman who introduced himself as Roy Tarvel and took it for granted that Margo was one of the

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invited guests.

Margo wasn't greatly impressed. Tarvel was a flimsy lightweight with a pussy-cat mustache that accentuated his silly smirk. Brushing him off, Margo thought she had accomplished something until she met Oscar Alcott.

This gentleman was as short as Tarvel but looked more so because of his stubby build. He was bulbous, bulging from his tuxedo vest and wing-tip collar, which looked as though he hadn't worn them for years. Alcott specialized in what was technically called an ogle and Margo liked neither his gaze nor his grin. Resisting the notion of patting Alcott on his bald head and telling him to run along, Margo decided she wanted no part of the party.

Gentlemen preferred blondes and if Diane, the unknown blonde, thought these were gentlemen, she was welcome to them. In fact, Margo wished she'd let Diane have her violets until, outside the dining room, Margo happened to meet Harry Vincent.

He was a friend of Cranston, this young man, which meant he also was an agent of The Shadow. Where Harry went things often happened, which pleased Margo that much more, particularly when Harry drew her aside, with one eye on the violets.

"So it's you," observed Harry. "I thought I was going to meet a stranger."

"I'm comparatively such," returned Margo, "considering how long it's been since I've seen you."

"Let's get acquainted again," suggested Harry, "while we go in and introduce ourselves."

"I have already," said Margo. "What's more, I've been looking at the place-cards on the table. There are none there for us."

This was literally true. What Margo didn't add was that she had seen a place-card bearing Cranston's name. She felt sure that Lamont had arranged for Harry to take his place, but there was no use pressing that opinion. The regular dining room was just across the corridor and Margo was quite sure that she and Harry could keep excellent tabs on persons who attended the private party, particularly those who came late or left early.

She promptly sold Harry on that idea, playing on his ignorance of the situation and meanwhile thinking what fun she would have at Lamont's expense later.

In the private dining room, Diane had found her place card. It was a cute contrivance bearing her name and with it a pasted clipping from a newspaper comic that bore a sketch of a blonde girl. All the place-cards were pasted up with quips, though who had arranged this, Diane didn't know. Certainly neither Tarvel nor Alcott was responsible; not only did they lack imagination and humor, they were paying for the party and expected the hired help to do the brain-work.

To Diane's right was the card with Cranston's name, bearing the caricature that went with a brand of cigarettes, showing a gentleman in high silk-hat and monocle. On the left, Diane saw a card that made her laugh: it bore the picture of a boy scout and carried the name of Rex Cardiff.

A laugh responded and looking up, Diane saw Cardiff himself. He was taller than Diane had supposed and brawny in proportion. Cardiff was handsome too, though at close range, his face showed the sag of dissipation. Cardiff corrected that when he smiled, even though Diane still thought of the Jack of Hearts. "That's me," chuckled Cardiff, "just the perennial boy scout. A good deed a day is my motto. Come to think of it" – he snapped his fingers – "I'm still short today's good deed. Any suggestions?"

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Diane looked blank and shook her head.

"Maybe we can think up one later," Cardiff decided. "You've done yours, just by meeting me. Don't go away, will you?"

Diane shook her head. Glancing past her, Cardiff saw a waiter removing Cranston's place card. He gave another of his habitual smiles.

"That makes it official," Cardiff declared. "I'm your escort for the evening. So come along, Miss Rose Petals, and we'll meet a few people."

That facetious reference to Diane's flowers was just the touch that convinced her that Cardiff was the man she was supposed to meet. Cranston had specified neither who the man would be, nor what flowers Diane would wear as token of recognition. Apparently, Cranston liked to spring surprises and this was really one, Diane gaining Cardiff as an escort.

Still, it fitted with Diane's notions, when she considered it. Cranston wanted to get at the heart of things and certainly Cardiff was a lead to Winslow Thorne, the man who rated as Artemus Hapwood's rival.

They met Thorne as they strolled around the table and Cardiff, having learned Diane's real name by that time, introduced her casually to the chain store magnate. As with Cardiff, Diane was impressed by Thorne's brawn, particularly because Thorne was older. When Thorne turned to chat with Tarvel and Alcott, he really towered in comparison. If measured by cubic standards, Thorne's bulk probably exceeded the combined proportions of those two shorties.

Since Cardiff was still on the rove, Diane thought it polite to follow along. Having finished introductions, Cardiff began glancing at place-cards where chairs were still vacant. He looked at one; then suddenly his eyes roved toward the door. A moment later, Cardiff gripped Diane's elbow.

"I won't say don't look now," undertoned Cardiff, "since everybody else is looking. But in case you don't know, that's Mary Bandom, the movie actress."

Following Cardiff's gaze, Diane saw the celebrity in question. A star of too many years ago, the famous Miss Bandom was still beautiful, away from strong light, which she had a trick of avoiding. The trick lay in her jewels; they fairly scintillated. A trifle on the plump side, Miss Bandom counted on the jewels to discount that also.

"She's stopping here at the Metrolite," Cardiff told Diane. "Of course she'd be invited to this party and you can be sure she wouldn't refuse. Bandom still tries to please her public – what's left of it."

Miss Bandom was swishing around the end to reach her side of the table, which was opposite where Cardiff and Diane belonged. Cardiff nudged Diane as a hint they'd better be going, but Diane couldn't resist a look at the place-card belonging to the actress.

Diane's stare became a long one.

Attached to the card that bore the name Miss Bandom was a clipping of an unusual sort, though Diane had seen its like before. Not from a newspaper, but from a book, that clipping. It was in rhyme, the familiar doggerel of Mother Goose.

The verse ran:

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Mary, Mary, quite contrary,

How does your garden grow?

With silver bells and cockle–shells

And tulips all to a row.

Those words were still running through Diane's thoughts when Cardiff piloted her around to her chair. Once seated, Diane could only stare at Miss Brandom, or more specifically at the great, jeweled brooch that formed the principal item in the actress's arsenal of dazzling gems.

The brooch was platinum and the setting was accentuated by sparkling diamonds. But diamonds weren't all; the brooch bore pearls, large handsome ones. Finally, it was studded with rubies, that added a glowing red to the galaxy.

Diane's mind kept strumming:

"Silver bells and cockle–shells and tulips all in a row."

Diamonds for silver bells, pearls for cockle–shells, and rubies for tulips!

All in a row!

Cardiff's voice undertoned into Diane's ear as he passed the celery and olives.

"If I think what you think," that low voice said, "there's somebody's target for tonight. And I mean somebody who has been plucking bonds and jewels – even if they did miss out on cash."

Diane found herself beginning a nod.

"I'd be doing my good deed," added Cardiff, his tone still suppressed, "if I told you to stop staring before people credit you with too many ideas. But I'll save that deed for Miss Brandom, provided you want to help. We'll convoy her back where she belongs, after this soiree is over."

Wrenching her gaze from the glitter, Diane concentrated on a plate of turtle soup, but sidled a nod to Cardiff, between spoonfuls. With Cardiff, Diane felt sure she could help stop crime if it struck tonight.

Somehow, it all seemed to fit with a plan devised by The Shadow!

VII

DINNER was over and with its courses, Diane Marlow felt that she had fully digested the facts of crime. From her summary, Diane felt sure that a new robber was to strike.

It was all so very obvious.

Behind crime, of course, was a brain belonging to some person of importance who knew enough about various prominent people to learn where their valuables were going to be at specified times.

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This brain used a compact organization, and at first the man assigned to actual robbery had been Lee Quade. Bold, daring and speedy, Quade had whisked away a batch of bonds and a stack of jewels on two separate occasions, only to pass them along to other hands.

Doubtless there had been Mother Goose messages on those two occasions, but neither had turned up. The first evidence of such had come when two other workers had been assigned in Quade's stead to rob Artemus Hapwood, jocularly described as King Cole.

Now crime was due again tonight, of that Diane was likewise positive, for a new Mother Goose order was on hand specifying Mary Brandom under the thin guise of Mary Quite Contrary.

But who were to be the perpetrators?

Diane was thoroughly stumped.

Starting with Roy Tarvel and Oscar Alcott, Diane immediately marked those puny men as ineligible. She had read the newspaper accounts of the Hapwood robbery and remembered that Hapwood had been talking to those two customers by telephone just before masked men invaded his home and that Tarvel and Alcott had been right here at the Hotel Metrolite.

Diane had noted specially that Hapwood testified that he was the person who made the call. Diane prided herself on checking that point, for it proved that Tarvel and Alcott must have been at the Metrolite. Even a pair of clever crooks couldn't have faked an incoming call.

To even think of drab characters like Tarvel and Alcott as clever was worth a smile. As for regarding them as crooks, that was doubly ridiculous, since it was their undelivered money that robbers had sought at Hapwood's and again their physical proportions could not compare with Hapwood's description of the two brawnies who had overpowered him.

Looking over the other guests, Diane naturally thought in terms of pairs, which brought back recollections of Winslow Thorne and Rex Cardiff in conference that afternoon. Here again was a stickler.

Thorne impressed Diane by his self-importance and Cardiff was squared by the fact that he had fulfilled specifications as the man Diane was to meet. As Cranston's friend, Cardiff had a clean bill that naturally reflected to Thorne's credit, since the two were friendly.

It just happened that as yet Diane didn't know she was supposed to be wearing violets instead of miniature roses.

Indeed, Diane had forgotten all about the corsage, so intrigued was she with the Brandom jewels. Inspired by champagne, the actress began to sparkle with the gems and Diane soon forgot the other guests. They were too standardized a lot, those guests, to pick out the ones who might be thieves.

Somehow, Diane's judgment was convincing her that whoever intended to rob Miss Brandom must be some outsider not present in this well-behaved company.

Having left the table, the guests were now standing in groups and Diane approached a little cluster consisting of Tarvel, Alcott and Thorne. It was obvious that the first two were talking to the third in terms of chain stores.

"We might sell," Diane heard Tarvel say, "but frankly, Mr. Thorne, we haven't reached that point."

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"Absolutely not," put in Alcott. "In fact we haven't paid Hapwood for our first buy."

"Because we want to buy more," added Tarvel. "I told Oscar here" – he waved a glass at Alcott – "that if Hapwood would sell a few, he'd sell a lot."

"And I said to Roy" – Alcott bowed to Tarvel – "that he ought to take up the matter tonight."

"I'm going over there now," decided Tarvel. "You take care of the party, Oscar."

"Certainly, Roy," Alcott acquiesced. "You'd better hurry, because old Hapwood turns in at nine o'clock. You'll just have time to make it."

A grunt came from Winslow Thorne.

"Handle it your own way," the big man said, "and remember I'm in the market."

Both Tarvel and Alcott nodded.

"Only don't tell Hapwood." Thorne's voice carried a suppressed boom and was particularly meant for Tarvel. "I don't want him to get a wrong impression. I buy from anybody who has what I want and will sell at a fair price. I'd even buy from Hapwood, if he would let me in that mausoleum he calls a house."

Tarvel left and Alcott ended the conference with Thorne in order to mingle among the guests. Probably ten minutes had passed before Diane found Cardiff at her elbow. He had something important to say.

"Miss Brandom is leaving," undertoned Cardiff. "We'd better start the convoy work."

"How?" inquired Diane.

"I'll go up to her suite," explained Cardiff. "I think I can get in by the outside balcony. You follow her and find some excuse to go in with her."

"What sort of an excuse?"

"Ask her for an autograph, or anything. Just make sure that nobody else is in the place."

"And suppose they are?"

"Then yell for me."

That sounded fair enough, but as Cardiff was leaving, Diane overtook him and asked:

"What if you have trouble?"

"Why do you think I'm asking you to get chummy with Brandom?" returned Cardiff, with one of his playing card smiles. "To square me, of course, if anybody challenges me. I'll explain that we were trying to prevent a robbery and you can testify for me."

That satisfied Diane until it was just too late for her to overtake Cardiff again. Then Diane had the sinking sensation that maybe she wouldn't be believed if the pinch came. Unfortunately, she couldn't tell Cardiff that, so there was nothing to do but play his game.

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A safe enough game it seemed, however, since Diane was sure that Cranston was behind it, which meant The Shadow was in the background!

The departure of Mary Brandom brought good-night bows from all the guests, and Thorne, in his big way, shoved forward to act in the capacity of host, though the duty belong to Alcott. Thorne made quite a figure as he clasped the hand of the actress and touched it with his lips. During that drama, Diane sidled past and was at the elevator when Miss Brandom arrived there.

Quite aglow from the party, Miss Brandom hardly noticed Diane. They rode in the elevator together, a mere two flights up. Following the actress from the elevator, Diane lingered until Miss Brandom had unlocked the door of her apartment; then she approached:

"You're Miss Brandom, aren't you?" inquired Diane, enthusiastically. "I was sure I recognized you."

Miss Brandom acknowledged herself with a bow.

"I'd just love to have your autograph," added Diane. "In ink, of course – on this."

What Diane produced from her purse was the Contrary Mary place card that had been on the table, but Diane had folded it the wrong way, so Miss Brandom wouldn't recognize it.

Always kind to her remaining public, Miss Brandom asked Diane into the suite and began turning on lights. She hadn't recognized Diane as someone from the dinner party and in the intermittent light, scarcely noticed the face of this admirer. Remembering that she had a fountain pen on her dressing table, Miss Brandom went there; then, sensing the burden of her jewels, she removed them before looking for the pen.

Meanwhile, Diane was looking toward a closed window, where a balcony rail showed outside the large pane, hoping that Rex Cardiff was in readiness there.

Cardiff was, as events were to prove; but first there was an interruption, in fact, several.

The first was the ringing of the telephone bell. Miss Brandom answered it, held a short chat and smiled at Diane in passing style.

"An old admirer," declared Miss Brandom. "I met him again this evening. It is nice to meet old admirers."

Diane agreed that it was. Then:

"Might I use your telephone?" she inquired. "Only for a moment. I have someone that I ought to call."

"An admirer?" queried Miss Brandom, turning toward the dressing table, which was across the room. "Certainly, my dear. Never neglect them."

The telephone had a long extension cord, so Diane was able to take it through the doorway into the other room. The number she called was the public library; she'd looked up that number earlier. Asking for the children's department, Diane got it, and said she wanted to speak to Mr. Cranston.

The wait that followed was painful to Diane. It was to be a longer wait than she supposed; in fact, she wasn't going to talk to Cranston until tomorrow. There were other things that were to enliven the present.

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At this moment, there were certain other factors that were to bear out their importance. Not just that Rex Cardiff was out on the balcony; that was something already planned. More important was the fact that the Bandom jewels were still on the dressing table; in looking for her fountain pen, Mary Bandom was actually pushing the gems aside, therefore she knew that they were still there.

But most important was the closing of the outer door, the one that led in from the corridor. Diane heard it and was a trifle startled; but she couldn't see the door itself, because it was beyond a little anteroom. The person who saw the door close was Margo Lane, as she came up the stairway leading to this floor, with Harry Vincent just behind her.

Harry didn't see the door close because he was looking down the stairs, under the impression that someone was following them. But Margo turned Harry's attention to the Bandom apartment.

"Look!" exclaimed Margo. "That's the Bandom apartment and someone just went in there! It couldn't be Mary Bandom; she'd be in the place by now, because we saw her go up in the elevator, wearing all her jewels. I'm sure she's the person they're going to rob, so we'd better get in there right away!"

Harry reached the door and began to rattle the knob, only to find it latched. The idea of making a more forcible entry didn't occur to him until a few seconds later. Then, anything was justified.

For, through the door came a wild, excited scream, in the voice of Mary Bandom, a screech that was echoed in more restrained style, by Diane at the telephone.

At that instant, every light in the Bandom suite had been suddenly extinguished!

VIII

THINGS happened rapidly in that pitch-blackness.

Since her experience with Quade, Diane had practically outgrown the screaming habit, but hearing the insane yell that Mary Bandom gave was enough to make anyone respond.

Momentarily petrified. Diane heard a voice come over the wire:

"Mr. Cranston is busy. This is Mr. Mann speaking for him –"

Diane clanked the receiver on that one. She didn't care what might be happening in the children's department at the public library. Anyway, Cranston couldn't help even if Mann brought him to the telephone. It was up to Diane Marlow to help Mary Bandom; nothing else.

Diane thought she heard someone rush past her in the darkness, but that sound was dispelled by a terrific crash that came from the balcony window. In her turn, Diane started for the dressing table, only to hear Miss Bandom come shrieking in her direction. The shrieks ended with a tumbling thud.

For the moment, Diane couldn't understand what had tripped the actress. Then Diane realized that she'd forgotten to drop the telephone before rushing to aid Miss Brandon. As a result, Diane had stretched the cord right across the other woman's path.

Strong arms were gripping Diane, whipping her over by the window. In the slight light from outdoors, Diane's face showed pale and startled. Then, Cardiff's face came into the light; Diane could see his hands, because they were full of sparkle.

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"Take these" Cardiff was pouring the Brandom gems into Diane's open hand-bag. "Take these and get out! I'll handle matters here!"

Cardiff gave Diane a shove that landed her half across a chair in the other room. Still gripping the hand bag, Diane wondered where she was until the door came crashing through, smashed with the same zeal that Cardiff had applied to the window.

In with the light from the hallway came Harry Vincent, with Margo Lane right behind him. Diane's eyes followed those figures into the darkness, where a sudden commotion took place. Who Harry was, Diane didn't know, but she was sure he had tangled with Cardiff.

At least the door was Diane's proper exit. Retaining her senses, including her balance, she started for it. The light from the hallway made Diane happy when she reached it, but only briefly. As she still heard the sounds of the slugfest back in the darkness, Diane was stopped by a hand that clamped hard upon her shoulder.

That hand came from within the apartment and as Diane turned to see what belonged to it, she was confronted by eyes glaring through a slitted mask, with a glittering gun muzzle accompanying them.

Right then, Diane was more terrified than most people ever could be. Fearful enough in its own right, this encounter stirred Diane's recollections and made her think that the masked man was Quade, come to life!

Logic didn't help because Diane wasn't thinking in such terms. The fact that other masked men had supplanted the unlamented Quade was something very far from Diane's mind. All Diane wanted was to wrench free from this creature that could well be a solidified ghost and wrench away she did, by yielding the prize she carried, the jewel-stuffed bag that glinted its valuable contents from its open depths.

Hard and merciless was the laugh that came from behind the mask. As Diane staggered across the corridor, she heard a pouncing sound behind her; at the stairs, the masked man overtook her and twisted the girl about with another of those deft, quick grips. Two steps down, Diane was looking into a gun muzzle looming from above her, with the masked face right behind it.

She'd hoped this monster would have let her get away once she had given up the jewels, but he hadn't. The hard laugh from the mask, as cold as the gun muzzle that accompanied it, meant death!

Then came a harsher, louder sound, even more metallic. The gripping hand hooked Diane up from the stairs and flung her full around. The man who intended murder had delayed it for the moment, until he checked on a new opposition that would otherwise have caught him at a disadvantage.

That loud clangor was the opening of the elevator door, down at the end of the corridor.

Again a harsh laugh came and with good reason. It would be easy enough for this masked robber to serve Diane a few bullets and send the rest at any rescuers who might be coming from the elevator.

Except that the idea of any rescuer didn't quite apply.

The harsh laugh died.

Small wonder, considering that it was drowned by a titanic taunt that only one living being could author. Living blackness was surging from that elevator, in the cloaked form of The Shadow!

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Wildly, the masked man took pot shots at The Shadow first. Thrice the gun muzzle spat flame past Diane's shoulder and The Shadow didn't stop. Dragging Diane with him as a living shield, the masked man made a headlong rush down the stairs, to escape that living vengeance cloaked in black.

All Diane remembered after that was a tripping plunge that carried her across the corridor of the floor below. Completely dazed, she knew that she had been released, until she felt the grip of strong hands hauling her up from the floor. Then Diane's eyes opened.

The man who had performed this service was Winston Thorne. How he had arrived here, Diane didn't know, but she tried to beat him off until she realized that he had no gun.

Then, as Diane subsided, Thorne let her ease back against the wall, while he stood there, hands in coat pockets, waiting while she made up her mind whether she wanted to continue the fight or not.

Diane didn't fight.

Looking straight up the steps, she saw blackness at the landing, half way up to the next floor. It seemed to hover there, like some protecting presence. Then, any menace that Thorne might have offered was ended, for from the stairs below came the left-overs of the dinner party, a group of excited guests headed by Oscar Alcott.

When Diane again looked for the shrouding blackness that represented The Shadow, it was gone.

The persons who encountered that blackness were Harry Vincent and Margo Lane. They were at the door of the Brandom apartment, Harry a bit groggy from a blind slugfest with somebody in the darkness; Margo trying to steer him out into the light.

From within the apartment came moans, uttered by Mary Brandom, but they were all in terms of missing jewels, not of physical hurt. Recognizing that the actress was safe for the present, The Shadow promptly guided Harry and Margo to the elevator.

This was a broth with too many cooks. There was no reason to involve others in it. What The Shadow wanted to do was reduce the cooks, then study the ingredients.

Shifting Harry and Margo from the scene was therefore a very good idea.

Returning after the elevator went down, The Shadow used a tiny flashlight to probe the Brandom apartment. He found a switch box in the closet of the ante room, and saw a pulled switch that somebody had yanked to plunge the suite into darkness.

The Shadow left the switch as it was. Continuing his course, he went through the inner room, where Mary Brandom was back at the dressing table, moaning as she pawed helplessly in the darkness for the gems that were no longer there.

Flashlight extinguished, The Shadow glided through the ruined window to the outside balcony. Going along the balcony, he found that he could swing easily over the end and down to the balcony below, one being within reach of the other. Here on the lower balcony The Shadow found a window leading into the corridor, a window which someone had closed; but had been in too great a hurry to latch.

Who that somebody was, The Shadow not only guessed, but promptly proved his conjecture.

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Coming around a corner of the corridor. The Shadow clung to blackness as he studied a group that had assembled by the stairway. There, Thorne was supporting Diane and explaining how he'd found her tumbling down the stairs. The listeners were Alcott and the others who had come up one floor from the private dining room.

Except for one man.

That man was Rex Cardiff. Hands in pockets, in copy of Thorne's style, Cardiff was joining the group without anyone noticing it, so concerned were they about Diane. Cardiff was easing into the picture from The Shadow's own direction, which proved that Cardiff was the man who had doubled down and around by the balcony route.

Neat, the way Cardiff maneuvered it.

By the time people were wondering what to do next, Cardiff had circled around so that he was standing at the head of the stairs from the lower floor. Just as if he had been the last to arrive from the dining room, Cardiff gave an upward gesture and suggested:

"Suppose we go and see if everything is all right with Miss Brandom. She lives somewhere above here, doesn't she?"

It was Winslow Thorne who gave Rex Cardiff a slow, steady stare in answer, but Thorne didn't interpret it, except with a blunt nod.

Then the group was on its way upstairs, Diane Marlow with them. Again, blackness was in the offing – trailing blackness which symbolized The Shadow!

IX

THE lights were on again in the Brandom suite, for someone had found the switch. The management had been notified of the robbery and the police were on their way. All this within five minutes time, while Miss Brandom still moaned about missing jewels and ferocious thugs who had seized her in the darkness and tripped her when she tried to flee.

It was just nine o'clock and Alcott decided to call Hapwood's and talk to Tarvel, who must have arrived there by this time. Getting Hapwood on the wire, Alcott explained what had happened and Hapwood immediately said he could talk to Tarvel, who had been there all of ten minutes. Alcott's chat with Tarvel was brief; ending it, Alcott handed the phone to Thorne.

"Hapwood," stated Alcott. "He wants to talk to you."

Thorne took the telephone and began an affable conversation, as one chain store magnate to another. Only Hapwood wasn't so affable. His voice fairly crackled from the receiver, so sharply that others besides Thorne heard it.

"I might have known you'd be there, Thorne!" came Hapwood's accusations, "You'd go to any lengths to get what you want. You'd steal anything if you could cover up –"

Clamping down the telephone, Thorne not only cut off Hapwood, but handled the situation splendidly. Ignoring the others present, Thorne spoke blandly to Alcott:

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"Your good friend Tarvel must have told Hapwood that I was at the dinner. Hapwood thinks I'm trying to buy up those stores he sold to you. He says it's practically stealing his business away from him. You'd better set him straight tomorrow, Alcott. Assure him that I don't intend to expand my chain."

His eyes idling away from Alcott, Thorne met Cardiff's gaze and Diane was sure that she saw a flash of understanding pass between them. Then, Thorne's glance was taking in the others and he became imperious.

"Come now, everyone!" ordered Thorne. "The Brandom jewels are missing and we must give the police a clear story when they arrive. If anyone here has those gems, say so now!"

As an example, Thorne turned his pockets inside out and spread his tuxedo jacket wide. Cardiff promptly copied the example and others hastily began to show that they weren't burdened with the missing valuables. It was Alcott who relieved the tension.

"This is quite unnecessary," objected Alcott. "There were so many gems beside the Brandom brooch that they would be too bulky for anyone to conceal upon their person. In fact" – Alcott smirked at some ladies who looked nervous in their low-necked evening gowns – "I am sure the police will prefer to search the premises, rather than the persons present."

"And besides" – Alcott added this with assurance – "we were all downstairs in the private dining room when the robbery happened. If the ladies would care to return there; I shall willingly be responsible, since I can see no reason why the ladies should have come up here at all."

The ladies didn't see it that way. Reassured by Alcott's preliminary statement, they wanted to stay around and witness the famous Miss Brandom acting her scene with the police. Remembering how the gems had bulged her hand bag, which was a fairly large one, Diane silently agreed that a search would be trivial, where the people present were concerned.

What really bothered Diane was the coming police quiz and she could foresee that it might bother someone else, much more than herself. As Cardiff looked Diane's way and gestured that she should go downstairs, the girl gave him a defiant look!

A moment later, Cardiff had stepped over beside Diane. No taller than Cardiff's shoulder, Diane looked up at his tired smile and waited until his firm hand had eased her well toward the door. Then, planting herself solidly, the girl spoke.

"You had those gems," reminded Diane. "Why don't you say so?"

"If I did," retorted Cardiff, "I'd have to testify that I gave them to you."

"But somebody snatched them away from me!"

"He did? Who was he?"

"A man with a mask," began Diane. "Like –"

She was going to say "like Quade" but caught herself. Cardiff returned one of his pasteboard smiles.

"So you don't know who he was," Cardiff declared. "Therefore nobody would believe your story."

"But I don't have the gems –"

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"You might have given them to the masked man," Cardiff emphasized. "You haven't any witnesses to prove you didn't."

"But I wouldn't have!"

"Why not?" Cardiff was very bland. "Some of those previous robberies were handled in pass-along style. Of course if Thorne saw the masked man, he could testify for you."

"I don't think Thorne did see him," Diane said slowly. "Maybe he couldn't have, because Thorne might —"

Again Diane halted. It wouldn't do to suggest the wild notion that gripped her at this moment, that Thorne himself might have been the masked man, since Diane had come out of her daze to find herself alone with Thorne. Considering how convincingly Thorne had handled himself, Diane felt herself quite at a loss.

"The best we can do is say nothing," decided Cardiff. "I didn't see the Brandom gems and neither did you! How could we have, considering that everything went dark? That is, if we want to admit that we were up here, which we won't! So you'd better go downstairs and wait."

"I'm staying right here!"

Diane's defiance was ignored by Cardiff as he turned to stroll back to the group. A moment later, the girl was following Cardiff's advice and very suddenly. From the door of the ante room, where she was standing, gloved hands came from blackness and literally plucked her out of sight, while a low, commanding tone ordered silence.

The Shadow again!

He was hurrying Diane through the corridor, to the same elevator that he had used to send Harry and Margo on their way. During that quick trip, The Shadow was giving Diane explicit instructions to get back to her hotel and stay there, while he handled this situation.

Out of her confusion, Diane nodded. Previously she'd thought of Lamont Cranston and The Shadow as one; now she classed them as different people. Because Diane had been practically speaking to Cranston at the library at the very time The Shadow had arrived here at the hotel.

It didn't occur to Diane that Mann might have been building an alibi for Cranston, whose peregrinations as The Shadow were something that had to be covered on occasion. At any rate it was The Shadow that Diane was meeting now, though briefly, for Diane was promptly on her way, as ordained.

And it was Lamont Cranston who made a casual appearance in the Brandom suite a short while later, just after Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona arrived to take over proceedings.

The police quiz, the search of the premises, became the routine matters that Oscar Alcott had anticipated, though everything was done thoroughly. In fact, Inspector Cardona ordered everyone downstairs anyway, so he would have more room in which to operate. Cranston remained, of course, as a friend of the commissioner, and Cardona's efficiency won his approval, even though it promised subsequent complications.

For one thing, Cardona made sense of Miss Brandom's story, narrowing it down to the fact that the actress had actually encountered but one person in the darkness and admitted that she might have tripped over the telephone cord. Unfortunately, though, that stirred a recollection which Miss Brandom had temporarily lost

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during the chaos.

"There was a girl here!" The actress suddenly exclaimed. "I don't know who she was, but she wanted an autograph. She was using the telephone while I looked for my fountain pen."

Miss Brandom gestured to the dressing table where the fountain pen was the only thing of value that remained. Beside the pen was the folded card, turned wrong-side out, on which the autograph was to have been written.

"The girl gave me that card –"

As Miss Brandom spoke, Cardona picked up the card and folded it the right way. The actress gave a surprised exclamation.

"Why, that's my place-card from the dinner!"

"Familiar lines," observed Cranston, studying the card over Cardona's shoulder. Then, to Weston: "I just came from the public library. I've been looking into that sort of literature, in the children's department."

Weston gave an annoyed bristle at what he thought was Cranston's jest. The commissioner changed tone, the moment he read the card himself.

"Mother Goose!" Weston exclaimed. "First Old King Cole and now Mary Quite Contrary, with a robbery to go along with each! This nonsense must be stopped!"

Lamont Cranston quite agreed; but how far this was nonsense and what could be done toward stopping it, he did not specify.

Those were matters for The Shadow.

X

DIANE MARLOW should have worn violets, instead she had worn roses, now she was talking about tulips.

This was the day after the Brandom robbery and Diane was really a fugitive from justice. In quizzing the guests at the Tarvel-Alcott party, the police had found an odd place card on the table and it tallied with Diane.

Only Lamont Cranston didn't want to talk about Diane's place card as he lunched with the girl. He was more interested in the Brandom place card with its reference to tulips.

"The different versions of Mother Goose show a great many discrepancies," asserted Cranston in an authoritative tone. "Only a few specify tulips in the Contrary Mary rhyme, just as there are some that refer to King Cole's glass instead of his bowl."

"Tulips were to the point," put in Diane, "because those Brandom rubies were the same red color. But how does that help me – or us?"

"It might help us," declared Cranston, "because if I can find the particular edition of Mother Goose that these crooks are using, I might learn where they bought their copies."

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"Copies?"

"Yes, copies. It may be that the man who engineers these crimes is sending the same message to several people. Therefore he would have bought several copies of the edition he uses. Besides" – there was something reflective in Cranston's gaze – "a copy of the proper book might give us some inkling to the coming crimes."

Cranston said that so calmly that Diane couldn't help but shudder. To think that men of Quade's ilk were still at large and ready for another move was something that really disconcerted Diane.

"You are safe for the present," declared Cranston, correctly interpreting Diane's shiver, "even if the police are linking you up as Quade's accomplice in that other robbery. However, let's stay with the Brandom case. Check the facts as I call them off."

From a list he had compiled, Cranston read what he considered the salient factors in the case. A number of items remained unlisted because Cranston considered them inconsequential.

"First the lights went off," tallied Cranston, "then Brandom screamed and someone went past you in the darkness – or at least so you thought."

"Check."

"Right then the window crashed, Cardiff came through, and next thing he was handing you the gems."

"Check again."

"On the way out you met a masked man who snatched the hand bag in which you had the gems, slung you down the stairs, and you woke up with Thorne holding you."

"I didn't exactly wake up," said Diane. "I was only dizzy. But I wasn't keeping good track of things right then, so all I remember is coming out of a blur to find Thorne there. So check again."

Cranston ran through the list and analyzed it.

"Cardiff couldn't have turned out the lights and gotten back to the balcony in time to crash through the window," declared Cranston. "Nor could he have overtaken you and grabbed the gems back. Cardiff was in a scuffle with Vincent."

"With Vincent?" queried Diane. "Who is he?"

"Harry Vincent," specified Cranston. "The man you were supposed to team with instead of Rex Cardiff."

Diane's eyes popped.

"Then Cardiff wasn't –"

"No, Cardiff wasn't," interposed Cranston. "Now let's consider Thorne. He might have come upstairs, turned off those lights, chased after you and grabbed you, taken the hand bag, flung you downstairs, and helped you afterward. Understand, I said Thorne might have –"

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"Because it would all have been a pretty large order," put in Diane, with a nod. "Only what right had Thorne coming up to Brandom's anyway?"

"She invited him," replied Cranston, calmly. "That came out today. Remember the phone call Brandom received from an old admirer?"

Diane nodded, then said:

"Thorne?"

"Right," returned Cranston. "He phoned from the room where the party was. Mind you, it might have been a smart bit of business on Thorne's part, but it doesn't answer one question."

"You mean what became of the gems?"

"Exactly. There wasn't any opportunity for Thorne to get rid of them. Cardiff, yes – if he'd kept them, or even if Thorne could have tossed them back. But that was impossible too."

Diane thought that over and nodded.

"There must have been another person," she decided. "Somebody working with Cardiff or Thorne – or both."

"Not necessarily," rejoined Cranston. "The reason I am checking details so carefully is because when dealing with persons like Cardiff and Thorne – either individually or together – we must realize that some essential incident may have been covered. We know however that there was a masked man. He had opportunities, brief but timely, to enter the picture and leave it, taking the gems with him.

"Which makes him the third person."

"Or just the first person," corrected Cranston. "We haven't yet proven a connection between such an individual and either Cardiff or Thorne."

Diane gave her head a puzzled shake, then said:

"Check."

"Let's return to the dinner party," suggested Cranston. "When the crowd came dashing up to find you and Thorne, Alcott was with them?"

"Check."

"That fits with what several people testified," declared Cranston, making a check mark with his pencil. "We can confirm it as reliable. Now about Tarvel. He went to see Hapwood?"

"Check," said Diane. "He left a little before nine."

"And he was there when Alcott called Hapwood's home from Brandom's suite?"

"He was. Hapwood put him on the phone to talk with Alcott. Then Hapwood talked to Thorne –"

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"I know." Cranston finished a rapid calculation with his pencil. "We're considering Tarvel right now. He left the Metrolite ten minutes before the robbery and reached Hapwood's ten minutes after it. Twenty minutes from the Metrolite to Hapwood's. Tarvel couldn't have made it in anything else. That takes care of Tarvel."

"Tarvel was already taken care of," said Diane, wearily, "just like Alcott. They come in the class of victims, not robbers. So does about everyone else who was at the dinner party. You ought to start looking for rank outsiders, like Quade."

"I've been letting the police do that," stated Cranston with one of his slight smiles. "You'd be surprised how many suspects they've rounded up."

"Did any of them have some Mother Goose clippings?"

"None. Some of them didn't have enough intelligence to appreciate even such verse. The police made the rounds of Quade's acquaintances and it seems Quade didn't associate with the intelligentsia."

"Well I wish you luck with Mother Goose," said Diane, rising. "But I'll need more than wishes if I'm to be lucky."

"Don't worry," returned Cranston. "The police don't have your picture and we'll see that you're cleared before they find one. So you may as well go shopping this afternoon. I'll phone your hotel before dinner."

Diane went shopping.

It seemed strange, indeed thrilling, to be traveling around Manhattan as a wanted woman. Only Diane hoped the thrill wouldn't last too long, because it was the sort of thing that might explode soon. In one department store, Diane passed the book section and shied away in horror at sight of some people poring over copies of Mother Goose.

One thing: Diane was strictly allergic to Mother Goose. It just wouldn't be smart to think of those old nursery rhymes, for fear she'd start muttering them out loud and have the arm of the law clamp down. Diane was still holding that idea, and seriously, when she reached her hotel, the Everest, and went up to her room.

It was dusk outdoors, so Diane turned on the lights. Her eye, by merest chance, was attracted to a very trifling object, an envelope lying in an otherwise empty waste basket, which was close by the door. It disturbed Diane and for a particular reason.

Today, Diane had made sure that she had left nothing in that waste basket. Considering her present status, she didn't want to leave a single clue to her right identity. Diane had found that she was expected by another name when she registered here at the Everest, and to cooperate with The Shadow, she was keeping up that pretext.

Plucking the envelope from the waste basket, Diane was both puzzled and horrified to find her own name typed on it. The address was Hotel Everest, with this room number, and there was something vaguely familiar about both the envelope and the typing.

Keyed to the quick, Diane looked frantically about the room for other clues and saw one that she might normally have overlooked a slip of paper poked out from beneath a small stack of magazines which looked slightly out of place. Whipping the slip clear, Diane saw that it was a portion of a page clipped from a book.

The paper bore a verse that read:

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Baa, baa, Black Sheep,

Have you any wool?

Yes, sir, yes, sir,

Three bags full.

One for my master,

One for my dame,

And one for the little boy

Who cries in the lane.

If Diane Marlow had pronounced the fearful name of some dread demon who threatened doom to anyone who uttered it, she couldn't have put more terror into the title that she did declare aloud:

"Mother Goose!"

Crime was on the march again; this time it had announced Diane as an accomplice in advance.

Here was quick need for The Shadow!

XI

IT was too late now to reach Rutledge Mann at his office with a phone call but there was another number that Diane had been given in case of emergency. In this emergency she couldn't remember the number to save her.

While Diane tried to recall it, the phone bell rang. Knowing that Cranston was to call her, Diane hurriedly folded the Black Sheep message, tucked it in a new purse that she'd bought that afternoon, and grabbed for the telephone.

It wasn't Lamont Cranston.

Instead, Diane heard the unexpected voice of Rex Cardiff!

"Hello, beautiful," bantered Cardiff, a bit thickly. "I got your message."

"My – my message?"

"Sure. Don't worry." Cardiff spoke with a consoling note. "I can fix everything. I'll be right over."

"But I was going out."

"Then don't. Just wait ten minutes. I have to talk to you."

When Cardiff ended the call, Diane didn't wait one minute. Instead, she opened the door while putting on her hat, flicked off the lights, and hurried to the elevator, carrying her precious new purse with her. When she reached the lobby, Diane ignored the front door. Outside, a cab would be waiting, piloted by a chap called

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Shrevvy, the same cabby who had brought Diane here from Quade's that first night.

But with all her trust for anyone who shared The Shadow's confidence, Diane couldn't take a chance on going out the front way for fear Cardiff would arrive too soon. Avoiding the bright lobby, Diane sped out through a dark side passage past the telephone booths, to another street, where she was fortunate to find a cab parked.

Good fortune ended as Diane landed in the cab. Another voice told the driver where to go. A powerful hand kept Diane from climbing out the door, while another hand suppressed her outcry.

The voice was Cardiff's and as Diane heard its short laugh, she subsided.

Cardiff's smothering hand relaxed and Diane spoke glumly:

"All right, take me to the police."

"To the police?" Cardiff laughed again, more pleasantly. "Nothing could be farther from my mind. I knew you would think that was my intention, so I had to use subterfuge to meet you. I guessed you would scurry out the moment that I called."

"But who gave you my number in the first place?"

"You did." Cardiff wore one of those smiles of his and held it. "Or didn't you?"

Diane shook her head, emphatically.

"There was a message for me at the Metrolite," stated Cardiff. "That's where I'm stopping now, like the other important people. You'll find out why when we arrive there. But that message – you didn't send it?"

Another head–shake from Diane.

"I wasn't sure," Cardiff admitted. He was eying Diane's new hand bag as he spoke. "That's why I took precautions in case you ducked out of the Everest. But if you didn't, who did?"

Maybe it was the direction of Cardiff's eyes; perhaps Diane just had a flash of intuition. She turned, met Cardiff's gaze with blazing eyes and stormed:

"Whoever took my hand bag found out where I was! I had a receipt in it from the Hotel Everest, with my room number!"

Cardiff kept that smile of his, as if still wondering whether or not to believe Diane. He was doubting – or so it seemed – even when they reached the Metrolite, but as they walked through the lobby, Cardiff became indulgent. Powerful as he was, towering over Diane as he did, Cardiff wasn't the person to worry much.

If Diane had been urged by a gun muzzle, she couldn't have felt more helpless than she did now. Her elbow was in the grip of Cardiff's hand and though light enough, that grip, Diane realized it would tighten on provocation. There was an index to that prospect in the way Cardiff used his hand to steady himself at moments, for he was walking with a wobble.

That fact and the thickness of his voice told Diane that Cardiff had been drinking, but how much, Diane couldn't estimate. Cardiff might be faking a half–jag for some reason; contrarily, he could be carrying himself well despite his over–indulgence.

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Whichever the case, Cardiff's smile kept telling Diane that she'd better put up with his game, for a while at least. As they reached the news stand, Cardiff stopped to buy an early edition of a tabloid newspaper, dated the next morning, which had just been delivered at the stand.

"There's a story in this that will interest you," Cardiff told Diane. "Let's go up to my office so you can read it."

Knowing that the Hotel Metrolite did not specialize in offices, Diane was loath to comply, but Cardiff put reassurance into his jackish smile and added a few persuasive sentences.

"You wouldn't want me to have a bellhop page you, would you?" queried Cardiff. "Some of the guests here not only remember you by name, but would recognize you. What's more, they wouldn't mind telling the law."

Diane's eyes flashed angrily. They had a violet sparkle that would have gone very nicely with the flowers Diane should have worn the night before.

"I see!" Diane compressed the words from her tightened lips. "You're going to sell me out to Miss Brandom. If you do –"

"Ridiculous!" interrupted Cardiff. "Don't worry about Brandom. She's sulking in her suite."

"If you do," resumed Diane, "I'll tell about you giving me the gems. You wouldn't want that!"

"Of course I wouldn't," Cardiff agreed genially. "That's why I don't want you recognized. Tarvel lives here and so does Alcott. Either one would give you away, just because you spoiled their party."

It began to strike Diane that Cardiff actually might be on her side.

"Tarvel and Alcott are out," added Cardiff, "because there is Thorne waiting for them. They are over at Hapwood's no doubt, otherwise Thorne wouldn't be so impatient."

Diane gained a look at Thorne across the lobby and saw him at what could be termed either his best or worst. Hands in coat pockets. Thorne was glowering around the hotel as if he owned it, which possibly he did, considering his numerous investments.

There was something haughty in the big bluff face that went with its overbearing owner, Winslow Thorne. His iron-gray hair was a proper accompaniment to his steely eyes, which glinted in Diane's direction and made the girl prefer Cardiff's company.

Only Thorne didn't notice Diane. He was looking past her and Diane saw why, immediately after she willingly let Cardiff sidle her into an elevator.

"You can look now," undertoned Cardiff. "I don't think you know the man that Thorne just noticed – or do you?"

Noting first that Thorne himself had turned away, Diane looked the other direction and shook her head as she saw a stocky, tawny-faced man who had just entered the hotel and was studying the lobby in a professional style that Diane didn't like. The man reminded Diane of Quade, which in a way was not surprising, considering that this newcomer had something to do with crime.

The difference was that the stocky man dealt with crime instead of dealing in it.

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

"Inspector Cardona," identified Cardiff, as the elevator door went shut. "Looking for clues to recent robberies, human clues no doubt, and letting the best of the lot slide out of his sight."

Of course the "best of the lot" meant Diane, but if the term were taken in a plural sense, it could include Cardiff. That thought gave Diane a certain trust in Cardiff and when they reached his floor, the sixteenth, the girl felt quite at ease.

To her surprise, Diane found that Cardiff did have an office, when he unlocked a corner door marked 1612. With a trace of sincerity in his smile, Cardiff bowed Diane into the place and gave a sweeping gesture that included a closed door in the corner.

"Office here, living quarters there," explained Cardiff. "They used to use these as display rooms. I'm only going to need an office for a few days, so a hotel seemed the best place to have one. An interesting business, mine" – Cardiff was unfolding the newspaper as he spoke – "here, you can read about it."

Diane looked at the headline that Cardiff tapped. It stated:

PLAYBOY GOES MAGNATE

Under that was the sub-head:

FINDS WEAK LINK IN CHAIN STORE SYSTEM

That wasn't all. The paragraphs that followed were even more revealing to Diane. As she read, she wondered, yet began to understand. Here was news about coming crime!

News that Diane could only hope had already reached The Shadow!

XII

ANY of Diane's doubts were rapidly dispelled by the way Cardiff verbally interpreted the story as she perused it. The whole thing meant that Cardiff was a very smart young man – or perhaps not.

It dealt with a group of stores known as The Amalgamated Chain, which hadn't been doing too well lately. In fact, Amalgamated had been due for a reorganization which had suddenly become a fact.

Only now Amalgamated was going to have a new name. It was to be called Cardiff Stores Incorporated and the president of this new organization was to be none other than Rex Cardiff.

"Funny, isn't it?" laughed Cardiff. "The black sheep of the family becoming the white-haired boy."

The term "black sheep" didn't startle Diane. She had been thinking of it from what the newspaper said. While the account didn't use the phrase, it intimated that Rex had something of a black sheep rating among the Cardiffs.

"It took one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to spring it," chuckled Cardiff, "and my dear, dear relatives pitched in with it. Three of them at fifty thousand bucks apiece. Here's what they get for it!"

From his inside pocket, Cardiff brought three sealed envelopes and spread them in front of Diane's eyes. She scarcely saw them, for her mind was occupied with the verse:

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

"Baa, baa, Black Sheep,

Have you any wool?

Yes, sir, yes, sir,

Three bags full."

Here stood Rex Cardiff, the black sheep, and in his hand the three bags of wool!

"Uncle Hugh chipped in a share," continued Cardiff. "He thinks he's the head of the family, that's why. I told that to my great-aunt Mathilda and she bought a part just to show Uncle Hugh. My cousin Bill came in for the third. They call him Bill now, the big stuffed shirt, but I remember when he was Willie. I used to call him Weeping Willie, because when the other kids shoved him around, he always bawled and ran home down the lane."

The second verse was shouting itself through Diane's mind:

"One for my master,

One for my dame,

And one for the little boy

Who cries in the lane."

Those terms fitted Cardiff's uncle, great-aunt, and cousin, each of whom rated as a recipient of a bag of black sheep's wool, as represented by the contents of those envelopes!

"Preferred stock," announced Cardiff, flaunting the envelopes. "Fifty thousand dollars worth for each of my precious relatives. Enough to control the Amalgamated chain with a voting majority. We'll expand the company and I'll get my share, unless somebody wants to buy up this interest and pay us a handsome profit."

Cardiff eyed Diane and particularly her new handbag as he spoke. Diane could only shrug and say:

"No money."

"Maybe Artemus Hapwood would buy," mused Cardiff. "I'm going to see him, anyway. Still, they say he's in a selling mood, not a buying one. Of course there is Winslow Thorne, but he hasn't shown any inclination to do either."

Diane didn't like Cardiff's eyes. They were fixed in a cold, hard manner that belied that perpetual smile of his.

"There's Roy Tarvel," reminded Diane, "and Oscar Alcott. They both bought into chain stores. Maybe you could sell to one of them."

The cold stare was becoming a glare as Cardiff stalked forward, his free hand creeping slowly toward his coat pocket.

"Anything to change the subject," Cardiff sneered. "You want to get it away from Thorne, don't you?"

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

"Why – why, no!"

"I say yes." Cardiff was close now, his hand almost in his pocket. "And I'm the one to ask why!"

"If you really want to know why," retorted Diane, defiantly, "it's because I don't trust Thorne any more than I do you. For all I know, you're planning this together!"

Realizing now that Cardiff probably had a gun in his pocket Diane grabbed for the knob of the door against which she was backed. At least she delayed the gun threat, for Cardiff's hand couldn't wait to draw. Instead, he made a quick lash, clamping his brawny fist over Diane's tiny hand, pressing it against the door knob until the girl's face solidified in a wince.

"No you don't!" stormed Cardiff. "I'm not giving you a chance to bring in that masked friend of yours again."

Diane's face remaining pained, Cardiff relaxed his grip just enough for her expression to change to indignation.

"I gave you my offer," Cardiff added. Again he flipped the envelopes in Diane's face. "Buy these options if you want. How much do you bid?"

"I told you I have no money!"

"Gems will do," mocked Cardiff, "unless you've already hocked them. You wouldn't have given them back to Miss Brandom."

"Why, you –"

Diane didn't complete what she ought to have called Cardiff. She'd stood enough of his insolence and now she was annoyed by his added impudence in flapping those envelopes right in her face. Diane had a free hand too, so she used it to snatch the envelopes in a batch from Cardiff's grasp.

Surprised by Diane's sudden flare, Cardiff made a sweeping grab to regain the family fortune. He not only swung wide, he pulled himself off balance and his other hand relayed its grip. During her own dodge, Diane twisted the door knob automatically and as the door came inward, the girl pivoted around it, hoping to begin a dash to freedom.

What stopped Diane was something as terrifying as it was unexpected.

Shoving in from the doorway, blocking Diane's path with one formidable lunge, was the very menace that Cardiff had anticipated and which Diane had denied, a masked invader!

He seemed tremendous to Diane, this newcomer, in the few moments that she saw him, but that could have been due to her imagination. How tall he was, it was impossible to estimate, for he was coming from a crouch. Being small, Diane thought the man huge and monstrous and the hand that came slashing at her was like a great paw.

The hand wanted the envelopes and it grabbed them as the man swung around, flinging Diane aside. Then Cardiff came lunging into the fray with a mad snarl that fairly reeked of trouble, a warning that the masked man heeded on the instant.

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Instead of trying to spring out through the door, the invader slapped the light switch, plunging the room into darkness, except for the glow from the corridor. Then that gleam was gone as the door slammed hard, propelled by Cardiff, as he tried to block off the other man's escape.

Reaching her feet, Diane was caught in the furious struggle and amid that maelstrom, she beat off swinging hands. Envelopes crinkled, came flapping in her face again and she snatched them as she had before, but this time in the dark. That brought fierce snarls from both combatants, as if they regarded Diane their common prey, and the girl reeled away madly, but gladly.

Then, in the half-light from a courtyard window toward which she whirled, Diane looked back to see revolvers glittering as hands at last whipped them into action. She thought for the moment that both guns were aiming her way and a pretty target she made, against the window. As though in answer to a frantic prayer, the looming guns faded from sight as though something had smothered them; in fact, the battling men were likewise lost from view.

It was only that the window light had blurred, as moonlight would when captured by a passing cloud. But it was something more than a cloud that blotted this scene so suddenly. As at Brandom's, the window crashed inward, launching a figure with it.

This time the arrival was The Shadow.

His laugh proclaimed that The Shadow was the provider of the blackout, which ended when the light followed his surge. In such dim glow, however, The Shadow was untraceable after he made a sideswipe with his arm, that sent Diane clear of harm.

The Shadow didn't wait for guns to talk. He was among them when they started to spurt. From where she landed, half-sprawled beside the window, Diane saw the upward jabs of flame and heard The Shadow's taunting laugh tuning among the barks of guns, as though he felt himself at home in such company.

Who was trying to shoot whom. Diane didn't know, but she felt sure The Shadow would be the main target, if the others could find him. Failing that, they'd seek Diane, because she had the precious envelopes.

All of which meant that a quick exit would be Diane's best resort, particularly as she couldn't help The Shadow. What was more, he had provided the short route, the broken window.

Still clinging to the envelopes, Diane was half-thrust through the window when she realized it just wouldn't do. That realization came with a freezing sense of horror. Unlike the Brandom suite, this one didn't have an outside balcony.

There was space, sheer space down the courtyard more than a dizzy dozen floors below, beneath this window where The Shadow had made his surprise entry!

Like an echo to silencing gun-shots came The Shadow's laugh as though its grim jest was a warning for Diane's benefit.

Recoiling from the window as though she expected the courtyard to come leaping up at her, Diane wheeled and saw another reason for The Shadow's significant laugh. The door to the corridor was wide open now, offering a clear path for Diane.

Over in a corner, Diane made out The Shadow lashing back and forth with one stubborn fighter, but the other man was gone. Diane didn't wait to learn who was the remaining opposition, Cardiff or the masked man.

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Out through the door sped Diane Marlow, obeying what she took for The Shadow's command and carrying with her the three envelopes that signified a fortune!

XIII

AN elevator disgorged Diane Marlow into the lobby of the Hotel Metrolite, along with a parcel of passengers who were puzzled at the girl's excitement. Within the walls of a great hotel, news of such commotion as a gun fray takes a while to percolate; hence nobody else in the elevator knew why Diane had bolted into the car when it stopped at the sixteenth floor.

The blonde had been in a rush to get out of Cardiff's suite; now she was as anxious to leave the hotel. For one thing, Diane didn't want to run into the stocky man whom Cardiff had identified as a police inspector.

Diane was doing just that, though she didn't realize it, until she reached the door. There, impatiently pacing outside, was Joe Cardona. Hastily, Diane turned back, to stop even shorter.

Above the large lobby of the Metrolite was a mezzanine floor, a spacious balcony stocked with writing desks and lounges reserved exclusively for guests. From the balcony rail, quite near the lobby clock, towered a man who not only pointed downward but raised an accusing bellow:

"There she is! That girl is Diane Marlow!"

The man was Winslow Thorne!

Staring upward, Diane couldn't believe she saw the face she did. The double notion was in her mind that Thorne's face should be hidden by a mask and that he ought to be in the middle of a tussle on the sixteenth floor. Maybe it was because she'd seen Thorne here in the hotel that made her think of him in masked terms; perhaps Cardiff had convinced her wrongly when he professed an enmity toward Thorne.

Then, while Thorne was still voicing accusations and jabbing his big hand Diane's direction, the girl realized that it must be Cardiff who was struggling with The Shadow upstairs. In that case, Thorne's head start could have brought him down to the mezzanine well before Diane herself reached the lobby.

"She's the missing girl in those robberies!" Thorne was broadcasting. "That's Diane Marlow who disappeared right after the Brandom gems were stolen! Stop her, I say, stop her! Don't let her get away!"

Sincere of Thorne to be thinking of reclaiming the Brandom gems which Diane didn't have – or was it? A crinkle from Diane's own small but tight-fisted hand snapped her back to her former theory. Right now, Diane was carrying something perhaps as valuable as those missing gems, as valuable to Thorne for one person, and something that Thorne probably knew about and the masked man certainly did, which linked the two and perhaps established them as one.

The Amalgamated Preferred!

Why should Thorne be letting Diane get away with that triple prize? The answer was, he wasn't. People were coming Diane's direction and seeing that the rush had started, Thorne himself was personally heading for the stairs that led down from the mezzanine.

About the only friendly face that Diane saw was that of the big clock above the desk, its hands indicating exactly half past seven. Then, shaking herself from her bewilderment, Diane was gifted with one thought only, to escape before Thorne arrived. Turning, the girl fled out into the street.

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Thorne's bellows hadn't reached the sidewalk where Cardona was. Something had diverted the inspector's attention, at the time Diane popped into sight before. That something was a taxicab that had just pulled up; its passengers were Roy Tarvel and Oscar Alcott.

The cab was standing by, because the driver was waiting for the door man to change a ten dollar bill and meanwhile, Cardona was sounding Tarvel and Alcott on some minor facts regarding the Brandom case.

"I haven't seen Miss Brandom today," Tarvel was saying. "Alcott and I have been over at Hapwood's most of the afternoon."

"We just came from there," added Alcott. "We had an early dinner and left old Happy with his pipe and brandy."

The door man was handing Tarvel his change and he was passing a couple of dollars to the cab driver when Diane clattered past the group and into the cab. Neither Tarvel nor Alcott saw her face, but like Cardona they heard the shout that came from the hotel.

"Stop her!"

Cardona made a quick dash and boarded the moving cab like a trick rider jumping on a horse's back. He had the door open and was rolling inside, flashing his badge for both benefit of passenger and driver when Diane pressed two warm hands on his arm and pleaded earnestly:

"Don't stop! Don't let him catch me! I can explain everything."

Cardona spoke through the window to the driver.

"Where are you taking her?"

"Right back to where I came from," replied the cabby. "That's where she said to go."

This wasn't Shrevvy's cab; Diane knew that already. But she was sure she caught a glimmer of other headlights following from the Hotel Metrolite and could only hope that it was Shrevvy's cab, not some other that pursuers had commandeered.

"All right," spoke Cardona gruffly, as he faced Diane. "Who is he and let's hear your explanation."

"I – I don't know who he is," began Diane. "Except after that terrible robbery at the hotel, well, I just didn't feel safe when someone shouted at me."

"Why not?"

"Because of these." Diane flourished the envelopes. "They're worth a lot of money."

Cardona reached for the envelopes, but Diane drew them away and thrust them in her handbag.

"If you're a police inspector," argued the girl. "you ought to see me safely where I'm going and let me prove I'm honest."

That brought a shrug from Cardona, his usual response to pure logic. For a while they rode in silence, which was Cardona's way; then suddenly the inspector spoke to the driver:

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

"Didn't you just come from Hapwood's?"

The driver didn't know, so Cardona gave the address and the fellow nodded.

"So you know Hapwood," Cardona said to Diane. "What's in these envelopes you're taking him?"

"I can't tell you until we arrive there."

Cardona managed to stay patient. He was in a dilemma like Diane. To arrest the girl and take her back to the Metrolite would be foolish if it turned out that she wasn't the girl that somebody had shouted after. Cardona didn't know who the shouter was, any more than who Diane might be. So he granted Diane the privileges of going where she intended. Once there, Joe could learn the details.

The cabby was making speed, feeling he was on official business with a police inspector as a passenger. Cardona's first objection came when the driver passed the entrance to a transverse that led across Central Park. At that moment, Cardona had been about to ask Diane's name; she was therefore much relieved when he became interested in something else.

"Why not go through that transverse?" demanded Cardona. "It's the shortest way to where we're going."

"They blocked it off at seven thirty," explained the cabby. "Same the last three nights. Doing some repair on one of the bridges that crosses over the transverse. Won't be open again until eleven o'clock."

Forgetting all about Diane, Cardona settled back in the seat. Diane glanced at her wrist watch, which was set the same as the hotel clock. It was quarter of eight; they'd been riding fifteen minutes.

That was, they'd traveled half way along the roundabout route. The cab had to go a considerable mileage to the next transverse and after it crossed the park, it was forced to double back to reach Hapwood's. As they pulled up in front of the glum old house, Cardona became efficient. He let Diane pay the fare, since the trip was her idea, but he told the cabby to remain within call. Moreover, Joe stayed very close to Diane as they went up the brownstone steps.

The servant who answered the bell recognized Cardona and after notifying Hapwood, returned to usher the visitors to the living room. Hapwood met them at the door, smoking his big pipe and his bushy eyebrows raised so that he could beam properly at Diane, to whom he gave a very jolly smile.

"Young lady to see you, Mr. Hapwood," informed Cardona. "She says she's bringing something valuable, so I convoyed her here."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Hapwood, chuckling so his double chin rolled down over itself. "Very well, indeed. This is a rare pleasure. But what is it you bring me?"

"Some chain store stock," declared Diane, handing him the envelopes. "I want you to give the inspector a receipt for it. Understand, it's not mine, nor yours, but I'm sure you will be asked to bid on it. So I felt I should leave it with you; because – well, because of certain complications."

Cardona eyed Diane, then followed her gaze toward Hapwood, who had torn open the envelopes and was bringing out their contents. The look on Hapwood's face showed peculiar annoyance for a man of King Cole characteristics.

"You must know what it is," began Diane. "Surely you've heard of Amalgamated Preferred."

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

"Amalgamated Preferred!" snorted Hapwood. "This, in my opinion, is unadulterated audacity!"

He handed the sheets of paper to Cardona and Diane looked at them with amazement. Crinkly paper, yes, but it lacked the green ink that went with stock certificates. In fact, it lacked all ink at all.

Those precious sheets of paper were entirely blank!

Diane's own gaze was blank, at this startling climax to her mad adventure. But her sense of hearing didn't fade. A telephone bell was jangling; she heard a servant answer it from another room. Cardona's ears were doing all right too, when they heard the servant exclaim:

"Diane Marlow? You mean the girl who stole the Brandom gems? You say she came here with Inspector Cardona?"

What Cardona heard as he wheeled was the clatter of high heels reaching the front door, which slammed before Joe could even shout a "Halt!" Madly, Diane wanted to get away, anywhere, in what little time remained. She saw a cab hauling up in front of the house, thought it was the one that brought her here and realized its driver would probably refuse to assist her in another flight.

So Diane turned to dart away from the stopping cab, but she turned too late, which was fortunate. Out of that cab swooped living blackness that gathered Diane in one swift, enveloping fold, and swung her into the cab, which spurted off like a whippet before the door had even closed.

All that Joe Cardona saw was the blink of Shrevvy's tail-lights past the corner, marking another rescue of Diane Marlow by her ever-present friend, The Shadow!

XIV

VERY patiently, Lamont Cranston heard Diane Marlow's story to the end. It was quiet here, in this little out-of-the-way restaurant where Diane had come from her new hotel, to discuss last night's events. She had found it easy to tell her story coherently.

Then Cranston spoke:

"So Rex Cardiff never showed you those stock certificates –"

"I'm sure he didn't," expressed Diane. "He only said they were in the envelopes."

"But somebody snatched the envelopes from you in the dark –"

"Yea, the masked man did, but I got them back."

"Not necessarily the same envelopes –"

"I guess not," conceded Diane. "That might have been why he let me regain them, mightn't it?"

"It might," acquiesced Cranston. "But suppose we confine ourselves to facts. Somebody handed you three dummy envelopes which you mistakenly believed contained stock certificates."

Diane nodded.

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

"Either Cardiff or the masked man may have employed that subterfuge," continued Cranston. "Possibly it was done to frame you, in which case Cardiff and his attacker could have been working in collusion, staging a fake fight; though either might have worked the envelope game individually.

"The other assumption is that whichever retained the stock certificates, wanted to divert matters to someone else, namely you. This could apply either to Cardiff or his unknown antagonist."

The analysis covered everything, so far as Diane could see, but it didn't crack the mystery. Hopefully, Diane produced the Black Sheep clipping that she had found in her room and passed it to Cranston.

"Why should I get one of these?" Diane asked. "I certainly don't belong to the group responsible for these Mother Goose robberies –"

Diane caught herself at Cranston's smile. A slight smile, that, and very calm, totally unlike the false face variety that was Cardiff's specialty.

The smile made Diane exclaim:

"You mean someone planted it in my room! So if the police found it later, they'd take it I was part of the gang. What with my meeting Quade and the way I was involved at Brandom's –"

Diane cut short again, realizing that the case was covered. She could understand now that she hadn't been expected to find that clipping from the Mother Goose book. Indeed, it had been through chance alone that she did find it.

"The Shadow must have arrived about the time I left the Everest," mused Diane. "That's how he followed me first to the Metrolite and then to Hapwood's. Only who was there ahead, to plant that verse? Cardiff?"

"Not necessarily," replied Cranston. "Somebody could have phoned him, as he said. At the same time, he may have told that story as a bluff. What interests me most, right now, is this Black Sheep rhyme."

Diane's eyes became questioning.

"Another Mother Goose variant," explained Cranston. "Sometimes it's the little boy who lived in the lane, not the one who cried there. Sometimes instead of getting one bag of wool, the little boy gets none."

Carefully placing the verse with previous Mother Goose samples that he carried in his wallet, Cranston added:

"Speaking of Lanes, there's one named Margo. She has a convenient apartment where you can stay until trouble blows over. Here's the address" – Cranston wrote it as he spoke – "and don't thank her too much because she owes you some return for a bunch of violets that she shouldn't have taken."

Shortly after this tete-a-tete with Diane, Lamont Cranston became The Shadow. The transformation occurred in a pitch-black room, which was suddenly broken by a bluish light, shining down upon a polished table. Into that vivid glow came two long tapering hands, the hands of The Shadow.

A mystic symbol glowed from one finger of the left hand. It was The Shadow's girasol, a remarkable fire-opal whose strange depths ran an ever-changing gamut of the rainbow's hues. There was something hypnotic in the iridescence of that unusual stone, as if in its lesser way it had absorbed some of The Shadow's own mesmeric power.

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Under the blue light, The Shadow's hands unfolded a large-scale map of Manhattan. With a pencil he circled spots where crimes had occurred. He placed little cross-marks at other places of importance and began tracing lines to indicate routes between them.

On a sheet of paper, The Shadow compiled the following list, arranged in four columns with accompanying notations:

LIST OF LIST OF PERSONS OTHERS

CRIMES RHYMES INVOLVED PRESENT

Bond None Quade None

Robbery Found An Unknown

Jewel None Quade Diane

Shop Found An Unknown

Hapwood King Two None

Robbery Cole Masked Men

Brandom Contrary Cardiff Diane,

Robbery Mary Masked Man Thorne

Cardiff Black Cardiff Diane,

Stocks Sheep Masked Man Thorne

After giving this list a careful scrutiny, The Shadow checked its discrepancies, or limitations. The first two cases could be eliminated since the unknown persons who had received the stolen goods from Quade, could have been almost anybody.

Skipping the Hapwood robbery, The Shadow checked the two that followed it. While he had marked Cardiff as "involved," he placed a question mark after that man's name in each case. Merely because Cardiff had handled the stolen goods in each case, didn't prove him a criminal any more than Diane, of whose status The Shadow was sure.

However, in each instance, The Shadow drew a connecting line between the term "Masked Man" and the name "Thorne." An excellent link, but the problem was to prove it. There was still that perplexer in the Brandom case: What had Thorne done with the gems if he'd taken them? As for the Cardiff robbery – if robbery it proved to be – The Shadow hadn't yet checked Thorne's alibi.

So The Shadow placed a question mark on each of the connecting lines. Then, concentrating on the three robberies that actually had been heralded by Mother Goose messages, he formed the following brief list.

WHEREABOUTS OF PERSONS

THORNE CARDIFF Substantiated by

MOTHER GOOSE MURDERS

Hapwood Unstated Unstated No alibi

Case

Brandom Outside Inside Diane

Case Brandom's Brandom's

Cardiff Around In Diane

Case Hotel Room

This was somewhat enlightening. It made Thorne and Cardiff eligible as the two masked men – big men – described by Hapwood as the robbers who had bound and gagged him. They could have been partners, Thorne and Cardiff, in the Brandom case; while the same applied in the Cardiff robbery, provided they'd been trying mutually to frame Diane. Interesting, though, was the possibility that last night's brawl might have represented a double-cross on the part of one or the other.

To make a thorough tally of the Thorne situation with its Cardiff angle, The Shadow made another list covering the whereabouts of men who had held some dealings – direct or indirect – with Thorne or Cardiff.

It ran as follows:

WHEREABOUTS OF OTHERS

HAPWOOD TARVEL ALCOTT

Hapwood At home Both at hotel. Phoned by

Case (Victim) Hapwood just before robbery.

Brandom At home. On way to In

Case (Called by Hapwood's private

phone from (Arrival dining room

hotel.) reported.) with guests

Cardiff At home with Coming from Hapwood's in cab.

Case Tarvel and Al– Both arrived at hotel just as

cott. Then when Diane left.

Diane arrived.

Concise though these statistics were, they shed little light upon Thorne or Cardiff. In the Brandom case, Tarvel had left the hotel ten minutes before the robbery and Alcott had phoned Hapwood's, to find Tarvel there, ten minutes after the episode of the stolen gems. Thus Tarvel, taking a cab trip at the crucial time, couldn't offer any more facts on Thorne or Cardiff than could Alcott, who had been with his guests during the

robbery.

Similarly, on the night of the Cardiff robbery, if Tarvel and Alcott had only arrived a little sooner they might have seen Thorne on the mezzanine and given him an alibi. Or if they hadn't seen him, or had by any chance gone up to Cardiff's room, they might have been able to brand Thorne as something more than an innocent bystander.

Methodically, The Shadow was running a pencil over the route from the Metrolite to Hapwood's, the route Diane had taken during her surprise trip with Inspector Cardona. Perhaps the recollection of that event was what brought the half-whispered laugh from The Shadow's lips, just as a tiny light glowed from the wall across the table.

Picking up earphones, The Shadow answered the call, which was from his contact man, Burbank. Word had just come from Rutledge Mann in the children's room at the public library. Mann had received a phone call from Weston and had told the commissioner that Cranston was very busy among the books and couldn't be disturbed. The commissioner was going to disturb him anyway, by stopping around in half an hour, in his official car.

All of which meant that The Shadow would have to drop his present research and go back to Mother Goose. Hanging up the earphones, The Shadow folded the traced map along with his lists and turned off the bluish light.

A strange laugh faded in the blackness, a singular, significant laugh, that was followed by complete silence in the sanctum. It seemed to have etched a message, that peal of parting mirth.

A message that The Shadow, by some quirk of analysis, had laid his finger on crime's full answer.

XV

FINDING Lamont Cranston in the kiddies' corner of the library was something of a novelty for Commissioner Weston, particularly as from all appearances, Cranston must have been there for hours. Piled all around him were editions of Mother Goose, which brought a snort from Weston.

"Still back at the starting post," commented Weston. "Where do you think this will get you, Cranston?"

"Mann and I have found it very enlightening," assured Cranston, gesturing to the patient-mannered broker, who was studying a bibliography of Mother Goose. "By the way, we've tracked down the edition from which those three verses were clipped."

"You mean two verses, Cranston."

"No, three. Here's another I meant to show you. I found it outside of Cardiff's room after we were there last night."

The statement was truthful enough, since Cranston actually had come across the Black Sheep clipping somewhere far outside Cardiff's room and at a time much more recent than last night. Receiving the clipping, Weston studied it and raised his eyebrows.

"This does apply to the Cardiff, case!" exclaimed the commissioner. "We'll have to show it to him later."

"Where is Cardiff at present?" inquired Cranston.

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"Trying to mollify his relatives." Weston sat down in a half-pint chair provided for the regular patrons of this book section. "You know, Cranston" – the commissioner's tone became confidential – "I'm a bit dubious about that chap."

"How so?"

"He says he tried to trick the girl into a confession; instead, she made away with his securities. Yet somehow she didn't get them. I wonder if the two were just framing something for publicity."

"Possibly."

"Besides" – Weston shifted uneasily in the undersized chair – "Cardiff talked about two attackers. One was a masked man, the other answered the description of The Shadow. Maybe there wasn't any."

"I see," nodded Cranston. "You think that Cardiff talked about two men to make it look as though they canceled out."

"That's it. He'd have been a dub to let just one person get away. I must admit, though, that Cardiff was a bit groggy when we found him in his room."

Cranston could have testified to that in first-hand style. As The Shadow, he'd really had to put a few finishing wallops on Cardiff in order to get started on a belated pursuit of the masked man, a quest which he had turned into that of trailing Diane in Shrevvy's cab.

"We're going to talk to Thorne," decided Weston. "He knows quite a bit about this fellow Cardiff. Thorne says Cardiff was trying to talk himself into the chain store business all along."

People were buzzing for quiet in keeping with the "Silence" sign above the children's books. Weston looked around, much annoyed and thereby made matters worse, when the chair cracked loudly under his weight.

"Let's start," suggested Cranston. "Where are we meeting Thorne?"

"Over at Hapwood's," replied Weston. "I want to find out how friendly those two are – if at all."

On the way out, Cranston paused to speak with Mann and give approval to what his friend had learned regarding Mother Goose.

"The Harlequin Edition," nodded Cranston. "A limited printing. See what more you can learn about it, Mann."

Reaching Hapwood's, the visitors found no difficulty in learning how he felt about Thorne and vice versa. Thorne was waiting there when Cranston and Weston arrived and he looked very stuffy, seated in a big chair opposite Hapwood, who in his turn was in anything but a jolly King Cole mood.

Thorne with his haughty manner, those cold, steel-blue eyes that glinted hard, might be the sort to make the average person quail; but all his dominating force was lost on Hapwood. Big though he was, Thorne was outbulked by Hapwood, whose portly frame seemed capable of absorbing all the glares that Thorne could deliver, even though Hapwood's massive face did wear a surly expression.

Now, with other persons on hand, Hapwood became himself. He was King Cole again, enthroned in the only chair that could support his avoirdupois, though it had to be conceded that Thorne's weight was a strain on the

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second largest chair in the room. In fact, when Hapwood put himself in motion, Thorne immediately began to swell himself as if to prove that his size would not lose in comparison.

"Cigars and drinks!" Hapwood bellowed to a passing servant. "Whatever my guests want, they shall have. Of course for me" – he settled back in his chair and gestured to his meerschaum and the huge glass beside it – "my choice is always pipe and brandy.

"You arrived just at the right time, gentlemen." This was to Weston and Cranston. "Thorne and I were discussing some ethical questions and we find we do not quite agree. Perhaps your opinions would help."

Thorne produced a harsh objection.

"It's not a matter for opinion," Thorne declaimed. "In any business, a man has the right to buy and sell as he deems best. Hapwood seems to think that I am doing this through others, as though I were afraid to show my hand. If I chose to do so, I would have the right."

"You said that before," reminded Hapwood, "and I said you were doing that very thing."

"But I am not!" stormed Thorne. "If you mean in the case of young Cardiff" – abruptly Thorne caught himself – "suppose I admitted that Cardiff bought those Amalgamated securities for me. Would that please you, Hapwood?"

"The admission would," rejoined Hapwood, "but not the fact."

"All right, have it your way, or both ways. Cardiff may deny it, but he was my front. Now you can see why I am worried, gentlemen" – Thorne turned a troubled gaze toward the two arrivals – "because next thing, Cardiff will be expecting me to share his loss."

Hapwood was pouring himself some brandy. He stopped to deliver one of his rolling laughs.

"Delightful, Thorne." Hapwood sipped the brandy. "Most delightful. I mean you, not the brandy. So you are trying to tell us that you were the real victim of last night's robbery."

"Potentially, yes," acknowledged Thorne. "Have you any objections?"

"None." Hapwood stared over his glass at Thorne. "Except that I think you should have been there with Cardiff, to help protect your mutual property. He's about your size, isn't he?" Hapwood eyed Thorne's bulk anew. "I should think that the two of you would be too much for almost anyone."

Before Thorne could reply to that pointed comment, two new visitors arrived: Tarvel and Alcott. Contrasted with Thorne and Hapwood, this pair looked really rabbit. Thorne was the first to bulldoze the arrivals, taking advantage of the fact that Hapwood was still too busy laughing.

"Hapwood thinks you are straw men," Thorne told them, not realizing how funny it sounded to address two lightweights by that title. "Just a couple of buyers that I'm using to get at his holdings. Is that true?"

Both Tarvel and Alcott shook their heads.

"Don't be worried, you chaps," broke in Hapwood. "I don't mind if it's the truth. I'm retiring anyway and I don't care who buys me out. You see" – Hapwood became reflective – "I conducted my business scrupulously during the period of wartime shortages. I had nothing to do with black markets and hot money."

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Hapwood's eyes took on an accusing stare, but his eyes were distant, rather than narrowed.

"Instead, I improved my properties," continued Hapwood, "and now I can sell out at an honest profit. That's why I've been wondering about these recent robberies. Bonds disappeared, then jewels, but nobody seems to know their value. The Brandom gems were appraised surprisingly low, I hear, and now the Cardiff stocks appear to have been blank paper. Maybe certain people don't want it known, just what their losses were.

"It doesn't apply in my case, because the money that crooks came after wasn't here. But the papers that I lost" – Hapwood nudged a big thumb toward his wall safe – "contained a great deal of correspondence on financial matters. Offers to obtain priorities, to handle government contracts, even to buy jewelry and securities at peculiar prices. I wonder if those were what the robbers were really after!"

Commissioner Weston became alert.

"You mean they might be clues to these Mother Goose crimes?" he demanded.

"If you can find them, yes," acknowledged Hapwood. "The next best plan would be to go through my office records. They might give some inkling to these offers that I rejected."

Pausing a few moments, Hapwood had another idea and gestured affably to Thorne.

"Perhaps Thorne could help you," Hapwood suggested. "He unquestionably heard from the same sources. Of course I am sure that Thorne conducted his business with the same integrity that I showed with mine."

Thorne acknowledged the compliment with a bow; then arose in leisurely fashion. Turning to Weston, Thorne said:

"I shall look through my papers, commissioner. I have a miscellaneous lot in my penthouse. It will take me an hour or more. Where will I find you then?"

Weston named his favorite rendezvous, the Cobalt Club, and Thorne bowed out. It wasn't long before Weston and Cranston followed, leaving Tarvel and Alcott to discuss their business of chain store purchases with Hapwood. Outside the house, Weston became annoyed when Cranston told him:

"Sorry, commissioner, but I have an appointment. I won't be going your way."

"Not to the club?" exclaimed Weston. "But I wanted you to go over Thorne's papers with me!"

"That's not for an hour yet," reminded Cranston. "I hope to be there by that time."

Somewhat mollified, Weston pulled away in his official car, only to remember that he might as well have offered to drop Cranston off wherever he wanted to go. Looking back, Weston found he was too late. Cranston had gone his own way, because he was no longer in sight.

Except that when Cranston disappeared, it didn't necessarily mean that he had gone his way.

Lamont Cranston might have gone The Shadow's!

XVI

AT the very time when The Shadow was resuming his cloaked identity, Diane Marlow was wondering just how soon she would hear from Lamont Cranston. At present Diane was stationed very comfortably in Margo's apartment, but Diane wasn't exactly in a mood to be comfortable anywhere.

Too many things were at stake and every hour was increasing the tension. Hence Diane was very glad when she heard a buzz from the door bell. Of course it might only be Margo Lane, who had gone out a while before, but Diane had a hope that the caller would prove to be Cranston.

Instead, the arrival proved to be a delivery boy, bringing a box of flowers for Miss Margo Lane.

It was only right that Diane should put the flowers in a vase. They proved to be magnificent roses and while admiring them, Diane couldn't resist the temptation of looking at the card in the accompanying envelope. Already, Diane had guessed that Margo had been piqued over what she considered a rivalry where Diane was concerned. Now that it all had been straightened, Diane's hunch was that Cranston had sent these roses to Margo.

But Diane didn't find a card in the envelope.

What she found was a printed slip of paper cut from the page of a book, which bore these startling lines:

Jack and Jill

Went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water.

Jack fell down

And broke his crown

And Jill came tumbling after.

Mother Goose was in again!

Who could have sent this message?

Oddly, the first name that flashed to Diane's mind was Cranston's, yet there was a reason for it. Only Cranston knew that Diane was at this apartment. How anybody else could have discovered it, was a mystery to Diane.

If not Cranston, it could be Rex Cardiff, assuming that he had been responsible for the precious message with its Black Sheep reference. Eliminating Cardiff, the next name that struck Diane was that of Winslow Thorne.

That made Diane grim.

Diane remembered Thorne only too well. Kindly enough at the time of the Brandom robbery, he'd turned quite the opposite after the Cardiff affair. Diane could picture Thorne's broad face, blatant with its shout to "Stop that girl!"

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Looking in the telephone book, Diane found Thorne's number and phoned it, intending to thank him sweetly for the flowers, to see what reaction she would get. However, the number didn't answer. Thorne was out.

New determination gripped Diane. She wasn't far away from where Thorne lived. So Diane put the slip of paper on Margo's table, wrote a brief note saying where she'd gone, and sallied out into the dark.

It was disconcerting, this trip. All the way to Thorne's, Diane had the disturbing sensation that some one was following her. When she reached the address, Diane cut across the street, slid into a doorway and looked to right and left, expecting to see furtive figures trailing her. None were in sight; maybe they'd guessed her purpose and had also taken to cover.

So Diane bided her time and whiled it by looking at the apartment house where Thorne lived. It was a handsome building, but not a very tall one: ten floors, with a penthouse in addition. Diane could see the penthouse looking darkly like a turret mounted on a deck, as represented by the roof of the apartment house.

Crossing the street, Diane took quick looks again and spotting no one, decided her imagination had been at fault. She entered the apartment house, found that it had an automatic elevator and pressed the button to bring the car down. As it arrived, the door opened and a man stepped out so suddenly that Diane didn't immediately recognize him. By the time she did, she was recognizing something else, a gun pressed against her, muzzle first. A voice gritted for Diane to enter the elevator.

The man was Rex Cardiff.

Pushing a button that bore the letters P.H., Cardiff started the trip to the top. In an ugly tone, he stated his case.

"I thought you'd be here," said Cardiff. "That's why I played a hunch and came down with the elevator. If it had been anybody else, I would have kept the gun out of sight, that's all."

Diane gave the gun a nervous glance.

"A nice game you and Thorne have played," continued Cardiff, bluntly. "Making me accessory to the robbery of the Brandom gems and pulling the envelope switch on the stocks my family bought."

Despite herself, Diane began to voice a denial, only to be interrupted.

"Thorne is a fox," declared Cardiff. "He hooked me at the start. That talk about setting me up in business was just a blind for his real game, robbery."

"You ought to know," retorted Diane, becoming so angry that she forgot the gun. "It took two of you to handle Artemus Hapwood. When the police remind you of that, you won't be able to bluff off your part in the Brandom steal."

The gun muzzle pressed hard against Diane and she gasped with fright as she saw Cardiff's finger actually quiver on the trigger. Then, as the elevator stopped at the penthouse level, the man's words came grimly:

"Not yet. I'm going to need you. If Thorne thinks he knows how to arrange a frame, he's due for a lesson."

Diane was chilled. She moved forward mechanically from the elevator as Cardiff used the gun muzzle as a persuader. Silent, dark, the penthouse nevertheless seemed to shriek a word, as though plucking it from Cardiff's thoughts.

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That word was:

"Murder!"

How long she could stall, Diane had no idea. That depended upon Cardiff. The best that Diane could do was play for some favorable opportunity. At least there seemed a chance for such as Cardiff marched Diane forward into a room he seemed to know. There, when he pulled the cord of a big floor lamp, Cardiff announced:

"Thorne probably won't keep the loot around here, not where anybody would find it. That won't matter too much, though. I wouldn't want the hot stuff anyway, because it will prove his guilt and I'll get back my share.

"What we're going to do is look for it. At least you are, so you'll leave plenty of finger prints. We want to show good enough reason for Thorne to cut loose with a gun and a few obvious clues will help – like these."

Roughly, Cardiff plucked away Diane's hat and tossed it on a chair. The girl was wearing a light cape that she'd borrowed from Margo's stock, so Cardiff whipped it from her shoulders and flung it beside the hat. Then, as they crossed the ample living room, Cardiff halted Diane and added:

"Shoes next. Kick them over in that corner, behind the big chair. Thorne will never find them, but the police will. They'll figure you were doing a sneak around the place."

Diane couldn't help but obey orders and now she realized that stalling tactics wouldn't help. In fact, stalling was part of Cardiff's own game. Shuffling her shoes into the corner, Diane continued with the farce that Cardiff demanded, prying into tables, book-cases and elsewhere, leaving everything in disarray.

It was becoming horribly obvious. Cardiff intended to murder her immediately after Thorne's arrival. In fact, he said that much, when he spoke in a low, ugly tone:

"I'll show Thorne what it is to make a fast getaway. No stupid business of giving him a chance to find a body and get rid of it. People will hear the shots" – behind Diane's back, Cardiff reached for a casement window and flung it open with his free hand – "but I'll be gone by the time they get here. Right down the fire tower, leaving my empty gun with Thorne!"

Diane's hands, planted on a table, seemed to glue themselves there. Her head was tilting forward and she wondered if a fainting spell could possibly help. She was close to such, when the breeze from the window revived her and she stiffened upward; just as a snarl came from Cardiff.

Then Diane was staring in the same direction as Cardiff, not toward the main door of the room, but toward another that must have been reachable by a side route from the elevator. In that doorway stood a man, whose determined expression equalled Cardiff's.

The man was Winslow Thorne. He had a gun too and like Cardiff's, it was leveled straight at Diane Marlow!

XVII

HERE was a dilemma indeed.

Between two gun points, Diane felt herself the center of the situation and didn't like it; not at all.

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In fact, Cardiff wasn't too pleased, as his snarl betrayed. The person who relished the proposition was Thorne. It gave him opportunity to gloat; and gloat he did.

"A small question of murder," was Thorne's terse comment. "The question is not who commits it, but who is to take the blame."

Out of an incoherent snarl, Cardiff mouthed the answer:

"You'll take the blame, Thorne!"

"I'm not so sure," retorted Thorne. "I observed this set-up the moment I walked in. You were too busy to realize that I'd arrived home, Cardiff. Of course, I took an unfair advantage. I saw the lights from down on the street. However, I think I have checked your game."

Cardiff snapped back the answer:

"Just how?"

"One killing" – Thorne gestured his odd hand toward Diane – "but two guns. It's something that our friend Hapwood would term unethical."

In reply, Cardiff prodded Diane harder with his gun muzzle. Thorne shook his head.

"Very foolish," declared Thorne. "Kill the girl and I kill you. The guns will bear out my story. You slipped, Cardiff, giving me a chance to slide around from the elevator and pick up this revolver."

The hope that filled Diane faded suddenly when Cardiff retorted:

"All right, Thorne. Let's make a deal. The girl dies anyway, because she knows too much. That's settled, isn't it?"

Thorne's nod was like Diane's death warrant. Slowly, he lowered his gun, yet not far enough for Diane to dare a break for freedom. At least she was pleased when Cardiff's gun relaxed. He too was playing wary as he sidestepped to face Thorne, yet kept his gun in Diane's general direction.

Curtly, Cardiff demanded:

"Let's hear the terms, Thorne."

As Diane watched, she noted the slightest of motions from Thorne's revolver. It was working toward Cardiff and all the while Diane could feel the sharp spank of the breeze from the broad window which was behind her and also behind Cardiff, except that Cardiff was closer to it.

Then, through Diane's strained thoughts, the lines of a verse flung themselves:

"Jack and Jill

Went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water."

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This was the hill, this penthouse!

The pail of water was whatever they intended to find here at Thorne's; that was, whatever Cardiff and Diane were to find, for they here Jack and Jill!

That was only the half of it. The rest came plunging through Diane's brain:

"Jack fell down

And broke his crown

And Jill came tumbling after."

So that was Thorne's game! Of course he'd dispose of Cardiff first, for this Jack – with his jack of hearts smile – was armed and dangerous. Cardiff's death accomplished, it would be Diane's turn to play Jill and the tumble would be like Cardiff's – out through the penthouse window!

To Diane's distraught mind there was but one prospect, that of a mad attempt at escape, no matter how implausible the chance might be. To jump a gun might be crazy, to try to escape two of them, crazier still. But Diane could only think of that broad door, that other door, which led out to the elevator. Beyond it, she could see the door to the fire tower, the very path that Cardiff had mentioned.

If Diane could reach either, she'd be lucky; nevertheless, it was worth the try. In fact anything was better than remaining frozen, with death the only reward. Of a sudden, Diane came to life and sprang toward that wide door.

Out of nowhere, came blackness to meet her. Diane couldn't say whether it came from the elevator or the fire tower, for both of their doors seemed to waver and fling in that wild moment. She realized that living blackness was swarming her way until it was eclipsed by total darkness, which happened when Thorne, right beside the floor lamp, pulled the switch.

Guns belched in the blackness.

Thorne's tongued toward Cardiff, of course, in keeping with the nursery rhyme. Cardiff's fire spat wildly in Diane's direction. Then, the blackness that was within blackness met Diane and whirled her, still unscathed, to a safe corner of the room.

The Shadow!

In his drive, the cloaked rescuer had reached Diane and was flinging her to safety, following with a spin of his own. Those were the sort of whirls that changed The Shadow into a living gun turret, but that wouldn't happen, not in close quarters like this, until other gunners had their play. So far The Shadow hadn't announced his presence, nor would he draw shots his way until a timely moment.

A few seconds were all The Shadow required; meanwhile, guns flared in the darkness and took their toll. As she landed back against the wall in the corner, Diane saw and heard the result.

One gun jabbed twice, toward the window. It came from the broad doorway toward which Diane had fled, only to encounter The Shadow. Sharp shots those and perfectly placed, an indication to Diane that Thorne had made a swift and effective change of position. The answer was a howl and with it, against the window, Diane saw Cardiff's form reel backward, outward, to be swallowed by the darkness beyond.

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That was the end of Jack. Cardiff's ten story plunge didn't bring back a trailing wail, because if such was uttered, it was drowned by other gunfire.

One gun, of course, was probing for Jill, which meant Diane. But that wasn't all; shots seemed to come from everywhere, for now The Shadow was shooting, intent upon clipping a murderer who had wrested the privilege of murder from an unsuccessful rival.

The Shadow's shots were toward the big broad door. Oddly, they were answered from the other door, which to Diane was more proof of Thorne's quick-shifting tactics. But The Shadow was whizzing elsewhere, faster than Thorne ever could have. So fast and frequent did the gun stabs ride that Diane couldn't believe the field was limited to a mere pair of fighters.

Main door – side door – corner – window – from here, there, everywhere came gunfire until above all rode the strident mirth of The Shadow's mighty laugh, like a prediction of certain triumph. Guns were popping now in the middle of the room, so close that they would have been deadly, except that their spurts were directed upward.

Weapons clashed, with hard, furious swings. Diane could hear the impact of powerful, smashing fighters in the dark. As at Cardiff's, it turned into a lashing fray that simmered to two fighters locked beside the window. This time, Diane was present at the finish.

The webbed blackness of a cloaked arm rose; the sweep of a gloved fist laid a glancing blow to a head beneath. Moments later, a solitary shape was finding Diane in the darkness, steering her out toward either the elevator or fire tower, she didn't care which.

For Diane knew that back beside the window lay Thorne, stunned by the conqueror who was completing Diane's own rescue; the victor called The Shadow!

The elevator was The Shadow's choice, but it wasn't at this level. Somebody was using it, for Diane could hear its thrum. Calmly, The Shadow spoke to Diane, questioning her as to how she was. Gripped by odd recollections, Diane began stammering about her hat, her coat, her shoes.

The Shadow returned and found them for her with a tiny flashlight, his expert search accompanied by the obligato of Thorne's increasing moans, over by the window. By the time The Shadow rejoined Diane, the elevator was up, so they descended in it.

Strange, that trip down.

For the first time, Diane really saw The Shadow, but still his identity was concealed. The upturn of his cloak collar, the downtilt of his hat brim, hid his features perfectly. When they reached the ground floor, The Shadow hurried Diane out and around the corner, her speed unhampered, for she'd put on her shoes in the elevator.

Then, Diane was in Shrevvy's cab, riding off to somewhere, while from the distance, far back, came the trail of The Shadow's strange laugh!

XVIII

COMMISSIONER WESTON was very wrath indeed.

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To prove it, His Excellency, or whatever a police commissioner should be called, kept pacing Hapwood's living room until the ancient floor-boards creaked, while a silent audience sat by.

This was the day after things at Thorne's and Weston hadn't arrived anywhere since. He had chunks of evidence, of course, but nothing to go with them.

Angrily, Weston flipped a piece of paper on the table. It was the verse that referred to Jack and Jill.

"It was the wind-up," stormed Weston. "Thorne getting rid of his accomplices. He brought them there with a message like this – Cardiff and the Marlow girl – and they were too dumb to know that they were Jack and Jill. Or maybe they just picked that jingle themselves and he turned the trick on them!"

Having once been Old King Cole, Hapwood took it upon himself to study the clip that referred to Jack and Jill.

"You found Cardiff's body," stated Hapwood, "but what became of the girl?"

"She slugged Thorne and got away," explained Weston. "Inspector Cardona met Thorne staggering out and let him go, thinking he'd find the girl up in the penthouse. Only she was gone" – Weston turned to glower at Cardona, who was sitting by – "and so was Thorne when the inspector came down to look for him."

"I called the Cobalt Club first, commissioner," reminded Cardona. "You'd told me that Thorne was to meet you there. I didn't want to bring him there under arrest. It's against the club rules."

That should have brought a smile from Cranston who was also present, but his mind was otherwise occupied at this moment.

"About that Mother Goose book, commissioner," Cranston began. "I have been doing considerable research –"

"Of course you have," interposed Weston. "The only place I can ever reach you by phone is at the public library and even then, you're always busy in the children's corner. Just like a little mouse."

"So quiet," added Cranston, "that you don't even know I'm there."

"Of course I know you're there," retorted Weston. "I'm always told so."

"And you take their word for it."

"Why not? Now listen, Cranston, put away that report on Mother Goose. I don't want to know about the missing editions or whatever they are. We'll wait until the big day when the school-children appoint a Boy Commissioner, unless Cardona wants to play at being Boy Inspector right now."

Cardona still had an argument.

"I tried to reach you here, commissioner," said Joe, "but the line was always busy."

"Tarvel and Alcott were making long distance calls," explained Hapwood, apologetically. "They still want to buy more stores. I just went to sleep and let them go ahead."

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"That you did," affirmed Tarvel, from a corner chair. "We didn't know that Inspector Cardona was trying to reach you here."

"The fault was really mine," put in Alcott to Weston. "When the inspector finally put a call through. I was expecting long distance. I just told him to phone the Cobalt Club. Perhaps I should have awakened Mr. Hapwood."

Weston dismissed the whole matter with an impatient gesture.

"All I can say is, find Thorne!" stormed Weston. "The girl is important, but Thorne takes precedent. He killed Cardiff and that's more serious than robbery. I want you to find a murderer!" Though Weston snapped the final sentence at Cardona, it was Cranston who had the answer.

"I'll find the murderer," stated Cranston. "All I need is the proper cooperation on the subject of Mother Goose. Only I'll be other places than the public library from now on, so I'll call you when I need your assistance, commissioner."

"My assistance?" demanded Weston. "How?"

"For a round-up," returned Cranston. "You're after a murderer and at least one accomplice, aren't you? I may need some squad cars in a hurry."

"You'll have them," promised Weston, "and a lot of mounted police if you want. I'll even arrange for the Fire Department if you wish. Just call for men and you'll have them, if you'll only talk about a murderer instead of Mother Goose!"

They left Hapwood's and rode away in the commissioner's car. This time Cranston was along and though the afternoon was late, there was still enough time for him to add some data to his previous lists.

It was grimly simple this time. The Shadow's two lists could be completed in combination with this brief notation:

THORNE CASE

Thorne – at home

Cardiff – murdered

Diane – witness

Others all at Hapwood's

Cranston was writing that with ink of vivid blue. Weston noted the action and impolitely stole a glance over his friend's shoulder. By then, the writing had vanished; Cranston was using the sort that The Shadow employed when sending messages to his agents.

What Weston thought was that Cranston had turned the paper over to fold the writing inside, for Cranston was creasing the paper downward. So Weston saw nothing, nor did he hear anything.

The laugh that Cranston gave was completely repressed by his tightened lips. If a laugh at all, it was of an inward sort.

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Yet it stood for the laugh of The Shadow!

XIX

DARKNESS had just replaced dusk when Inspector Joe Cardona arrived at a little store called the Book Worm in response to a telephone call. It was rather a surprise call, for it came from Lamont Cranston, who had been riding with Cardona in the commissioner's car, only an hour before.

At least Cardona wasn't surprised to find that the Book Worm was a book store. Its title rather defined it as such.

The shop specialized in old books and remainders, the latter terms signifying surplus copies of books that publishers no longer planned to list and which were therefore sold in bargain lots.

Cardona found Cranston among the remainders. Swarthy Joe lost something of his poker-faced attitude when he saw the book that Cranston showed him. It was a copy of Mother Goose, the sort of thing that Commissioner Weston didn't want to hear about.

It was a compliment to Cardona that Cranston had considered that he might be interested. After all, Weston hadn't said that people couldn't talk about Mother Goose on the side.

"Here's luck," Cranston told Cardona, displaying the book and its fancy-colored jacket. "The only copy of the Harlequin Edition of Mother Goose in any New York book store."

"How come?" asked Cardona.

"Because this shop bought the whole remainder," explained Cranston, "and they sold all except one copy, which they purposely kept. They like to have samples of all the remainders they handle, just for comparison."

Cardona nodded.

"I've talked with the clerk," Cranston continued, "and he tells me that a few weeks ago, he sold a half a dozen of these books to one customer."

"Does he remember the customer?"

"No, except that he was a rather big man. The light is dim over there by the counter" – Cranston gestured that way – "and the clerk was very busy. But he remembered a sale of six and also that the man said he wanted them for his grandchildren."

Cardona began to make a note of it.

"Check on Thorne's grandchildren," stated Joe. "Find out if he has six – or more –"

"Or less," put in Cranston, "or any. That was just an excuse. Wait, here comes the clerk. Perhaps he has some more information."

The clerk had it, and in a tangible way. He was unwrapping a flat package and as he finished, he triumphantly displayed another copy of the Harlequin Edition.

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"This just came in by messenger," the clerk announced. "Very timely, I'd say, if you want to buy a copy. It's in fine shape –"

Thumbing the pages as he spoke, the clerk gave a dumb-faced stare. Among the pages were large square gaps, where portions of the book had been clipped with scissors. But Cardona didn't take it dumbly.

"It's one of Thorne's books!" exclaimed the inspector, seizing the volume. "Look, Mr. Cranston, these are missing rhymes. The only question is which rhymes."

"Easy enough to check them," returned Cranston, taking the mutilated book. "Here, I'll call the page numbers and you tally by the sample copy that we just looked at."

Tally they did. One by one, Cranston discovered that King Cole, Contrary Mary, Black Sheep, Jack and Jill, were the missing jingles. Each told a story in itself, by its jagged absence. But those weren't all. As Cranston flipped another page, he was greeted by a further gap – and more.

From between the pages fluttered the missing verse that had been cut from this additional page. Cranston picked it up and showed it to Cardona. The verse read:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

All the King's horses

And all the King's men

Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty

Together again.

Muttering the jingle, Cardona tried to guess its implication. Then:

"Thorne sends these to the crooks who work with him," stated Joe. "I'd like to know who this one was for, and what's more I'd like to know who's meant by Humpty Dumpty."

Cranston's reply was a slight gesture along the book store aisle; turning, Cardona saw Diane Marlow approaching. Reaching one hand for his revolver, the other for a pair of handcuffs, Cardona was about to make a quick arrest when Cranston stopped him.

"I don't think the girl is involved," said Cranston calmly. "She wouldn't have come here if she were. You see, I happened to know how to reach her and I sent for her."

"But she received messages –"

"And so did I, right now," interposed Cranston, gesturing to the Humpty Dumpty clipping. "It's a nice way of planting crime on someone who isn't concerned with it."

"Unless that message was for this girl," began Cardona; then, as Diane arrived, Joe decided to follow Cranston's plan. "All right, Mr. Cranston, what's the next step?"

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As he said this, Cardona gave Diane a cordial bow, or at least as cordial a bow as he was capable of making. The blonde gave the inspector a grateful smile. It seemed good to be getting some cooperation from the law.

"Perhaps we should see the commissioner," suggested Cranston, "now that we can show him this cut-up version of Mother Goose."

"He'd accuse you of being the cut-up," returned Cardona. "You know what he wants. We're supposed to find the murderer in back of all these crimes and that means Thorne."

Toying with the Humpty Dumpty slip, Cranston nodded. Then:

"There's no way of producing Thorne," said Cranston, "but we might drop around and see Hapwood."

"Why go to Hapwood's? We were there only a few hours ago."

"Hapwood was King Cole," reminded Cranston. "He might be able to identify Humpty Dumpty for us. If he could remember some of that correspondence of his, he might give us a lead. The commissioner certainly would be interested in forestalling some new crime."

That convinced Cardona. They took a cab outside the Book Worm, and rode straight to Hapwood's, with Diane as a member of their party. Though silent, the girl was thinking intently, wondering what Hapwood's reaction would be when he remembered her as the person who had delivered envelopes stuffed with blank paper instead of stock.

Diane's wonder was wasted.

The moment they rang Hapwood's door bell, a servant admitted them, and hastily beckoned Cardona upstairs. He hurried there, with Cranston and Diane close behind him. On the way, the servant buzzed quick words to Cardona and the inspector had his gun out as he strode between the curtains into Hapwood's big living room.

There, seated in his heavy chair, was Hapwood, his hands half raised. Confronting him was Thorne, gripping a revolver to keep Hapwood covered. As Cardona entered, Thorne turned and let his own gun fall when he saw Cardona's weapon.

Reaching for Diane's arm, Cardona drew the girl into the light as he declared:

"You're wanted for murder, Thorne! Here is the witness who can prove your guilt!"

From the doorway, Lamont Cranston watched, silent as he stood between the curtains. It seemed that crime's game had cracked wide, without the services of The Shadow!

XX

WINSLOW THORNE was still defiant in his big bluff style. Anything to brazen it out seemed his motto, or so Diane Marlow thought. The accusation of murder brought a sneer from Thorne:

"Whose murder?"

"You killed Rex Cardiff," denounced Cardona. "Don't try to deny it, Thorne. This girl was a witness."

Thorne stared hard at Diane.

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"She was more than a witness," he affirmed. "She was to be a victim. Cardiff's victim, not mine. Ask her."

Starting a nod, Diane halted it.

"Yes, Cardiff intended to kill me," Diane declared. "He wanted to plant the crime on Thorne –"

"So I came in and planted it on myself," interrupted Thorne. "Ridiculous! Why should I do that?"

"Because Cardiff was Jack," explained Diane, "and I was Jill."

Now Thorne really stared.

"What nonsense is this?" he demanded. "First I come here to square matters with Hapwood; now people are talking in riddles. All I did was save this girl's life" – he made a despairing gesture toward Diane – "and now see how she thanks me!"

Oddly, Diane couldn't help but concede that Thorne had saved her life, or at least had prolonged it. If he hadn't seen the Jack and Jill message, if he'd had no part in it, his words could be taken at face value. Noting Diane's hesitancy, Thorne declared:

"Matters are badly mixed. If this girl can claim she was framed, so can I. She came rushing out of Brandom's when I was on the way there. I wasn't even near Cardiff's hotel suite when she dashed out through the lobby. At my place, I simply exerted the right of any householder to protect my property. I had to handle Cardiff tactfully; the man was murderous. At that I didn't shoot him."

It was Hapwood who blared a loud objection as he bulked himself to his feet.

"You lie, Thorne! Who else could have been there?"

Thorne rubbed his chin, puzzled.

"You'll be accusing me next!" Hapwood stormed. "Or you'll try to lay the blame on chaps like Tarvel and Alcott. Fortunately, they have alibis, just as I have. If you want to be totally preposterous" – Hapwood turned, inspired by an after thought – "why don't you accuse the commissioner's friend, Mr. Cranston?"

As Hapwood gestured toward the doorway, Cranston, speaking from between the darkness of the curtains, volunteered a dry reply.

"It wouldn't be too preposterous," stated Cranston. "After all, my alibi might not hold. I doubt that even Inspector Cardona can say where I was yesterday afternoon."

"I can answer that one," returned Cardona, figuring that Cranston wanted an answer. "You were at the public library."

"You're sure, inspector?"

"You were there when the commissioner phoned. In fact you were so busy studying Mother Goose that somebody had to answer the phone for you."

"In other words, inspector," returned Cranston, "I might not have been there at all."

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Cardona hadn't thought of it that way.

"I guess you're right," he conceded. "You could have been somewhere else."

"Like Tarvel and Alcott," suggested Cranston, "the night they were supposed to be at the Hotel Metrolite, the time Hapwood claims he phoned them there."

That brought a snort from Hapwood.

"Where else could they have been?"

"Right here," returned Cranston. "Ready to tie you up when you learned that the police were coming here. They still had time to hurry out and go back to the hotel, at your order, Hapwood."

Hapwood stared as though he didn't understand.

"Old King Cole," defined Cranston. "He called for his pipe and his bowl. Perhaps the pipe represented the bonds from Quade's first robbery, loot that he passed to Tarvel. The bowl could have been the jewelry from Quade's second job, that he passed along to Alcott."

A disdainful expression spread itself over Hapwood's massive face to show his depreciation of Cranston's theory.

"Fiddlers Three," added Cranston. "Quade, Tarvel and Alcott. They all received the same message, clipped from Mother Goose books. Not messages pertaining to coming crime, but a summons to come to crime's headquarters, from their chief, who represented King Cole."

"A most entertaining theory," acknowledged Hapwood. "So you believe that I misrepresented facts in stating that my attackers were big men and brawny."

"With purpose too," put in Cranston. "The description fitted a pair like Thorne and Cardiff."

Folding his arms, Hapwood smiled broadly and waited for Cranston to go on.

"Once the police misjudged the purport of the King Cole message," continued Cranston, calmly, "it was smart for you to send another before each succeeding crime. The night of the Brandom robbery you used Contrary Mary. Tarvel left ten minutes early to come over here, while Alcott fixed himself a perfect alibi."

"Tarvel did come here!" snapped Hapwood. "He talked to Thorne on the phone, ten minutes after the crime!"

"No he didn't!" put in Thorne, excitedly. "He talked only to Alcott. I'm sure of it."

"Tarvel didn't talk to anyone," assured Cranston, coolly, "because he couldn't have gotten here in twenty minutes. The transverse was closed off across Central Park, so the trip would have taken thirty minutes. The only man who talked to Alcott was Hapwood, covering up for Tarvel."

The statement was a clincher, but Hapwood didn't take it that way. He even put on a jolly smile and waited for Cranston to continue.

"You learned Diane's address" – Cranston was directly accusing Hapwood now – "and planted a Black Sheep message there as preliminary to the Cardiff robbery. You were the masked man in that instance, Hapwood;

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not Thorne. You left here ahead of Tarvel and Alcott, staged the robbery, and made a hasty return.

"Nicely timed, that job. Tarvel and Alcott reached the hotel just too late to be implicated and gave you an alibi by saying that they'd left you here. You were the person who switched those envelopes in the dark and made off with the ones containing the Amalgamated stock."

Cardona stepped forward, bringing out his handcuff's, hoping they would be large enough to encircle Hapwood's thick wrists. Meanwhile Cranston was delivering the final accusation.

"You murdered Cardiff," Cranston told Hapwood. "You went to Thorne's, leaving your stooges, Alcott and Thorne, right here, making long distance calls. When the commissioner managed to put a call through, they told him you were asleep. He believed it, but there was someone who did not.

"That person" – Cranston paused dramatically – "calls himself The Shadow. He was outside this house, Hapwood, and he followed you, straight to Thorne's. If need be, he can testify that you were a third party in that fray, and that your shots killed Cardiff!"

It rang home to Diane, just as the shots had punched away on that fatal night. Diane remembered now that a gun had blasted from the wide door and that she'd wondered how Thorne could have shifted over there so rapidly. There hadn't been time for The Shadow to prevent Cardiff's death, because the victim himself was trying to commit murder and The Shadow's first duty was to prevent that deed. In fact, Cardiff's death was in no way undeserved.

Hapwood, however, was ready to debate that point.

"Quite remarkable," declared Hapwood. "You will say next that I sent Cardiff up to Thorne's."

"It was Cardiff's own idea," returned Cranston, "but the obvious one. Your part was sending Diane the Jack and Jill message to lure her there too. You'd heard that she wore flowers on the night of the dinner party and you managed to learn what florist supplied them."

The handcuffs were circling Hapwood's pudgy wrists. He was half turned about and the light that came from the flames in a large fireplace threw a demoniac gleam upon his face. In the glare, Hapwood's features showed a ruddy gloat.

The time for argument was past and Hapwood knew it. No use for him to wait and hear Cranston explain the final machination, how Hapwood had sent the Mother Goose book with its Humpty Dumpty clipping to the Book Worm, as a trap for Cranston himself. Right now, the trap was in reverse.

Hapwood gave it a double reverse.

Hooking Cardona's own wrists with his huge fists, Hapwood showed himself a man of power as well as bulk, by hauling the stocky inspector full about. Half lifting Cardona from his feet, Hapwood gave him a mighty heave, almost to Cranston's doorway.

At the same moment, Hapwood raised a tremendous bellow that fairly shook two ornamental screens flanking each side of the fireplace. Those screens toppled forward and across them sprang Alcott and Tarvel, Hapwood's partners in crime, each with a gun.

Cranston would have been their first target if he'd been anywhere to find. But in that interim, Hapwood's accuser had dropped back through the curtains, letting them close in front of him. A moment later, those

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curtains were parting and from their folds, a black-clad figure launched in a low, arrowlike drive, past the persons in the foreground.

The Shadow had supplanted Lamont Cranston!

Reaching Hapwood before the bulky man could grab up Thorne's lost gun, The Shadow hoisted the huge murderer and flung him hard against Tarvel and Alcott. In the confusion, Cardona heard The Shadow's quick, sharp order, uttered as he went past. Joe acted in accordance. What Cardona did was rush Thorne and Diane right out of this room where battle was to rage.

Before Tarvel and Alcott could find The Shadow with their guns, he was at the fireplace, flinging new missiles their way. The Shadow was using flaming logs that hurled masses of sparks wherever they struck. Dazzled, startled, the stooges were recoiling, leaving only Hapwood to hurl himself upon The Shadow.

Reeling about with Hapwood, The Shadow kept the man's big bulk toward his other adversaries. Meanwhile those logs were doing swift, devastating work. Their flames had reached the screens, the fancy hangings, and were jumping to the curtained doorways.

The Shadow had begun a holocaust that was turning Hapwood's domain into a hellish scene that suited its Satanic master!

Amid the crackle and the smoke, Tarvel and Alcott fled choking from the room and staggered down the stairs right into the waiting hands of Cardona and Thorne, who were backed by Hapwood's servants, honest men, who had been in ignorance of Hapwood's criminal ways.

With smoke pouring down the stairs, Cardona thrust the prisoners to the street, shoving Diane and Thorne along to safety. The open air offered the only safety now, for when Cardona turned to be back upstairs, the smoke had become too thick to penetrate.

The conflagration was vivid at the upstairs windows. Its very rapidity had attracted the attention of the neighborhood, for along with far away whine of a patrol car's siren came the greater howl and the clangor of approaching fire engine.

As everything seemed to converge upon this scene, Diane kept staring anxiously at those blazing windows, hoping to see The Shadow. Then great streams of water were meeting the flames and steam dominated the scene, until above a playing hose, Diane saw two figures gain the roof. Lighted by the glow of the still active fire, they could be identified as The Shadow and Artemus Hapwood.

The fighters parted suddenly, The Shadow wheeling toward a wall dividing Hapwood's roof from that next door, while Hapwood gained the vantage point of a cornice at the front of the house. The Shadow stumbled as he gained the parapet, then swung himself about to look for Hapwood.

Horribly the meaning of the final Mother Goose message swept home to Diane Marlow:

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall –"

They meant The Shadow, those lines! Having taken a worse choking than Hapwood from the smoke, he was exactly where the murderer wanted him, on a wall, ready for a fall!

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Only to Diane, Hapwood looked more like Humpty Dumpty as he squatted on the wall that topped the front cornice. But even at this distance, Diane could see Hapwood gloat as he aimed his gun for The Shadow.

Cardona was hauling Diane out past the curb. The clatter of horse's hoofs announced mounted police, who were arriving to fling back the crowd. All that significance was lost on Diane as she saw two guns spurt: Hapwood's, then The Shadow's!

Hapwood had fired first, but he had missed, for he was tilting away as he aimed. Hapwood's strategy worked, however, for his lean caused The Shadow's shot to go wide too. The next opportunity was Hapwood's, but to Diane's amazement, he leaned further instead of straightening; in fact, Hapwood leaned so far that his shot went up into the air.

The Shadow didn't respond with gunfire. Instead, he laughed, and grimly.

Then Diane saw why.

The front wall was responsible for Hapwood's lean. It was toppling forward, downward, cornice and all, toward the cleared sidewalk below. The fire was practically out, but that wall top hadn't stood the strain of loosening masonry, sprung by weakening timbers.

Artemus Hapwood had become his own Humpty Dumpty.

Like Diane, Cardona realized that fact as they both heard the bellowed shriek that came from the bulky figure, plunging earthward with the cornice. The hiss of water, the clatter of bricks, drowned that death cry from Hapwood's lips as he was lost in the mass of debris that reached the sidewalk with him.

Stunned like the other observers, Diane could only stare at the pyramid of bricks that had become a murderer's temporary tomb. Then, staring at the squad of motionless firemen and the mounted police on their quivering horses, Diane could feel the finish of the verse clash through her brain:

"All the King's horses

And all the King's men

Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty

Together again."

That was right, they couldn't. The law was king now, for Artemus Hapwood was no longer King Cole. He was just Humpty Dumpty and he had found his proper fate.

Briefly, a beckoning figure in black rose upon the low wall, then dropped lightly and easily to the adjoining roof. The connecting parapet had remained intact and with it, The Shadow had done likewise. Cardona understood that parting beckon; it meant that the house was safe enough to enter and begin the search for the wealth that Hapwood and his helpers had stolen.

As for The Shadow, he was off again into the darkness that veiled his mysterious way. No longer exhausted, he trailed back a peal of mirth that all could hear and comprehend.

A weird laugh, that blended into persisting echoes, The Shadow's pronouncement of a final triumph over crime!

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THE END