

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. MASKED MURDER

POLICE COMMISSIONER RALPH WESTON glanced at the last appointment on his daily calendar. It was marked 5:30 p.m., and it said: "Call Hubert Warrendale."

With a tight smile beneath his short-clipped mustache, Weston reached for the telephone and gave Warrendale's number. At that moment, Weston heard a brief knock, followed by the opening of the office door. The commissioner looked up to see a swarthy, poker-faced man, of stocky build.

"I'm here, commissioner."

The arrival was Inspector Joe Cardona of the New York City police, the ace of Weston's staff. Cardona made it a habit to be punctual, which sometimes irked Weston, who liked to chalk up errors against inferiors in order to prevent them from becoming too self-satisfied.

Today, the commissioner had hoped that he would complete this important phone call before the ace inspector arrived to keep a five-thirty appointment. But Cardona, in his accustomed style, had shown up on schedule.

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Briskly motioning for Cardona to be seated, Weston concentrated on the telephone call. He heard a slow, precise voice answer, and recognized it as belonging to Lathan, Warrendale's secretary.

"Hello, Lathan," spoke Weston. "This is the police commissioner. Is Mr. Warrendale there?"

"Yes, commissioner," returned Lathan. "He is occupied at present, but I shall summon him."

"No need to do that," declared Weston. "I merely want to know how soon he will be starting to Malvin's."

"I shall ask him, sir."

During the pause, Weston glanced at Cardona. Catching the look, the swarthy inspector inquired bluntly:

"Is that Hubert Warrendale you are calling, commissioner?"

"It is," said Weston. "He's at his Long Island home."

"Hubert Warrendale, the financial wizard," mused Cardona. "Sounds interesting, commissioner."

"Have you ever met Warrendale, inspector?"

Cardona shook his head.

"I've seen his picture. So often, that I'd know him on sight. But I understand that very few people ever do see Hubert Warrendale."

"You'll meet him this evening."

By then, Lathan was back on the wire, informing Weston that Warrendale would be ready to leave in a quarter hour. He added the request from Warrendale that the commissioner go at once to the office of Cedric Malvin, where Warrendale would arrive by half-past six.

The call finished, Weston arose.

"Here is the situation," he told Cardona. "Hubert Warrendale is going into partnership with a promoter named Cedric Malvin. The final papers will be signed in Malvin's office."

"But I thought Warrendale already had a partner," put in Cardona. "A fellow named Philip Renz. I've heard the two names often: Warrendale and Renz. Like ham and eggs."

"That partnership is to be dissolved," stated Weston. "From now on, it will be Warrendale and Malvin. Inasmuch as Malvin will bind the deal with a cash payment of fifty thousand dollars to Warrendale, it is advisable that we should be witnesses to the transaction, to make sure that the money is safe."

Cardona began to understand why this appointment was so important, and he was glad that he hadn't forgotten it. Joe was inwardly pleased when Weston displayed forgetfulness. They were just getting into an elevator, when the commissioner recalled something and went back to the office, Cardona with him.

"Call the Cobalt Club," Weston told his secretary. "Tell Mr. Cranston that I'll be late. If he wants to reach me, he can call me at Warrendale's."

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It happened that Weston was going to Malvin's office in Manhattan; not to Warrendale's home on Long Island. However, Cardona did not correct the commissioner's slip. It was better policy to let such things pass. Later, Weston would recall his mistake and realize that he wasn't always infallible.

At quarter of six, a leisurely, calm-faced gentleman sauntered into the exclusive Cobalt Club. Other members recognized him as Lamont Cranston, wealthy traveler, whose globe-trotting had been curtailed by unsettled world conditions.

He found Weston's message, and a curious light came to the keen eyes that peered from Cranston's hawkish face.

Had Commissioner Weston stated that he was visiting Cedric Malvin, it would have meant comparatively little. Mention of Hubert Warrendale signified a great deal.

Famed as a financial wizard, Warrendale had piled up millions, carrying his lucky partner, Philip Renz, along on a tidal wave of accumulating wealth. Warrendale dealt only with large matters; hence, a visit from the police commissioner indicated that something of real magnitude was at stake.

Cranston decided to phone Warrendale's home at once.

It was Lathan who answered. Having visited Warrendale's often, Cranston was familiar with the secretary's voice. In his turn, Lathan recognized Cranston's steady tone. But Lathan was quite at a loss when Cranston asked to speak to the police commissioner.

"There must be some mistake, Mr. Cranston," protested Lathan. "The commissioner isn't coming here. He intends to meet Mr. Warrendale in Manhattan."

"Where will the meeting be?"

"I'm not supposed to say," returned Lathan. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cranston."

"At least," persisted Cranston, "you can tell me the time, if not the place."

"I'd say about six-thirty."

Cranston made a quick calculation. It would take at least three quarters of an hour for Warrendale to get to Wall Street, assuming that the meeting was to be in that vicinity. Cranston was about to ask if Warrendale had left, when Lathan supplied the information himself.

"One moment, Mr. Cranston!" exclaimed Lathan. "I thought that Mr. Warrendale had started, but I hear him in the study. He must have come back for some papers. I shall speak to him."

Lathan was gone, but in half a minute he was back, his slow tone a trifle breathless.

"Mr. Warrendale says it's quite all right to tell you," panted Lathan. "He is going to the downtown office of Cedric Malvin, to meet the commissioner there. Mr. Warrendale will be glad to have you join them, Mr. Cranston."

The call finished, Cranston left the Cobalt Club. His stride, though leisurely, was faster than it seemed. A limousine wheeled over to receive him; in the car, Cranston spoke through a speaking tube to the chauffeur:

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"Wall Street, Stanley."

As the big car rolled away, a remarkable transformation took place. From beneath the rear seat, Cranston drew out a hidden drawer. He removed garments of black – a cloak and a slouch hat. After he had put them on, he added a pair of black gloves, and tucked a brace of .45 automatics beneath his cloak. As he slid the drawer shut, his hidden lips phrased a strange laugh.

This personage who posed as Lamont Cranston was actually The Shadow.

Master fighter who tracked down men of crime, The Shadow knew that transactions involving wealth were magnets that attracted workers of evil. Whatever the deal between Hubert Warrendale, genius of finance, and Cedric Malvin, successful promoter, it meant money. Commissioner Weston would be a witness to the deal; but it was a question whether he would provide adequate protection. The Shadow knew, from experience, that if the law gave away its presence before-hand, smart crime connivers would change their own plans accordingly.

Calculating that he could reach Malvin's office a few minutes after six, The Shadow intended to look over the terrain before discarding his black garb to make a casual appearance in the guise of Cranston.

SIX o'clock.

In his office, Cedric Malvin, a smallish, birdlike man, was seated behind a large desk, chatting with two visitors: Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona. On the desk lay a stack of papers beside a bundle of currency.

"The agreements," explained Malvin, "and the money. This deal is as good as settled, although there is one man who may not like it."

Cardona thought of Warrendale's partner, Philip Renz, mentioned by Weston. But Malvin did not have Renz in mind.

"I have a silent partner," stated Malvin in a troubled tone. "Another promoter, named Roy Alker. He has lost his claim, however, because he failed to supply money that he promised. That is why I approached Hubert Warrendale. When Warrendale arrives –"

At that, the door of the office opened. Swinging about, Cardona had a stubby revolver half drawn from his pocket, only to let it slide back again as he heard both Malvin and Weston voice the pleasant greeting:

"Hello, Warrendale!"

On the threshold stood Hubert Warrendale, a man of medium height, whose face had the firm mold that Cardona had so often observed in newspaper photographs and newsreels.

Warrendale's forehead was high; it gave a backward tilt to his derby hat. His nose was straight, his lips made a slight, smiling curve. His chin, though square, was double, but its lower paunch was half hidden by a muffler wrapped tightly as a protection against the chill outside air.

Warrendale gave a nod to Weston and threw a curious look at Cardona, the only expression coming from a pair of sharp eyes. Hands in his overcoat pockets as though they, too, were cold, Warrendale stepped forward to the desk without a word. He stood face to face with Malvin, in the glare of the lamp from the desk.

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Half behind Warrendale, Weston and Cardona saw him lift his left hand from his pocket and extend it to the desk. Malvin was thumbing through the stack of contracts, so Warrendale picked up the bundle of cash. They heard him say:

"I presume this is the full fifty thousand, Malvin –"

The tone was odd. Weston recalled Warrendale's voice from telephone conversations; Cardona remembered it from newsreels. It seemed off key, with a bit of a snarl that didn't fit with Warrendale's usually emphatic speech. While Weston and Cardona were puzzled, Malvin was actually alarmed. He knew Warrendale better than his visitors did.

Malvin's face popped up. He saw Warrendale's face in the full light, and mouthed a harsh cry. Springing from his chair, Malvin flung himself half across the desk, to grab at the money in the other man's left hand.

Malvin never reached the cash.

The man who had come as Warrendale was whipping a revolver from his right coat pocket. He gave Malvin three quick bullets in the region of the heart, collapsing him like a dummy figure. So rapid were those shots that all were delivered before Joe Cardona could get to his feet and draw his own gun.

Whipping about, the derby-hatted assassin wagged his smoking revolver between Weston and Cardona, finally centering it on the inspector. Weston's hands were both in view, while Cardona's right had actually reached its pocket. At the murderer's snarl, Cardona let his own hands come up empty, like Weston's.

Both representatives of the law were staring at the face of the bold killer who had delivered open death. The man was in the light, and for the first time, Weston and Cardona saw what Malvin had observed with startlement.

The killer had the features of Hubert Warrendale, but the face that the witnesses saw was not the financial wizard's own. It was a mask!

Detail for detail, it matched the countenance of Hubert Warrendale; but its frozen expression, the fact that mouthed words brought no lip motion, were proof that the face was false.

Masked murder had been done in the very presence of the law! But it was masked crime of a unique sort.

Instead of merely being content to hide his own features, the killer had put on those of Hubert Warrendale, that blame for crime, on sight, might be placed upon the noted financier whose visit had been expected by Cedric Malvin, the victim!

CHAPTER II. THE MASK DEPARTS

THE Mask!

The name sprang instantly to Cardona's mind. It was the only term that could define this killer who had so cleverly covered his identity. He couldn't be Hubert Warrendale; therefore, he would have to be termed the Mask.

Weston's mind was working, too. He was appreciating why the Mask could not be Warrendale, aside from the fact that the killer's face was obviously false. Weston had due cause to chide his own stupidity.

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At half-past five, the commissioner had called Warrendale's home and learned that he was still there. Warrendale couldn't have reached Malvin's in half an hour. Therefore, Weston should have known, from the moment of the Mask's entry, that the visitor could not be Hubert Warrendale.

Such mental reflections ended abruptly. Weston resolved to keep them for future reference, should he ever have the chance. For the Mask, with one murder accomplished, seemed quite disposed to add two more to his list.

He was drawing back from the light, eyeing Weston and Cardona sharply, as though trying to guess whether their gaze had penetrated his disguise. A gun in one hand, fifty thousand dollars in the other, the Mask was planning a departure that would certainly be quicker, could he prevent Weston and Cardona from following him.

There was a reason, however, why he might not want to kill these other victims.

The Mask had come as Warrendale. By departing as Warrendale, he could pin murder on the financier. Provided, of course, that neither of the living men guessed that his face was false, as Malvin had. Looking from man to man, the Mask tried to discern how much each knew.

Weston tried to cover up his discovery by sheer bluff. He spoke in gasping tone:

"Warrendale! You... you've murdered Malvin! He was your friend, Warrendale!"

"You were wrong, commissioner." Again, the Mask snarled an off-key imitation of Warrendale's voice. "Malvin was a double-crosser, not to be trusted."

By then, the Mask was away from the light. Near the door, his lack of lip motion could not be observed. His eyes, however, showed a glitter as they fixed on Joe Cardona.

The inspector was using a system quite the opposite of the commissioner's bluff. Joe wasn't saying a thing. He was simply staring, poker-faced, as though taking it for granted that the Mask was Warrendale.

A strange tableau, with Malvin's body stretched across the desk as token of what two other men might expect, if either betrayed his knowledge of the murderer's unique disguise!

"I am leaving here." The Mask's tone took on a harshness. "Should either of you attempt to follow me —"

He was poking the big bundle of currency into an inside pocket as he spoke, and the move produced a result that threatened tragedy. His fingers engaging the muffler, the Mask hooked it downward from his neck, revealing the thing that he had so definitely covered by moving from the light: namely, that his face was a mask, ending just below his chin!

As quickly as he could, the Mask rectified the matter. Stowing away the money delayed him, however, before he could fling the muffler up again. His other hand, using the gun to cover the men in the room, was unable to help.

A harsh snarl voiced the Mask's suspicion that the observers might have seen too much. The snarl made Weston tighten, and start another bluff. But the effect was the opposite on Cardona.

While Weston was voicing "Warrendale!" Cardona made a spring behind the desk where Malvin lay. Joe was taking it for granted that the Mask would start shooting. The desk offered a bulwark against bullets, and

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Malvin's body could serve as an additional shield.

While drawing shots his own way, Cardona hoped that Weston would have a chance to dodge through a door into an adjoining office. Moreover, Joe expected to gain the desk lamp as a weapon against the Mask. Used as such, the lamp would be extinguished, giving Joe a still better chance in the darkness.

Things went wrong, doubly.

IN diving for the desk, Cardona tripped over the lamp cord and sprawled to the floor, where he madly tried to get his gun from his pocket. As for Weston, he didn't even think of the door to the other office, for it was behind his back.

Instead, Weston snatched open a door that opened right into a closet, thus boxing himself in beautifully.

With three bullets left in his revolver, the Mask had one for each victim, with a third to spare.

He was to use the third bullet first.

So timely, that it seemed a voice from the void, came a shivery laugh of challenge, weird mirth that betokened a new arrival on this scene of death. It was mockery that meant doom to men of crime, along with rescue to persons who represented right. Weird and fateful, that taunt.

The laugh of The Shadow!

So singular was the uncanny peal, that it would not have betrayed The Shadow's position, except that he had wished it. With the laugh came the clatter of a door, the one connecting with the other office. The Shadow was hurling it wide, to draw the attention of the Mask.

The Shadow wanted the man with the fake face to swing his way. A duel between The Shadow and the Mask could mark salvation for two threatened victims. Recognizing The Shadow's mirth, spying the cloaked figure that lunged in from the connecting doorway, Weston and Cardona responded.

The commissioner grabbed a cane that was standing in the closet; while the inspector, finding his coat pocket twisted, seized the lamp that was still rocking on the desk as a result of the cord's tug.

Two guns blasted at that moment; each shot was directed from one doorway to the other.

Neither bullet found a mark. The Shadow was fading, the Mask was ducking. The Shadow fired hastily, with purpose. He wanted to draw the Mask's aim his way, in order to make the rescue of Weston and Cardona a certainty. As for the Mask, his rapid dodge caused his shot to go far wide of the cloaked figure that was twisting inward from the other door.

Wheeling out into the hallway, the Mask struck his hat brim against the doorway. The stiff derby did a half flip from his head. By then, the lamp was flying through the air, flung by Cardona. The lamp shade was gone, and the full glare of the light showed the Mask quite plainly to both Cardona and Weston, who were nearer than The Shadow.

Beneath the uptilted derby, they saw the top line of the false countenance that the Mask wore. Madly, he clamped the derby down again, to hide the fact that Warrendale's features were a mask.

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In that same instant, the flying lamp reached the end of its cord. The jerk put the light out and slowed the lamp's flight. Instead of reaching the Mask, the missile crashed short of the hallway door.

In that last glimpse, The Shadow, wheeling to the center of Malvin's office, saw the Mask dash away. Starting a drive toward the hallway, The Shadow intended to pepper bullets after him, along the dim hall. From the door edge, The Shadow would have had an easy time of it; but he did not get his chance.

Almost at the door, The Shadow encountered the lunging figure of Commissioner Weston, who was going after the Mask with Malvin's cane.

Totally excited, Weston actually started to grapple with The Shadow, who twisted him about and sent him reeling to a corner. Tripping over the cane, Weston sprawled before he realized that he had made a bad mistake.

By then, Cardona was across the room, to reach the doorway first because of The Shadow's delay. It was Joe who ripped bullets after the fleeing figure of the Mask, far down the hall.

Those first shots missed. By the time Cardona had the range, the Mask was around a corner leading to a stairway. Cardona chased after him, and Weston sprang to his feet, to follow, still brandishing the cane, forgetting that he, too, had a gun in his pocket.

The Shadow was gone.

WHEN Cardona blocked the doorway and started shooting, The Shadow decided to take another course. He cut through the adjoining office and reached a hallway.

Unfortunately, the Mask didn't come The Shadow's way, for the stairway was around a different corner. This hall opened into a fire tower, the route that The Shadow had used in coming up to Malvin's. Hoping to cut off the fugitive outside, The Shadow sped down the fire tower.

There were several flights down to the ground, and The Shadow reached the bottom as soon as the Mask. From the alleyway where he arrived, The Shadow heard the spurt of a car from the street, and it didn't come past the alley. Reaching the alley's mouth, The Shadow saw the twinkle of tail lights; nothing more, as the Mask's car rounded the next corner.

Among the narrow, short-blocked streets of the financial district, where traffic was almost entirely stilled by evening, it was practically impossible to overtake the Mask in his mad getaway, particularly as The Shadow's limousine was stationed a block from Malvin's building.

Weston and Cardona also recognized the futility of a chase, for The Shadow saw them return through the doorway from which they had emerged, too late to fire after the Mask's escaping car.

Skirting the block on foot, The Shadow left his black garb in the limousine; then returned and entered the building by the usual entrance. He was Cranston, strolling in his usual style, when he stepped into Malvin's office, to halt abruptly on the threshold.

Weston and Cardona, stooped beside Malvin's body, were coming up with leveled guns as they heard the footsteps of a new arrival.

"Cranston!" exclaimed Weston. "You received my message saying that I would be here."

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"He couldn't have," inserted Cardona bluntly. "You made a mistake, commissioner. You said you'd be at Warrendale's."

"I called Warrendale's," explained The Shadow, in Cranston's even style. "It was quarter of six, and he was just about to leave. Lathan told him I was on the wire, and Warrendale said I could meet him here."

Quizzically, Cranston was surveying Malvin's body. Ruefully, Weston told his friend what had happened, giving all the details of the crime. The commissioner stressed the details of the mask that the killer had worn.

"A perfect replica of Warrendale's face," asserted Weston. "We didn't suspect that it was false, until after the Mask murdered Malvin."

"The Mask –"

The Shadow spoke the title slowly. Cardona inserted an explanation.

"That's what I termed him, Mr. Cranston," said Joe. "The commissioner seems to think it fits: the Mask. That's all we know him by. He may not know it, but we got a good look at that phony mug of his. Let's hope that he still thinks we identified him as Hubert Warrendale."

The Shadow, too, had gotten a glimpse of the murderer's mask during the lamp flight; but, as Cranston, he could not add his testimony to that which he had heard. The Shadow was thinking in terms of the future, rather than the past, since neither Weston nor Cardona had supplied any proof as to the Mask's actual identity. They were talking in terms of Philip Renz and Roy Alker, when they heard Cranston's quiet tone:

"Half–past six. The real Warrendale should be arriving by this time. Lathan said that he was starting at quarter of six."

Snatching up the telephone, Weston called Warrendale's number. He could hear the phone ringing, but there was no answer. Dropping the telephone, Weston turned, aghast.

"The Mask murdered Malvin!" he exclaimed. "Do you think he's killed Warrendale, too?"

"Hardly," replied The Shadow calmly, "considering that the Mask tried to brand Warrendale as Malvin's murderer. But I would say that a trip to Warrendale's is next in order."

Cardona supplied an approving nod.

"Mr. Cranston has the right idea," said Joe. "Let's go, commissioner."

They started for Warrendale's in the commissioner's car, and on the way, The Shadow sat silent in his guise of Cranston. Volubly, Weston was commending his friend Cranston on suggesting this trip, but those words produced no response.

The riddle of the Mask was deepening, the more The Shadow considered it. Somehow, that riddle seemed to be riding ahead, as though crime would surely rear its ugly self at Warrendale's as it had at Malvin's!

CHAPTER III. THE MAN FROM THE DARK

IT was quarter–past seven when the commissioner's big car rolled up in front of Warrendale's Long Island mansion, and, from first sight onward, the place had a forbidding look. By the time the arrivals were out of

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their car, both Weston and Cardona were sharing The Shadow's secret apprehensions that they had arrived too late.

Warrendale's house was isolated. High hedges cut off all view of it, except from within the actual grounds. As the residence of a millionaire financier, the mansion should have shown some signs of life and light. What little it expressed of each was just enough to make it all the more ominous.

From outside the big front door, the visitors could hear a very muffled thumping, its location untraceable. It ended abruptly, began again, and ceased just as suddenly as before. The front door proved to be unlocked.

Opening it, Weston led the way inside, to disclose a great hall which was very dim, for only a single light was burning under the shelter of a stairway.

This house could well have been a haunted manor, judging from those mysterious thumps and the ghostly dimness of the light. It became even more forbidding as the visitors approached the stairway.

From above came another dim light, which seemed to waver and fade away, like a will-o'-the-wisp, as the men went up the stairs. Accompanying the curious change of light, was another sound, more ghostly than the strange pounding.

The sound was a distinct moan, coming from somewhere on the second floor.

Pausing momentarily, Weston lost his lead of the procession. Cranston was ahead of him; taking the final turn of the staircase, the commissioner's friend paused and beckoned. The mysterious light was explained. It came from a room near the front of the second floor, and had changed simply because the door was half open, blocking the glow from certain portions of the stairway.

Familiar with the house, Cranston identified the room. In quiet tone, he said:

"Warrendale's study."

The moans lost their weird effect as Cranston and the others neared the study. The moans were coming from the room itself, and they were human. That fact, however, was prelude to a sight more ghastly than any spooky groans.

In the study, lying beneath the glow of a floor lamp, was Lathan, the secretary. Warrendale's long-trusted employee was in his death throes. Lathan was a smallish man, of complexion ordinarily pale. At present, he looked absolutely shriveled, and his face was the color of pure chalk.

Perhaps it was the dye of Lathan's shirt front that made his pallor so perceptible. The shirt was stained crimson, from a copious flow of blood.

Oddly, Lathan's hands weren't pressed to his body. They were clutching his throat, as though he sought to choke himself. That riddle explained itself as the arrivals came closer. Blood was oozing between Lathan's fingers. He had been shot in the neck, as well as the breast.

Cardona shoved forward, to drop at Lathan's side. Witnessing a man's death agony was a matter of routine for the experienced police inspector. In Cardona's mind, something else was more important.

"Who did it?" demanded Cardona. "Who shot you?"

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Lathan couldn't answer. The best he managed was a wheeze. Releasing one hand from his throat, he gestured feebly toward a closet door; then, in pitifully choking tone, he coughed:

"In there... you'll find Mr. Warrendale –"

"And who put him in there?" queried Cardona. "The same fellow who shot you?"

This time, Lathan couldn't find his voice at all. Both hands again clutching his throat, he managed to pull his head into a nod. Cardona persisted with his questions:

"And who was the killer? Do you know him? Can you tell what he looks like?"

Lathan voiced a gargle. It might have been a name, but it sounded more like a death rattle. What little chance Cardona had to hear it was lost when other sounds occurred.

FIRST came the ringing of the telephone, which ended as Weston pounced over and snatched up the receiver. As though the telephone bell had started it going, the pounding began again. The same pounding that had been heard from outside. This time, the thumps were very close, and heavy.

They came from within the closet where Lathan had testified that Warrendale was a prisoner. Warrendale was evidently quite alive, for he was making a valiant effort to batter his way out.

Whether Weston's brusque hello, or the sounds of Warrendale's hammering, was the cause, the telephone call ended instantly. Weston found himself at the end of a dead wire, as evidenced by a receiver's click at the other end. The only voice that was heard came muffled from the closet:

"Help... help me out of here! I'm suffocating!"

The Shadow was at the closet door. He had stepped there in Cranston's easy style. He opened the door and a man reeled out, carrying what was left of a golf club. He had splintered away several, trying to smash the door open. The others were lying broken on the closet floor beside an overturned golf bag.

The man was Hubert Warrendale. As the financier sagged, panting, to a couch, Cardona studied his face. It was much like the false one that the Mask had worn, yet remarkably different when stirred by emotion.

Warrendale's features were haggard from combined terror and effort. His eyes were blinking, his lips trembling. Only when his gaze lighted on Lathan did Warrendale's features gain any of the immobile effect that had characterized the imitation face of the Mask.

"Lathan!" exclaimed Warrendale. "They've killed him!"

He bounded forward from the couch, and Cardona observed that Warrendale had a stoopish posture that the Mask had failed to imitate. Crouched above Lathan, Warrendale queried in earnest tone:

"Who were they, Lathan? Did you see their faces? Can't you tell us something about them?"

Lathan's eyes opened in a glazed look. They met Warrendale's in an appealing gaze that served as a farewell between secretary and master. For, with the effort whereby he tried to move his blood-flecked lips, Lathan's strength failed. His face froze, the eyes still holding their glassy stare.

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Rising from beside the dead man, Warrendale dropped the remnants of the niblick that he had carried from the closet. He looked at the three men about him as though they were ghosts. He was muttering to himself as he looked for another. Then, in normal tone, Warrendale asked:

"Where is Cedric Malvin?"

The words had emphasis, totally lacking the snarling note that the Mask had added when rendering an imitation of Warrendale's normal voice. Knowing that Commissioner Weston had been at Malvin's office, Warrendale had reason to show puzzlement because his future partner had not come along. His eyes, though, began to flicker with apprehension as he observed Weston's grim look.

"Something... happened?"

"Yes." Weston nodded as he replied. "Malvin was murdered at six o'clock, in his office."

"By the same men who came here!" Warrendale exclaimed. Then, shaking his head: "No, that couldn't have been the case. They would have been unable to get there and back. They must have been here all the while."

"Tell us exactly what happened here, Warrendale."

"Very well, commissioner."

EMPHATICALLY, Warrendale gave the details. He began by mentioning Weston's call at half-past five; then the other, that had come from Cranston at quarter of six. Ready to leave immediately after, Warrendale had stopped when he heard the phone bell ring again.

"I'd sent Lathan out to the garage," he explained, "to see why the chauffeur hadn't brought up the car. So I answered the phone myself. It was a long-distance call, and I switched it up here to the study from the phone downstairs.

"The moment I stepped into this room, two men prodded me with guns. Their voices were ugly, and they warned me not to look around, so I didn't see their faces. They shoved me in the closet and closed the door. I was practically locked in there, because there is no knob on the inside."

Like the others, The Shadow looked at the open closet door. It had no inside knob. The surface was deeply scarred from Warrendale's hacking with the golf clubs. Warrendale had done heavy work, considering the cramped confines of the closet. It wouldn't have taken him much longer to bash his way out, except that he was greatly exhausted. He was now resting on a couch.

"What time was that?" queried Cardona, who was making notes. "At quarter of six?"

Warrendale started to nod; then shook his head.

"About ten minutes before the hour."

Cardona made the correction.

"For a while," resumed Warrendale, "I thought I heard the men moving around. After that, I was not sure. The air wasn't bad in the closet, and I thought I'd better wait. Finally, the telephone began to ring."

Remembering the unanswered call that Weston had made from Malvin's, Cardona questioned:

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"Was that at half-past six?"

"I don't know," returned Warrendale, wagging his head from where it rested on the couch. "It seemed as though I'd been in the closet for hours."

"But that was the only time it rang – until just now?"

"Yes. Lathan must have come in here to answer it. I heard a sudden cry; then shots. There was a scuffle, as though men were leaving in a hurry. After that, only Lathan's moans. I began, then, to batter away with the golf clubs. Every time I rested, I could hear Lathan's agonized groans growing weaker. It was horrible, to think of him dying by degrees –"

Warrendale broke off with a shudder and drew his hand across his high forehead. Weston waited a few moments, then began:

"About Malvin's death, Warrendale. There was something about the murderer –"

Weston caught a gesture from Cranston. The Shadow was lounging in a chair near the door, his feet perched on a footstool. In Cranston's style, he was indicating that it was better not to burden Warrendale with details about the Mask until the financier had recalled every detail of his own case.

"About your car, Warrendale," queried Weston abruptly. "Why didn't the chauffeur bring it?"

Warrendale shook his head. He didn't know.

"I'll go out to the garage and take a look," decided Cardona. "Here are my notes, commissioner, in case you need them while I'm gone."

Looking at Cardona's idea of shorthand notes, Weston gave a grunt.

"Your knowledge of Sanskrit is admirable, Inspector. I presume these are written in that ancient language."

Cardona wasn't in a mood for jest. Bluntly, he took his revolver from his pocket, as though anticipating trouble when he reached the garage. He stepped out into the darkened hall and threw back a glance at Weston, a rather indignant one.

Cardona was several paces toward the stairs before he looked in their direction. The others heard Joe give a sudden shout.

"Hey – you, there!"

THERE was a scuffle in the hallway, the sound of a hard-smacked punch that came with the crack of a revolver. Before the echo of the shot faded, a wiry man twisted in from the doorway; scooping up a gun that he kicked ahead of him. He had a sallow, long-jawed face, and his eyes were quick. They saw only Weston, standing beside Lathan's body.

Startled by the scuffle, the commissioner had started to draw his own gun, but he was caught flat footed as the sallow man lunged toward him.

Realizing that Warrendale, exhausted on the couch, would be unable to help him against this new invader, Weston could only shout:

"Cranston! Stop him!"

The Shadow did stop the newcomer, but in a style that suited Cranston to perfection. He didn't even lift himself from the chair where he lounged. Deliberately, he shoved his feet forward, driving ahead the footstool on which they rested. Haste wasn't needed; in fact, it would have spoiled the trick. It was perfect timing that counted.

Skidding across the waxed floor the speeding footstool reached the sallow invader at just the right instant. It tangled with the lunging man's shins and tripped him into a long spill across the floor, the gun flying from his clutch at a wide angle, as he flung his hands flat to break his headlong fall.

Whizzing along the floor, the lost gun was passing right by Cranston's chair, when the leisurely clubman dipped one hand and took it up, adding a nonchalant flip that brought his finger to the trigger, with the muzzle aimed toward the fellow who had lost the gun.

In Cranston's tone, The Shadow drawled:

"Don't shoot, commissioner. I have him covered."

Pouncing upon the fallen man, Weston hauled him to his feet. Clutching the dazed invader by the back of the coat collar, the commissioner thrust him into the light, where Warrendale could view him plainly.

"What about it, Warrendale?" Weston demanded. "Is this one of the men who shoved you in the closet?"

"I... I don't know," stammered Warrendale. "I told you... I didn't see their faces. But... but —"

There was bewilderment in Warrendale's voice, a new hesitation that smacked of recognition. Catching such significance, Weston demanded abruptly:

"But you know this fellow, don't you, Warrendale?"

Hesitating no longer, Warrendale nodded soberly; he studied the sallow face that was wavering from side to side, as Weston pushed it closer to its viewer.

"Why, yes." Warrendale spoke with emphasis. "He is my partner, Philip Renz!"

CHAPTER IV. A MATTER OF CHOICE

SHOVING Renz into a chair, Weston was just about to question the new prisoner, when he remembered Cardona. Glancing anxiously toward the door, the commissioner saw his ace inspector enter shakily.

Joe was quite intact, but he looked groggy. He was clamping one hand to his jaw as he looked for a chair. Finding none, he reached for the overturned footstool that had sprawled Renz. Setting the stool upright, Cardona sat down on it.

Weston took another look at Renz, whose own daze had ended. The sallow man glared up at the commissioner.

"We want you for murder, Renz!"

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For a moment, Renz's eyes were nervous, hunted. Suddenly, the sallow man gained poise. He leaned back in his chair, delivered a short laugh, and queried:

"Whose murder?"

He acted as though he expected Weston to name Lathan as the victim.

Instead, the commissioner said briskly:

"The murder of Cedric Malvin!"

Renz's smile turned to an expression of surprise. Gradually, his face went blank. Only his eyes gave trace of anything but doubt, as he queried in an oily tone:

"Do you mean to tell me that Malvin is dead?"

"I do," retorted Weston. "He was killed by a man who could have been you, Renz, even though the murderer pretended to be Warrendale."

Warrendale injected the next note of surprise.

"You didn't tell me that, commissioner!" he exclaimed. "How could the murderer have posed as me?"

"He wore a mask," explained Weston. "A very special mask, that resembled your features, Warrendale. Perhaps this partner of yours" – he gestured toward Renz – "would be just the person to think up such a ruse."

Renz wasn't at all perturbed.

"Aside from that mask, commissioner," he remarked, "what makes you think that I killed Malvin?"

"The fact that you carry a gun!" snapped Weston. "You bolted in here like a man bent on murder. You gave yourself away completely, Renz."

"I have a permit for a gun," purred Renz, "but I never carry one. My revolver happens to be back in my apartment, where I always keep it."

Weston turned toward Cranston, who was holding the evidence in the shape of the very gun that Renz denied carrying. The commissioner saw his friend shake his head.

"This isn't Renz's revolver." Cranston was examining the weapon. "I'd say it belongs to Inspector Cardona."

At mention of himself, Cardona looked up. He took the gun as Cranston passed it to him. A glance at the stubby revolver and Cardona pocketed it.

"Mine," he admitted. "Guess I dropped it out in the hall."

"You did drop it," chuckled Renz, "after I smacked you in the jaw. How was I to know that you were a police inspector? You had a gun and you came at me with it. I was lucky to shove your hand up, or you would have shot me when you fired."

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Renz swung to Weston.

"Naturally, I grabbed the gun and dashed in here," continued Renz. "Then, what did I see? Lathan lying dead, and you standing over him with a gun. You weren't carrying a flag with 'Police Commissioner' written on it. I thought that you were a killer, so I went after you."

There was no disputing Renz's lucid summary of recent events. It put him in the right, and the law at a disadvantage.

FROM his chair, The Shadow watched the triumphant look that spread on Renz's face. This chap was either telling a very straight story, or covering some very crooked work.

Could Philip Renz be the Mask?

That was the important question. One which Weston had already hinted at, and was determined to pursue. The Shadow expected the commissioner to start some blunt questioning. It came.

First, Weston wanted to know why Renz had come to Warrendale's at this particular time. Renz told him, and with it amplified his reasons for having entered the way he had.

It appeared that Renz had phoned Warrendale that afternoon, stating that he would like to drop in after the Malvin deal was completed. Warrendale had suggested that he arrive between half past seven and eight o'clock.

By then, Warrendale had expected to have his transaction completed and be back home. According to Renz, Warrendale had mentioned the prospect of a shore dinner at a roadhouse a few miles out along the Sound.

All during this testimony, Renz was supported by corroborating nods from Warrendale.

"I started early," continued Renz glibly. "Thought I'd get in a little daylight driving, as I always do when I come out to Long Island."

"It was dark by six o'clock," reminded Weston.

"I know it," returned Renz. "A very cloudy day. Drizzly, toward sunset, if there was a sunset. I didn't see one. I went rather far out on the Island. Had trouble finding my way back here."

"You must have started around five o'clock," mused Warrendale. "I remember that Lathan mentioned it. My chauffeur was here at the time. That's it!"

"That's what?" queried Weston.

"Where my car went," returned Warrendale. "Lathan must have told Elbert, the chauffeur, that Renz was coming by train. I'll wager that Elbert is down at the station, either waiting for Renz, or expecting a call to come back here!"

"Didn't Elbert know that you were going in to see Malvin?"

"Of course not!" Warrendale was positive. "Only Lathan knew it. That's why he was so careful about answering telephone calls. Lathan was thoroughly reliable. Renz can testify to that fact."

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Renz nodded.

"I knew you were going to see Malvin," he said smoothly. "The commissioner might as well know all the facts."

"I like facts," snapped Weston. "Therefore, I'd enjoy hearing more."

With that, Weston began a more pointed quiz. He wanted to know all about the partnership that Warrendale and Renz had intended to dissolve.

There wasn't much to learn. Warrendale had charge of the funds, which totaled a full million dollars, mostly in securities, all listed on a big sheet that Warrendale produced. Upon signing up with Malvin, Warrendale was to have given Renz his share of the funds.

"I've made mine," boasted Renz. "I'm quite ready to drop out. I've just been waiting for Warrendale to sign up a more ambitious partner. Too bad about Malvin. But there will be someone else instead of him."

"Suppose we go back to Malvin's," suggested Weston, "and see how matters stand there. You'll be glad to come, Warrendale, and I think Renz should be, too."

Renz seemed agreeable, though in an indifferent fashion. Weston sent him downstairs with Cardona and Warrendale. The commissioner wanted to call the local precinct and have officers sent over to the house. He actually made the call, but afterward, he turned to The Shadow, who was still lounging in his chair.

"You probably noticed something, Cranston," expressed Weston. "Renz doesn't have a good alibi for the time of Malvin's murder. Renz could have been the Mask at six o'clock."

The Shadow nodded.

"Coming back here was a smart trick," continued Weston. "Perhaps a very smart one. He may have wanted to make sure that Warrendale had managed to break out of the closet. He wanted to ruin Warrendale's genuine alibi. He killed Lathan –"

"A bit too fast, commissioner," came Cranston's interruption. "We can concede that the Mask posed as Warrendale, and had a deep purpose for doing so. But there is no proof that Renz is the Mask – not yet. Let's hold it until after our trip to Malvin's."

DURING the ride into town, Weston made references to murderers who returned to scenes of crime, all for Renz's benefit. Renz, himself, had comments in reply. He agreed with the theory, but said that invariably such murderers returned voluntarily.

They reached Malvin's office, and Weston watched Renz closely as the sallow man entered. Looking about curiously, Renz expressed disappointment when he didn't see Malvin's body. It had been removed to the morgue.

"Suppose we re-enact the crime," suggested Weston brusquely. "Cranston, you be Malvin. Take your place at the desk. Never mind the broken lamp. We'll do without it. Cardona and I shall take our positions. You two" – he gestured to Warrendale and Renz – "can watch from the adjoining office."

"Someone will have to play the Mask," reminded Renz. "I'm willing, commissioner. How did the Mask enter? From this other office, or from the hall?"

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"We'll have Warrendale play the Mask," returned Weston. "Since the Mask was disguised as Warrendale, it will help the illusion. You will come in from the hallway, Warrendale –"

"Wait, commissioner."

The interruption came in Cranston's quiet tone. His upraised hand brought silence. Then, with a restraining gesture, The Shadow kept Warrendale and Renz where they were, in the other office.

His pointing finger moved Weston into the closet, where the commissioner had formerly tried to dodge from the threat of the Mask. His hand as deft as the leader of a symphony, the calm Mr. Cranston pointed Cardona to a position just inside the hallway door.

His purpose explained itself amid his moves. The Shadow's keen ears had detected sounds that the others had not heard – sounds which, at last, the others noted. Footsteps were creeping along the hall, coming with a furtive tread that might denote a murderer: a man who might prove a better candidate than Renz for the questionable title of the Mask!

Had a murderer returned to the scene of crime at invitation of the law?

Or was a murderer returning voluntarily?

It was to be a question of choice. The Shadow was deliberately laying the scene for the arrival of a creeping man who might actually be the Mask!

CHAPTER V. THE LAW DECIDES

As the footsteps approached, then hesitated outside the office door, four men watched, their very breathing stilled.

Warrendale and Renz, good friends as ever, were peering from the gloom of the adjoining office. Weston was in the closet, peeking from the crack of the door. Cardona was flat against the wall, just inside the entrance from the hallway.

One man, alone, was in motion.

He was The Shadow, the man that the others knew as Cranston. Turned away from the door, Cranston was half stooped behind the desk, bringing papers from the drawers. To all appearances, he was Cedric Malvin, a man who had died a sudden death about two hours before.

The impersonation wasn't difficult. First, Cranston's face was turned away; further, the lamp was no longer on the desk. The only light in the room came from a floor lamp in another corner. No one from the hallway could have identified the man behind the desk. Anyone who expected to find Malvin here, still alive, would mistake Cranston for the dead promoter.

In crept a figure from the hall.

It was a furtive figure, of medium height, but it wasn't a stooped form. The man was a bit bulkier than Renz, but no taller. To Weston and Cardona, the essential thing was that the man could be the Mask. They wanted to see his face, wondering if it would be wearing the false countenance of Warrendale.

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The face came into the light, but it wasn't masked. It was a thin face, whitish, with shrewd eyes that might have been the Mask's. After all, the eyes counted most. But the quick, nervous way in which the intruder darted looks to right and left was quite different from the Mask's approach.

There were just two points that reminded Weston and Cardona of the killer:

First, the whitish-faced intruder had his hands deep in the pockets of his overcoat.

Second, when he saw Cranston at the desk, he stopped abruptly and focused his attention there.

In the other office, two men were judging the newcomer in different terms. Warrendale and Renz viewed the man for who he really was, not who he might be. Fortunately, they kept their undertones low enough to escape the intruder.

"Who is he?" queried Warrendale. "I've seen him before, I'm sure."

"Roy Alker," returned Renz. "The silent partner who worked with Cedric Malvin."

"That's right. I saw him one day with Malvin. But Malvin did not introduce us."

"Malvin probably had his reasons. A silent partnership should be silent."

MEANWHILE, Roy Alker was moving closer toward the desk. It was impossible to judge the thoughts behind his twitchy countenance. Perhaps he thought that Cranston was Malvin. Possibly he knew that the man at the desk couldn't be Malvin.

There was even a chance that Alker wasn't sure. However, he declared himself, in terms that were either very innocent, or extremely smart. He acted as though he assumed Cranston to be Malvin.

"Stay as you are, Malvin." Alker's voice had something of a croak. "I want to talk to you. Don't reach for a gun!"

Cranston's figure froze.

"Maybe you don't have a gun," gloated Alker. "I'm assuming that you have, just because most crooks do."

He swung around the desk, on the side behind Cranston's back, which enabled The Shadow to continue his pretense of being Malvin, whether Alker knew it to be a fake, or not.

"I happen to have a gun," asserted Alker. His tone was taking on a sneer. "Honest men need guns to handle crooks. If you don't believe me, Malvin, I'll convince you!"

Alker gave his right hand a forward thrust inside his coat pocket.

From different angles, Weston and Cardona could see the rounded bulge that indicated a gun muzzle through the cloth. Alker planted it firmly against Cranston's back, much to the regret of the men who represented the law. This thing had gone farther than they expected. Cranston was definitely on the spot.

Of course, they didn't know that Cranston was The Shadow. Even if they had, the situation would have worried them. It looked very, very bad.

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"You're trying to freeze me out, Malvin," buzzed Alker in Cranston's ear. "That's why I'm letting you feel what a chill is like. You'd better shiver, Malvin!" The Shadow gave a shudder, in keeping with the theme. "And while you shiver" – Alker paused for emphasis – "you can think!"

Long seconds passed. So silent was the room, that it seemed cut off from the world. Then Alker's voice, its sneer more pronounced:

"I've been waiting hours in my own office," he said. "Like a fool, I didn't guess that you were here, expecting Warrendale. He's honest; that's why I'm going to stay until he gets here.

"I'll tell Warrendale just how our partnership stands. You promised me time to raise the extra funds I expected. A few days more, and I shall have them. I'll talk Warrendale into postponing this deal for a week, at least. Things can happen in a week –"

Things could happen in less than a week. They could happen in less than a second. That fact was demonstrated in a most amazing fashion, though the remarkable point was the ease with which it all took place.

His right hand pressing its rounded burden hard against Cranston's ribs, Alker shifted his left arm a trifle forward. He didn't observe that Cranston's left hand was dangling behind the back of the swivel chair.

Whipping upward, The Shadow's left hand caught Alker's wrist, on the same side, and gave the threatening man a quick jerk toward the desk.

That, in itself, wasn't enough. It happened that Cranston, at the same moment, pivoted to the right in his chair. Whirling on the swivel, Cranston's revolving form exerted its full weight. His sudden twist hoisted Alker across the desk, to the far side, where the man dived hard to the floor, throwing his left hand ahead of him.

Cardona bounded forward while The Shadow was still spinning. No need to stop the spin and spoil the part of Cranston. The Shadow knew that Cardona would do the rest.

Joe did.

He clamped Alker's right hand as it was, inside the right coat pocket, and gave the cloth a rip.

Cardona was saying: "I'll take that gun, Alker –" when the man's hand came into sight. Cardona came up from the floor, wondering whether he ought to punch Alker's jaw or slap his wrist.

The rounded object in Alker's fist wasn't the barrel of a gun. It was the barrel of a fountain pen!

TWO hours of steady grilling didn't shake Alker's story in the least. He had two answers that fitted every question.

One was: "You saw everything I did." The other "You heard everything I said." Alker's story, so he maintained, was self-evident.

Malvin had tried to ease Alker out of a business in which he had tied up some fifty thousand dollars, and expected to add more. Malvin, the promoter, would multiply his assets many times, once he joined with Warrendale, the financier. But he hadn't been willing that Alker should share.

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Persuasion having failed, Alker had come here – so he affirmed – to throw a scare into Malvin's heart, if he had one.

He didn't know that Malvin had been murdered, so he claimed. Alker felt that his actions toward Cranston proved the statement. Strained and worried, he couldn't believe that the man at the desk was anyone other than Malvin.

Alker admitted two things: personal ill will toward Malvin, and the fact that he had threatened him. But he used those as his strong points.

His ill will wasn't sufficient for him to have murdered Malvin, or he would have come here with a gun, instead of a fountain pen. In turn, the fountain pen proved that Alker's threat was not of the criminal variety, but merely a bluff. Those, indeed, were powerful arguments.

When Alker heard mention of the Mask, he stared dumbly. Weston let Cardona detail the cold facts of how Malvin had died. Alker's only response was that he would have liked to see the Mask in action. Not that he favored crime; he simply couldn't be sorry that Malvin had died.

As for whom the Mask might be, Alker suggested that he might be anyone who had ever dealt with Malvin. Of course, Alker classed himself as the one exception.

To produce an effect upon Alker, Weston decided to release Renz. Thanking the commissioner, Renz left with Warrendale. The two still were partners, and agreed that they would have to discuss their future plans.

Renz's release did not perturb Alker. He took everything very coolly, and even smiled when Weston ordered Cardona to take him to the morgue, give him a look at Malvin's body, and resume the questioning.

Alker lacked an alibi, just as did Renz. He insisted that he had stayed alone in his own little office, expecting Malvin to call before completing the deal with Warrendale. The fact that Malvin hadn't called was just another proof of the promoter's inability to keep a promise.

Later, at the Cobalt Club, Weston was having a late supper with Cranston, when Cardona phoned from headquarters to say that Alker hadn't blinked an eyelash at seeing Malvin's body, nor changed an iota of his story under a terrific grilling.

Cardona wanted to know what next. Weston considered the matter briefly, then ordered:

"Release Alker."

Shortly, the commissioner explained his future plans to Cranston.

"One or the other did it," affirmed Weston. "Either Renz or Alker. No one else could have known about Warrendale's deal with Malvin, or had a reason for blocking it. They're opposite types, Renz and Alker. So different, that they're bound to see things separately."

The Shadow nodded. Weston was showing excellent understanding, as well as foresight.

"Take Renz," continued Weston. "He's smooth. He claims that he didn't mind breaking off his profitable partnership with Warrendale. Glib talk, the sort that could hide a lot of real ideas that Renz didn't care to state."

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"As for Alker, he's open. Too open! He isn't even a book. He's a lot of printed pages that never were bound. Renz may be the Mask; if he is, he's hiding it by silence. If Alker is the Mask, he's covering it with talk. One thing is sure: those two could never have worked together."

THE SHADOW picked it up from there.

"I suppose, commissioner," he said casually, "that you are thinking of what happened out at Warrendale's. The time element would have made it impossible for the Mask to have imprisoned Warrendale, come in and killed Malvin, and gone out again to murder Lathan, when the secretary heard your phone call."

"You've hit it, Cranston!"

"Therefore," The Shadow added, "the Mask must have used accomplices to handle the Long Island end. Warrendale mentioned two men: rough, with ugly voices. Run-of-the-mill crooks –"

"Exactly! That is why I released both suspects. If we were dealing with the Mask as a lone hand, it might be better to hold them. But since he has accomplices, he is carrying a burden. One that will weigh him down. The balance will shift, Cranston, from Renz to Alker, or vice versa, whichever is guilty."

"You intend to watch them?"

Weston shook his head, as though Cranston's question were absurd.

"Absolutely not!" said the commissioner. "Whichever he is, Renz or Alker, the Mask will be on the watch himself. I want to give him leeway. Leeway means rope. Rope has weight. Its weight will lower the balance, and with it, the Mask will hang himself!"

Riding from the Cobalt Club in his limousine, The Shadow considered the points that Weston had mentioned. Though his guise was still that of Cranston, The Shadow delivered a whispered laugh that befitted his cloaked self. The Shadow liked Weston's plan of allowing rope. But The Shadow, too, had plans.

He could see ways of checking on Philip Renz and Roy Alker; subtler ways than the law would use. Through such ways, The Shadow believed that he could determine the actual identity of the singular murderer whose manner of crime had given him the evil but well-deserved title: the Mask!

CHAPTER VI. THE BALANCE SWAYS

RALPH WESTON was enjoying himself immensely. He was pleased by what he read in the newspapers.

New York crime reporters loved to make copy at Weston's expense. The commissioner was letting them indulge themselves to the full. They were wallowing deep in muck that would later besmirch them, for the last laugh would be Weston's.

It all concerned the Mask.

Last night, according to the newspapers, a masked criminal had murdered a promoter named Cedric Malvin and snatched fifty thousand dollars from his desk, accomplishing the daring robbery right under the noses of Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona. This murderer, termed the "Mask," had not yet been identified.

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The Mask's motive was robbery, and to insure it, he had sent accomplices to the Long Island home of Hubert Warrendale on the chance that the cash might be there, instead of at Malvin's. The Mask's underlings had imprisoned Warrendale and slain the financier's loyal secretary, Lathan.

Weston chuckled over those accounts.

Reporters loved to learn news that lay behind the news, and this time, they had made an absolute miss. Not a newshawk in Manhattan had guessed the real truth: that a stake much greater than fifty thousand dollars lay behind the Mask's daring raid.

Actually, the murder of Cedric Malvin had blocked a million-dollar deal between the dead promoter and Hubert Warrendale, the living financier.

Commissioner Weston had smothered the inside story, very simply. He and Cardona had simply described the Mask as a criminal whose real face was covered. They didn't specify that the mask, itself, was a disguise resembling the features of Hubert Warrendale.

Thus, the newspapers were talking of the Mask in terms of a man who wore a handkerchief, a domino, or some other ordinary type of facial concealment.

Later, they would learn what the Mask had really looked like. Then the news sheets would have to swallow their criticism of the police for having let the Mask enter Malvin's office at all. Meanwhile, Weston was feeling very comfortable. He was like a big cat, with a mouse beneath each paw. Those mice were Roy Alker and Philip Renz.

Ludicrous, the way the newspapers shouted about the Mask, as though he might be any one of a hundred public enemies gone berserk in New York and ready to strike again!

Weston's evidence marked the Mask as one of two men, both available: Alker or Renz. Each was the type of man who would have to stay in circulation, or otherwise forfeit the fruits of murder. Whichever made the first false move, Weston's paw would pounce.

Like a rabbit from a hat, the Mask would be dangling in the law's grasp, held up for public display, while astonished newspapermen would gape at the miracle.

Yes, things were working very nicely; better, even, than Weston had hoped. Already, a new element was creeping in, one on which Weston hadn't counted so soon.

Alker and Renz were both beginning to worry.

They had been mentioned in the newspapers as associates of Malvin and Warrendale, respectively, but not a whisper of suspicion had been directed toward either. Furtively, each had called Weston, asking about the other. Both were playing innocent, but intimating that the other ought to be considered guilty.

To each, Weston stated that he had no evidence against the other, but he indicated that he would welcome any important facts. Good business, getting each to check on the other. Cardona approved of it, but so far, Weston hadn't mentioned it to Cranston, for he hadn't seen his friend today.

In chatting by telephone with Warrendale, Weston had asked the financier to report any new word that might have bearing on the Mask; but he hadn't stated specifically that he expected such facts to come through Alker or Renz.

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THAT same afternoon, a young man who lived at the Hotel Metrolite received an important telephone call. The young man's name was Harry Vincent. He looked prosperous, self-possessed and competent; and all three appearances were correct. The phone call, though important, seemed very trivial.

The call was from a cleaning company, and it referred to a pair of white flannel trousers that had shrunk when Harry sent them out to be cleaned. They were old trousers, and this wasn't the season for white flannels, so Harry wasn't much concerned about them. But the adjuster who called from the cleaning company insisted that something should be done.

"Our man would like to see you," he said. "I am sure, Mr. Vincent, that if you see our man at your convenience, this claim can be adjusted satisfactorily."

The stress of the words "our man" meant much to Harry. Leaving the hotel soon after, he went immediately to a tall office building, took the elevator to one of the top floors, and went to a suite that bore the newly painted name:

UNITED INVESTMENT CO.

Down in a lower corner of the frosted door panel was another name, in small letters. It was the name of the investment company's New York representative. The name was: R. MANN.

Our man. Harry smiled. Always, when "our man" was mentioned over the telephone, it meant that Harry was to call on Mr. R. Mann, whose first name was Rutledge. For Harry Vincent was an agent of The Shadow, and Rutledge Mann was a contact through whom Harry received instructions from his mysterious chief.

Solemn, round-faced and methodical, Rutledge Mann closed the door of his private office as soon as Harry Vincent entered. Then, seating himself at his desk, Mann referred to sheets of typewritten papers and passed a few to Harry, with the undertoned comment:

"They concern the Mask."

Harry nodded. As he read the statements, his eyes widened. The fact that the Mask had worn an imitation face of Hubert Warrendale was startling news indeed.

Even before he had finished perusing The Shadow's data, Harry could see the possible connection with such men as Roy Alker and Philip Renz. Either could have posed as Warrendale, in Harry's opinion, and used the ruse to murder Cedric Malvin.

"You will concentrate on Alker," stated Mann, referring to other notes. "It will be easy to meet him; but, of course, you must use discretion afterward. Alker is at present straightening Malvin's affairs, and would like to take over the business intact. However, he needs money. Such was his agreement with Malvin."

Harry put a pointed question:

"How much does Alker need? More than fifty thousand dollars?"

"Less than fifty thousand," returned Mann, with a slight smile. "If you are thinking of the funds that the Mask stole from Malvin, you may rest assured that Alker – should he be the Mask – would not dare to produce that cash. Alker's only plan, whether he be innocent or guilty, is to take in a new associate who will not want too much profit."

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"These securities will help you, Vincent." Mann dug a stack of stocks and bonds from a desk drawer. "All are registered in your name, and they are negotiable. They make you worth about a hundred thousand dollars" – Mann was thumbing through the securities – "but they aren't paying enough dividends. You'd like to use them toward a business that would bring a better return. See Alker, Vincent – but be careful of the securities."

As Harry arose to leave, Mann gave him Alker's address and telephone number, with the comment that Alker hadn't been in his office all day, but might be located there, later.

WITH most agents, The Shadow used a contact like Mann to furnish instructions. There was one exception. In the case of a certain assistant, The Shadow used the personality of Lamont Cranston to pass along his own instructions.

The assistant so favored was Margo Lane.

Attractive and self-assured, Margo was a very likable brunette who knew the ins and outs of cafe society. She was seen often at the night spots, and was always welcome. She never tried to be the life of the party; instead, she served as stabilizer. For Margo didn't like night-club life, as people supposed. She made the rounds to gather facts for The Shadow.

Between times, Margo dined with Cranston, usually at some quiet, secluded restaurant. Though she regarded Cranston as The Shadow, he never admitted the fact, and tactfully avoided it. Of late, she had begun to modify her theory.

It might be that instead of Cranston being The Shadow, The Shadow could be Cranston. That is, Margo suspected that The Shadow's real identity was that of a person she had never met, and when he appeared as Cranston, he was using a special guise.

Cranston and Margo were dining together, on this particular evening, and Cranston came directly to the point, as he said steadily:

"The Shadow expects us to find the Mask."

Margo nodded; then queried:

"Has he any idea what the Mask looks like?"

Leaning back, Cranston took a puff from his thin cigar; then, as though viewing a face in the cloud of smoke that he blew, he informed:

"The Mask looks exactly like Hubert Warrendale."

Margo's eyes went big with amazement.

"Why... why... he couldn't be Warrendale! He was the man who lost most through Malvin's death. Warrendale is a millionaire. He wouldn't trifle with a robbery involving a mere fifty thousand dollars."

"I said that the Mask looked like Warrendale," explained Cranston. "The mask that he wore was a replica of Warrendale's face. That's something that I learned from my friend, the police commissioner. I am sure The Shadow knew it, earlier."

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Idly flicking his cigar ash into a tray, Cranston was actually watching Margo keenly. He could tell by her changes of expression that she was forming rapid conclusions from the fact that she had learned. Realizing that the Mask had begun his deadly work by attempting to throw suspicion on Warrendale, Margo saw the personal elements involved, precisely as Weston had.

"Roy Alker could be the murderer," she said slowly. "I read today that he was Malvin's silent partner. Alker had much to lose, if the deal between Malvin and Warrendale went through. I'm wondering, too, about Philip Renz. I'm not sure that he wanted to drop his association with Warrendale."

"Vincent is checking on Alker," remarked Cranston. "You can do the same with Renz, Margo."

The girl nodded.

"I certainly can," she agreed. "While Warrendale has been handling finances, Renz has been having fun. I've met him often in cafe society."

"Does he mention Warrendale frequently?"

"Yes. Always in the finest terms. When he boasts of having made a fortune, Renz always finishes by saying: 'Thanks to Warrendale.' Renz has said, too, that whenever Warrendale wants to divide the shares, Renz will take his portion gladly, and drop out. He even talked as though he would like to press the matter. Renz classes himself as a burden that Warrendale shouldn't have to carry. I always wonder, when I hear such big-hearted talk around the night clubs."

"Look for Renz this evening," suggested Cranston, "and hear what else he has to say."

OUTSIDE the restaurant, Cranston ushered Margo into his limousine and hailed a cab for himself. The cab had been waiting near the corner, for it was The Shadow's own cab, piloted by a skilled hackie named Moe Shrevnitz, another of The Shadow's agents.

Like the limousine, the cab had a secret compartment beneath the rear seat, containing cloak, hat and guns.

The Shadow's laugh whispered from Cranston's lips.

Harry and Margo would certainly check on Alker and Renz. Therefore, The Shadow could look into some other matters. As Cranston, he intended to chat with Thomas North, vice president of the Crescent Trust Co.

Warrendale and Renz kept a joint account there; and, by a fortunate coincidence, Malvin and Alker also banked at the Crescent Trust. North, the vice president, had been called upon to draw up some of the papers for the transaction between Warrendale and Malvin.

In Cranston's tone, The Shadow told Moe to take him to the Crescent Trust. Since there was no hurry, the cab moved away at an easy speed. A faster pace would have been advisable.

Though The Shadow had not yet learned it, this trip to the Crescent Trust Co. was to produce important consequences, that could have been permanently settled by a rapid trip.

Unwittingly, The Shadow was riding to another meeting with the Mask!

CHAPTER VII. MILLION-DOLLAR MYSTERY

THE Crescent Trust Co. stayed open evenings, under the most strict surveillance. One of the executives was always in charge, and on this occasion, the official in question was Cranston's friend, Thomas North. Two watchmen were on guard, and the assistant cashier was also armed with a gun. The tellers had revolvers handy, behind their wickets.

Only one door was used during the evening hours. It was a side door, around the corner from the main entrance to the bank. Cars often parked on the side street, because the main entrance was on a busy avenue where the subway ran beneath. Anyone who came in the side door was noticed promptly by a watchman.

It wasn't surprising when a taxicab pulled up at the side door. Many of the bank's customers came by cab. Nor was the watchman suspicious of the man who stepped from the cab and paid off the driver, who promptly swung away, around the corner. The watchman recognized the man from the cab as one of the bank's largest depositors: Hubert Warrendale.

Usually, Warrendale came in a chauffeured limousine. The watchman never remembered having seen him use a cab before. Nevertheless, that was a very minor detail. The watchman simply bowed and said: "Good evening, Mr. Warrendale." The financier gave a slight nod in response, and stepped toward the vice president's office.

Commissioner Weston's scheme to trap the Mask was proving something of a boomerang.

Had Weston announced that the Mask wore a false visage that looked like Warrendale's face, the bank watchman would have studied this customer more carefully. He would have observed that the expression of Warrendale's face was fixed. It had to be. It was actually a mask!

Vice President North looked up as the masked man entered. The visitor blocked off the light, hence North saw nothing wrong with the imitation features. North said politely:

"Good evening, Mr. Warrendale."

"Good evening, Mr. North." The Mask put a crisp touch to his rendition of Warrendale's tone. "I should like to obtain some papers from my safe-deposit box."

The Mask displayed a safe deposit-box key as he spoke. North pressed a buzzer.

"Wilbur will take you down to the vaults, Mr. Warrendale."

Wilbur was the assistant cashier. He arrived and led the way from North's office, across the banking floor, and down the stairway to the safe-deposit vaults. There, the assistant cashier unlocked a grilled gate and the Mask passed through, to reach his safe-deposit box in the far wall.

The only odd feature of the trip was the way the Mask kept glancing from side to side. It happened when he passed the watchmen, and whenever Wilbur looked around. Also, the Mask was turning his head when he went through the gate. But he aroused no suspicion, because he didn't look away from the men he passed. Instead, the Mask actually glanced toward them.

He wanted them to see Warrendale's face, but not its set expression. By simply keeping his head in motion, the Mask was blurring his fake features sufficiently. They almost seemed to move. So far, his game was perfect, but the snag was to come.

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From the gate, Wilbur watched the Mask unlock the proper safe deposit box with the key he carried. But from the time the Mask spent there, it was evident that he was removing all the contents of Warrendale's box, which was unusual.

He was hurried, too, as he stuffed sheaves of securities and piles of money into his pockets. The box was a large one, and the contents began to make the Mask's overcoat bulk.

Even then, Wilbur wasn't overly suspicious. He was a bit concerned because Mr. Warrendale seemed nervous. Recalling the newspaper accounts of the Mask, and Warrendale's experience of the night before, Wilbur took it that fear was the cause for Warrendale's actions at the safe-deposit box. It might be that he thought his funds insecure, even here.

The Mask, along with his imitation face, was wearing the get-up of the night before: derby hat and muffler. His back to the open gate, he adjusted the muffler, after stowing the contents of the box into his coat. The flaw in the muffler lay in the fact that the evening was a warm one; no need for protection against inclement weather.

Perhaps that thought troubled the Mask.

As he closed the box and pocketed the key, he turned toward the gate and flashed a sharp-eyed look at Wilbur. Struck by the deep-set glitter of the eyes, the cashier gave a startled gasp. It might have meant that the imposture was discovered.

Springing for the doorway, the Mask clutched Wilbur, flung him full about and hurled him into the vault room. Startled by the swiftness of the attack, the assistant cashier could only stare, dumfounded, as the gate clang shut and locked. The muffler fell away, and Wilbur really saw the face that the Mask wore.

An imitation of Warrendale's visage!

BEFORE the startled assistant cashier could remember that he had a gun, the Mask was dashing up the stairway. The watchmen were coming his way; they had heard the gate clang, and the pound of footsteps also roused them. As they saw the Mask, they heard Wilbur shout from below, but his words, echoing in the vault room, were not distinguishable.

The guards thought the real trouble lay below, and they would have let the Mask go through, if they hadn't caught a better look at him. He was halfway across the floor when they saw that his face was a mask. The dangling muffler gave the game away.

As it was, the Mask had a start. He was out through the side door, blazing back with a revolver as the guards began to fire. His hat was askew and his imitation face more plain than ever, under the glow of the strong light above the doorway. North saw it as he poked his head from his office.

"The Mask!"

The vice president thought of the name instantly, and voiced it; but by then, the Mask was gone. He was running along the street to the corner, where he wheeled just long enough to shoot back at the pursuing guards.

They'd come out through the door, and were right in line for disaster. All that saved them were shots from a cab that was approaching along the side street.

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It was The Shadow's cab. He had heard the shots from a distance – those that the Mask had fired outside the street door. Whipping into hat and cloak, The Shadow had a gun ready when he gained the range. His shots at the Mask diverted the killer's aim from the stupefied bank guards.

The trouble was that the guards themselves were in The Shadow's path of fire. He had to aim above their heads, and therefore he missed the Mask. His bullets, however, were cracking the marble face of the building corner, very close to the Mask. The killer didn't wait. He turned the corner and dashed away.

At the same moment, The Shadow came flinging from the cab. Clever strategy, this. He was making for the corner, also on foot, in case the Mask ducked for an alleyway. He was counting on Moe to wheel the corner and be ready with the cab, in case the Mask had a vehicle of his own. Spurring the cab, Moe took the corner just ahead of The Shadow.

Another cab was speeding away from the curb. There was no sign of the Mask. Having vanished from the lighted avenue, the amazing crook must have jumped into the cab ahead. Slapping to a stop, Moe shoved the door open and pointed ahead. Understanding, The Shadow sprang into Moe's cab and the chase was on.

It should have taken only a few blocks to overtake the fugitive cab, for Moe was a speed demon. From behind came the trailing wail of a siren, from a police car that had come by the bank just when needed. Moe was outdistancing the police car. But there was a hazard just ahead.

As the Mask's cab shot across a side street, a coupe catapulted from the narrow thoroughfare. Two men, accomplices of the Mask, were blasting straight shots at The Shadow's cab.

Moe gave the wheel a jerk; on two wheels the cab went winging like a flopping, crippled bird, into the side street opposite. Thinking they had put the cab out of commission, the crooks swung left, down the avenue.

The turn brought them right past the police car. Shots were exchanged as the two cars whizzed by each other. Then the patrol car made a rapid turnabout, to pursue the coupe. It was a bad mistake. The coupe was leading the chase in the wrong direction, and its start was too good for the patrol car to overtake it.

Still, pursuit wasn't over.

AS his cab skidded the corner, The Shadow, turning to aim at the elusive coupe, saw the Mask's cab make a similar turn, two blocks ahead. He ordered Moe to cut through the side street, to the next avenue, which Moe did, for his cab wasn't crippled after all. On the next avenue, The Shadow spotted the Mask's cab.

From then on, it was a crafty chase. Speedy at first, but slower later, when the driver ahead came to the conclusion that he wasn't being followed. He reached that opinion after darting in among some crooked streets in the vicinity of Greenwich Village. Keeping about a block behind, Moe was mostly out of sight.

At last, the Mask's cab rolled eastward to a dingy district. On a darkened street, it slowed and swung into a narrow parking lot between two buildings. By then, Moe's cab was coming along, he blotted its lights at The Shadow's command.

Like an arrow of blackness, The Shadow was out of the cab and speeding to the parking lot. Arriving there, he hurdled the fenders of two cars and arrived beside the Mask's cab just as it halted in a waiting space.

An automatic in one hand, The Shadow whipped the cab door open with the other. Dim light from a building window threw a revealing glow into the cab. That shaft showed The Shadow's .45 poking into the cab's interior, ready to cover the Mask. A laugh was ready on The Shadow's lips.

The laugh wasn't uttered.

The Shadow would have to wait for another meeting with the Mask. The interior of the fugitive cab was empty!

CHAPTER VIII. A MATTER OF PAROLE

TWENTY minutes of wasted pursuit, with an empty cab at the finish. Somewhere along the route, the Mask had dropped off. That was, if he had been in the cab at all. That point impressed The Shadow. He voiced a soft laugh as he drew back from the cab and eased the door shut.

There was special purpose in the laugh.

The Shadow hadn't forgotten that the cab had a driver. At sound of the strange whisper, the fellow bobbed from the wheel and shoved a peaked face into the rear, staring anxiously about. He didn't see the gloved hand that thrust itself through the open window, impelled by a long, hard-driving arm.

Taking the cabby's neck, The Shadow bent the fellow almost double. The cabby's squirms ended as he heard the whispered laugh, more sinister, this time, for it was very close to his ear. The cabby gulped:

"I'll... I'll talk!"

Talk he did, when The Shadow had dragged him, half limp, from the cab. He was pleading, begging, that peakfaced prisoner, for he knew who The Shadow was. He gulped his own name: Nick Hemble. After that, he continued his plea.

"I didn't want to get into this," expressed Nick. "Honest, I didn't! They made me."

"Name them!"

"Ernie Bedlo and Tagger Scherf," declared Nick, responding to The Shadow's command. "They're working for the Mask. But I didn't know it until tonight."

Near the parked cab was a door that opened into a garage that flanked the parking lot. Opening it, The Shadow saw a darkish room that served as an office. He shoved Nick inside, and turned on a hanging lamp to study the fellow's face in the light. Quivering at sight of The Shadow's burning eyes, Nick renewed his plea.

"I'm out on parole," he stated. "I was mixed in a stick-up a year ago. Didn't know what it was all about until the bulls grabbed me. The judge must have believed me; anyway, I got my parole, and went back to hacking. Then along came Ernie and Tagger."

Nick paused to lick his lips. The Shadow was considering the names that the prisoner mentioned: Ernie Bedlo and Tagger Scherf. The Shadow knew them by their reputation, or lack of it. They weren't important criminals, but they were competent in a small way; just the sort of crooks that the Mask might choose as his accomplices.

There was a telephone in the little office. Pushing Nick into a rickety chair in the corner, The Shadow decided to make a call that would impress the prisoner.

Since Ernie and Tagger might have been the men at Warrendale's, last night, The Shadow decided to call that number first. He wanted to talk to Commissioner Weston, rather than Hubert Warrendale. But there was a

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chance that Weston might be out at Warrendale's.

His call to Warrendale's home produced a busy signal, which was repeated when he tried it again. So The Shadow called the Cobalt Club, instead. He used Cranston's voice, but did not give his name. He asked for Weston, and when the commissioner's voice came, The Shadow spoke again, in Cranston's tone. Weston recognized it.

"I've just been talking to Warrendale!" exclaimed the commissioner. "He called me from his house. I'm going out there. Something serious has happened!"

Weston's mention of a call from Warrendale's accounted for the busy signal that The Shadow heard. What interested him more was the "something serious" that Weston mentioned.

"Something serious?" repeated The Shadow. "Did it happen out at Warrendale's?"

"No, no," returned Weston. "It happened at the Crescent Trust Co. The Mask came there this evening, less than a half hour ago. They mistook him for Warrendale and let him go downstairs. The Mask rifled Warrendale's safe—deposit box. He must have taken a million dollars in cash and securities belonging to Warrendale and Renz!"

"How did Warrendale learn about it, commissioner? Did the bank call him?"

"No. Warrendale doesn't know about it. He'd promised to call me this evening, to learn if there were any developments from last night. While he was talking to me, Cardona came in with a report of the bank robbery. I told Warrendale I'd come out. I'll break the news when I get there. Will you join me at Warrendale's, Cranston?"

"Yes. I'll be there, commissioner."

HAVING heard so much mention of Warrendale, The Shadow thought of Alker and Renz. He glanced at Nick and saw the peak-faced fellow staring, open-mouthed, much impressed by The Shadow's personal acquaintance with the police commissioner. Knowing that Nick would give no trouble, The Shadow dialed another number.

This time a methodical voice answered:

"Burbank speaking."

Burbank was the contact to whom agents reported by telephone when they were on the move. The Shadow spoke one word:

"Report!"

Two reports came. One from Harry, who was still looking for Alker. The other was Margo's: she had been to half a dozen night clubs without discovering a trace of Renz.

"Reports received."

The Shadow finished that statement with a low, sardonic laugh that quivered ghoulish echoes through the room. Nick shook in a fashion that would have suited a jellyfish. He feared that the laugh was meant for him.

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It was grim mirth, that voiced The Shadow's sentiments regarding Alker and Renz. Both were still in the balance, and with neither accounted for, the weight hadn't shifted either direction. The riddle of the Mask was still unsolved. There was a chance that Nick might help to solve it. The Shadow turned to the cowering cabby.

"Proceed with your story," ordered The Shadow in a steady whisper. "I want facts concerning the Mask."

"Ernie and Tagger work for him," repeated Nick, "but they don't know who he is. They were making me chauffeur them around, saying if I didn't, they'd frame me on something and put the skids under my parole."

"You took them to Long Island last night –"

"No, I didn't." Nick's tone was sincere. "I didn't see either of them last night. But tonight, I got a call straight from the Mask. The first time I'd ever heard from him. He said to meet him, and take him somewhere."

"Which proved to be the Crescent Trust Co."

Nick nodded. Then:

"He sent me around the corner, see? Said I was to stay there until I heard shooting; then beat it. So I did."

"Without waiting for the Mask to –"

"Without waiting for the Mask. I can tell you where he went. He ducked into the subway. There was an entrance to it from the building right next to the bank. I saw him slide in there, just as I started."

The Shadow gave a laugh that worried Nick.

"I was a decoy," affirmed the cabby. "That's all. Ernie and Tagger were the guys who covered my getaway. I came back here because this is where I belong."

"Where you belong –"

"Yeah." Nick nudged a shaky thumb. "I've got a room in the house across the parking lot. Ernie fixed it for me. It's got a telephone, so he and Tagger can call me any time they want –"

As he spoke, Nick brightened suddenly.

"It was the Mask called me tonight," he exclaimed, "and he's waiting to hear back from me –"

"He gave you his number –"

"No. But he had me leave the phone off the hook, so the line would be open, see? It was seven o'clock when the Mask called me. I met him a few blocks from the bank, and got him there about a quarter of eight. And now, it's –"

"Half past eight."

The Shadow supplied the time by noting an old alarm clock that was ticking on a shelf in the dingy office. Gripping Nick by the arm, he steered the fellow out through the door and across the parking lot.

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From there, Nick led the way, in through the back of the old house and up to his room.

THE SHADOW saw the telephone that Nick had mentioned; its receiver was off the hook, as the paroled man claimed. Before Nick could reach the telephone, The Shadow picked it up. In a tone that was a perfect imitation of Nick's, The Shadow said:

"Hello."

There was no response. The Shadow repeated the word, but recognized that it was useless. He could tell that the line was dead. He dropped the receiver on its hook and turned to Nick.

With a hopeless gulp, the peak-faced man subsided in a corner chair. The silence was stirred only by the ticking of Nick's own alarm clock. It was on a table in the corner, and it registered twenty-five minutes of nine.

The next minutes were tremendous ones for Nick Hemble. He was wondering why The Shadow waited; why he didn't take some vengeance for what he could properly consider to be a double cross on Nick's part. Then, when Nick was ready to start panting pleas for mercy, a jangle came from the telephone bell.

The Shadow answered, using Nick's tone. The cornered man waited expectantly; sank back, as he saw The Shadow replace the receiver.

"Only the operator," The Shadow told Nick, "saying that your receiver was off the hook a few minutes ago. Evidently" – The Shadow's laugh had grimness, but not for Nick – "the Mask hung up at his end before we returned here."

Hope flickered in Nick's eager eyes.

"Since the State paroled you," declared The Shadow, "I shall do the same. On these terms, Nick: that you report to me everything that you hear from Ernie and Tagger – or from the Mask."

Nick nodded willingly.

"You will follow their orders," added The Shadow, "only when I approve them. You will obey my own instructions whenever I give them."

"Sure thing, Shadow!" Heartfelt in mood, Nick forgot his awe toward the black-cloaked avenger. "I've been wanting to go straight. But when Ernie and Tagger said they'd frame me –"

Nick halted abruptly. He'd seen The Shadow turning toward the door, but now he was staring at the door itself. Either gloom had absorbed the cloaked figure, or The Shadow had performed an absolute vanish. Nick recalled The Shadow's reputed power of clouding men's minds through some hypnotic process. The departure was uncanny.

So was the chilly, whispered laugh that trailed to Nick's ears. Weird though it was, Nick sensed a note of welcome in that mirth – The Shadow's acceptance of a new recruit who was deserting the cause of the Mask!

CHAPTER IX. THE LAW MOVES

IT took The Shadow nearly an hour to get out to Warrendale's, because he lost fifteen minutes or so transferring from Moe's cab to Stanley's limousine. Traffic was heavy in the night-club area, otherwise Moe

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would have found the big car sooner.

As Cranston, The Shadow entered the limousine, leaving Moe to answer Margo's call. Reaching Warrendale's, The Shadow found that Commissioner Weston had arrived ahead of him. The official police car was standing outside the mansion.

In the upstairs study, Hubert Warrendale was behind the desk, staring with trance-like gaze. He didn't even see The Shadow enter, although he came as Cranston, not as a being in black. Small wonder that Warrendale was mentally stunned. Weston had told him about the Mask's latest exploit, at the Crescent Trust Co.

Loss of a million dollars, the total assets of Warrendale and Renz, was bitter news to take. Warrendale seemed paralyzed by the blow. His lips were moving, but the rest of his body had gone still. When words finally formed upon his lips, they were to his credit. He wasn't thinking of his loss in terms of himself alone.

"Poor Renz," spoke Warrendale. "Everything he had was tied up in that fund. He must be told."

Cardona was present with Weston. Before the commissioner could speak, Joe put in a comment.

"We'll tell Renz, if we can ever find him. Trouble is, we don't know where he is. He's not around his apartment, nor at any of the night clubs where he usually hangs out."

Weston brought the subject back to the Mask.

"We'll handle this case, Warrendale," said the commissioner. "Since you and Renz are both losers, it points straight to Alker. Let's take things in order. First: how did the Mask get the key to your safe-deposit box? Was it stolen from here, last night, by the thugs who locked you in the closet?"

Warrendale shook his head

"Ah!" exclaimed Weston. "So you had the key today."

Another negative headshake from Warrendale. Cardona stopped by the chair where Cranston had seated himself

"A guessing game," grumbled Joe. "The commissioner's idea of a quiz is something he heard over the radio. I suppose he'll hand Warrendale three nice silver dollars if, on the next guess, he tells him where the key is."

Weston was growing impatient.

"Come, come, Warrendale." Weston shook the numbed man's shoulder. "You are contradicting yourself. First, you say that the key wasn't stolen; then you say that you don't have it. Give us an intelligent answer. Which is it?"

Warrendale roused himself with effort. The color came back to his strong-jawed face. His double chin dropped away as he lifted his high forehead upward.

"I never had the key here," he said. "Renz is the man who keeps it."

Weston and Cardona stared at each other. Each exclaimed: "Renz!"

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"Yes; Renz," Warrendale repeated. "I don't suppose that anyone else knows that he has the key. That is, no one except the Mask."

"But why did Renz have it?" demanded Weston. "Tell us that, Warrendale!"

WARRENDALE explained. It was all quite simple. Warrendale had taken out the safe–deposit box in his own name, as he was the man who intended to use it. But the funds for which the box was rented, as protection, belonged to Renz, too. So Warrendale had let him keep the key.

It meant that Warrendale could never open the box without Renz's knowledge; or, for that matter, without Renz's permission. Should anything happen to Warrendale, Renz would have the key. In addition, Warrendale had given an affidavit which would allow Renz to open the box in the event of Warrendale's death.

Viewed the other way about, the arrangement was still fair. Should Renz die and the key not be found, Warrendale could prove ownership to the safe–deposit box and have it opened officially. But the point remained: while Warrendale lived, he, alone, had access to the safe–deposit box.

"That tells us all!" expressed Weston. "We don't want Alker. We want Renz. He has the key, and he is the culprit. He played the Mask last night, and found that it worked well enough. We were fools, not to disclose that the Mask wore a replica of Warrendale's face.

"Had we done so, the bank would have recognized the imposture immediately. As it was, Renz profited by our folly. He'd gone so deep, that he might as well continue. He's stolen your money, Warrendale, and gone."

Warrendale shook his head.

"I can't understand it," he said. "Why should Renz rob himself?"

"Rob himself!" scoffed Weston. "Of what? He was taking his own money – that you'd have given him, anyway. But he took yours with it, Warrendale. Our job, now, is more than keeping him from getting out of the city. We'll have to stop him from leaving the country!"

Weston picked up the telephone, intending to call the FBI in Washington. Cranston stopped him, with an easy gesture.

"Why not settle this matter of the key?" he queried. "There might have been a duplicate, you know. People have made duplicate keys, even to safe–deposit boxes."

The sarcasm slipped past Weston. He reverted to his claim that Renz was necessarily the culprit, arguing that since Warrendale had told no one about it, Renz was the only man who could have played the Mask at the Crescent Trust Co.

"Quite true," agreed Cranston, "unless Renz happened to let someone find out that he had the key."

Not having thought of that one, Weston was stumped. He finally decided that a visit to Renz's Manhattan apartment would be quite in order. He arranged to have Warrendale come along with himself and Cardona. Since his own car was here, Cranston decided to go ahead alone, saying he would meet Weston later at the club.

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

Gaining a head start, The Shadow told Stanley to make speed getting into town. When Mr. Cranston wanted speed, he meant speed, and Stanley gave it. The limousine was smooth—running, capable of quick but easy stops.

Stanley had ways of gliding it up to traffic lights so nicely, that even the most watchful cop could be deceived by the rapidity of its approach.

Clipping a few minutes from the usual time between Warrendale's and Manhattan, The Shadow had time for a phone call from a place near Renz's apartment. He contacted Burbank, to learn that Harry was still seeking Alker, and that Margo hadn't found Renz.

Garbed in black, The Shadow approached the apartment house on foot and took a rear route up to the third floor, where Renz's apartment was situated.

THE rear route was a fire escape, and a curious thing occurred as The Shadow neared his goal. From the window that The Shadow intended to enter, a dim glow suddenly appeared. It flickered brighter; then lessened.

Stopping at the window, The Shadow looked through a darkened room toward a hallway beyond, from which the glow came. Suddenly, the light was blanketed. Someone had closed a door at the far end of the little passage.

Working the window open, The Shadow entered. A few moments later, he was at the passage door. Peering through a tiny crack, he looked into Renz's living room. It reminded The Shadow of a hurricane's wake.

Desk and table were overturned, their drawers ripped out and the contents scattered. Books had been tumbled from shelves. Pictures were lying on the floor. A radio cabinet was upside down in a corner. Even a tobacco humidor was overturned, its smoking mixture forming a brownish streak along the carpet edge beside a small stand near the door.

The door itself showed a broken lock, indicating a forcible entry. Standing in the middle of the mess was a man who swung slowly in The Shadow's direction, revealing a thin, sharp—featured face with quick, gimlet eyes.

The man was Roy Alker.

Apparently, he had just entered. A floor lamp was shining in the corner, accounting for the glow that had appeared as The Shadow came up the fire escape. There was a wall switch near the door, which Alker had turned on, then off, producing a temporary glare from ceiling lights. Such was the brighter glow that had come, then faded.

Though Alker might have broken the door lock, he certainly couldn't have produced the chaos within so few minutes. Therefore, it followed that the door had probably been smashed earlier. Still, there was no proof that Alker hadn't been here before, at which time he could have tossed things into confusion.

Alker's expression wasn't exactly a puzzled one. Rather, his gaze seemed shrewd, as though he were trying to figure out something from the wreckage.

Again, Alker turned, this time swiftly. His eyes darted toward the door; he tilted his head attentively. The Shadow heard the same thing that Alker did: the clang of an elevator door.

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

Quickly, Alker turned off the floor lamp and stumbled across a batch of books, to reach a closet. Its door was open, but the closet itself was shallow. The Shadow noted that the door didn't thump when Alker closed it.

Against the light from the outer hall, another man appeared. His long-jawed face was darkish, the hair above it glossy. Even in the poor light, The Shadow recognized Philip Renz, the actual owner of this apartment. Renz was dangling some keys; he pocketed them when he saw the broken door.

Sliding one hand through the doorway, Renz pressed the switch, then stared about suspiciously. The chaos did not bother him; he was more interested in the interior of a bedroom that he could see through a side door that opened from the living room.

The Shadow saw the bedroom, too, from the passage, and observed that its furniture was undisturbed.

Whistling softly, Renz took quick paces across the living room, deftly avoiding books and other articles that strewed his path. The Shadow heard the clicking of a key, the opening of a bureau drawer. Then Renz was back into the living room, his right hand dipped into his coat pocket.

He glanced toward the closet door and his gaze stopped at the floor lamp, which stood quite near it. Renz turned on the floor lamp.

Stepping back, the sallow man surveyed the scene. Like Alker, he decided that there was too much light. He strode over and turned out the ceiling lamps. Approaching the closet, he paused halfway there and deliberately drew a revolver from his pocket. He aimed the gun at the closet door, which was perfectly focused in the lamplight.

Renz spoke. His tone was smooth, but loud.

"Come out, whoever you are!" he ordered. "Within five seconds, if you prefer to come out alive! If you wait any longer, you'll come out – dead!"

CHAPTER X. DIVIDED HONORS

FIVE seconds.

Much hinged on the time period that Renz was allotting Alker. Much that was important to The Shadow.

The whole campaign against the Mask lay at stake. Bullets, whether right or wrong, could seal the mystery of a master criminal's past, to a point where even The Shadow could not unravel it.

If Renz, on his own premises, should slay Alker, the intruder, the latter would be branded as the Mask, whether he was the masquerading crook or not.

Perhaps Alker, too, was armed, capable of turning the tables on Renz. Still, that didn't prove Alker to be the Mask. Alker would take the rap if he killed Renz; but should Renz be the Mask, with the profits of crime buried somewhere, Alker would be unjustly sentenced to the electric chair.

Those thoughts were instantaneous flashes in The Shadow's mind. They spurred him to intervention. Within two seconds after Renz had delivered his ultimatum through the closet door, The Shadow was in the living room. Out from the passage, he was silently creeping upon Renz, who was too concentrated on the closet to be aware of the stealthy approach.

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

"Three –"

Renz was counting the seconds aloud. One more, and Alker would have to come out before the fatal count of five. One second more and The Shadow would be lunging in Renz's direction. His intervention would be perfectly timed.

At least, it would have been, but for the sound that shrieked through the apartment windows, drowning Renz's count of "Four." It was the siren of Commissioner Weston's official car.

Of course, Weston would let the chauffeur use it! Sometimes The Shadow wondered why Weston hadn't been appointed head of the fire department, instead of the police. Weston insisted upon using that siren, even when it might scare off a horde of hunted crooks.

In this case, it produced the usual annoying results. It started things an instant too soon for The Shadow.

Renz gave a half turn as he heard the siren. The piercing sound reaching Alker in the closet, the trapped man acted frantically. He flung the door wide and lurched out, a sure target for Renz, who swung his gun toward Alker before The Shadow could stop him. The thing that saved the situation was the wide swing of the closet door.

Bashing with full force, the door struck the floor lamp and crashed it. Diverting his own lunge, The Shadow hooked Alker's ankle and sent him into a dive just as Renz blasted with the gun.

Bullets whizzed above Alker's head, the first shot missing him by mere inches. Then, grabbing through emptiness, Alker found Renz.

Alker's tackle carried Renz to the floor. They were writhing, with Renz's gun furnishing spurts like a firecracker. Before Renz could clamp the gun muzzle against Alker's body, The Shadow flung himself upon the pair.

Grabbing for Renz's gun, he found it and wrenched it from the fellow's grasp. It took a blow from the gun itself to convince Renz that he didn't want it any longer. By then, Alker had put his hands on The Shadow and was trying to choke him.

Flinging the gun across the floor, The Shadow caught the clutching hands and yanked them away, keeping his grip the while. He lashed Alker back and forth across the floor, finally giving him an over-the-shoulder throw that should have settled him. But Alker proved tough and lucky.

As he finished his somersault, he saw the glitter of Renz's gun by the glow from the hallway light. He scooped up the revolver, swung about and aimed blindly in The Shadow's direction.

AT that moment The Shadow was coming to his feet, his hands gripping a chair that he had encountered.

The chair was about the only thing that hadn't been disturbed in this badly messed room, so The Shadow added it to the collection of wreckage. He simply flung it in Alker's direction, instead of dodging away from the man's chance aim.

Maybe it was the crash of the chair against his arm and shoulder that impelled Alker to pull the gun trigger when he did. Whatever the case, the chair performed its required service.

It jolted Alker's aim upward. His shot found the ceiling. Groggily, he reeled toward the hallway door.

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

Scooping up the radio cabinet, The Shadow was about to fling it, when he saw that the fight was over. A stocky man was lunging from the hallway to grab Alker. Dropping the radio cabinet, The Shadow wheeled back through the passage.

The cloaked invader was gone when another arrival pressed the light switch. Ceiling lamps showed Commissioner Weston standing at the door, with Warrendale staring over his shoulder. In the room, Alker was limply yielding the revolver to Joe Cardona; while farther away, Renz was rising from hands and knees, rubbing his head.

Sight of the wrecked room pleased Cardona. Since this was Renz's apartment, the shamble could be blamed on Alker. Moreover, Alker had a gun – a bad point against him. One that Cardona would have advanced, if Weston hadn't shouted it first.

"So you came here to murder Renz!" stormed Weston. "We've learned all we needed, Alker!"

"But... but" – Alker's hesitating protest sounded real – "the gun isn't mine!"

Right then, Cardona remembered a recent grudge. One that he was anxious to settle. Since Weston had taken it upon himself to accuse Alker, Cardona decided to try another tack. Not that his grudge was toward Weston. The score that Cardona wanted to settle was with Renz.

"Your gun, Renz?" gruffed Cardona. "The one you said your permit covered?"

Renz hesitated, then nodded.

"Good enough," declared Cardona. "It just goes to prove that if you grab a guy in the dark, you can often get his gun. You took mine last night, Renz, and acted smart about it. This time, Alker turned the trick on you."

Renz's admission exploded Weston's theory that Alker was a man of murderous intent. It looked very much as though that talent belonged to Renz. Looking from one to the other, Weston demanded abruptly:

"Which one of you is the Mask?"

Both men gave him stares. Angry at their silence, the commissioner burst loose.

"One of you went to the Crescent Trust Co.," he declared. "Whichever it was, he wore that face that looks like Warrendale's. He opened the safe–deposit box and took everything that was in it."

Renz articulated a wild cry, far different from his usually oily tone.

"The safe–deposit–box key! That's why someone tore this room apart! The key –"

Springing across the room, Renz halted short when he saw the humidior and its dumped tobacco. Dropping to hands and knees, he pawed in the flaky smoking mixture, then gave a hopeless look toward Warrendale.

"This is where I kept the key," said Renz. "In my tobacco. Remember, Warrendale? The one place where no one would ever look for it. But someone ransacked the room, and finally found it. Maybe he just happened to upset the humidior. Someone!" Renz's tone became a sneer, as he came to his feet and glared. "Why should I say someone, when I mean you, Alker!"

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

NORMALLY, Renz was a man of poise, while Alker was inclined to be nervous. At present, their parts were reversed. Perhaps Renz was irked because he lost his gun to Alker in the hectic struggle in which The Shadow had participated.

In turn, Alker's obtaining possession of the gun could have been the reason for his confidence. However, contrary to form, Alker was cool, while Renz was excited.

"Why accuse me, Renz?" inquired Alker steadily. "You were the man who had Warrendale's key. Not I."

Renz mouthed words that nobody understood. Weston interrupted them.

"Warrendale kept the matter of the key a secret," said the commissioner. "Did you do the same, Renz?"

"Of course!" snapped Renz. "I'd have been the last person in the world to let anyone know that I had it!"

"Thanks for the kind words, Renz," spoke Alker with a smile. "They prove my case. Since neither you nor Warrendale told anyone that the key was here, how could I have known it?"

Again, Renz went incoherent. He tried to correct himself, claiming that he might have mentioned the key, inadvertently, or that someone could have spied upon him. Finding that such words didn't carry weight, Renz took a deep breath and calmed down.

"It baffles me," he admitted. "I suppose you think I tore this apartment all apart just to make it look as if someone else had. Well, I didn't. It's your job, commissioner, to find out who did."

Renz finished by looking at Alker.

"I suppose you're accusing me," returned Alker. "It doesn't make sense, Renz. If I'd found the key, why should I have come back here afterward?"

"To fix the place so no one would suspect –"

"You mean clean up this mess?" Alker shook his head as he gazed about the room. "It couldn't be done without leaving traces. If I'd taken the key, I could have straightened things at the time, rather than later.

"No, I'm not the Mask. I'll tell you frankly why I came here. I suspected you, Renz. I've been looking for you all evening, and when I couldn't find you anywhere else, I came here."

A smile was curling Renz's lips. He reached into his pocket, produced a cigarette case and placed a cigarette between his lips. His oily poise had returned to perfection. The widening of Renz's smile kept everyone intent. They expected an interesting statement, and Renz supplied it.

"Very funny, Alker," said Renz smoothly. "So funny, that I almost believe you. Because all evening I've been looking for you, on the assumption that you might be the Mask."

"What!" exclaimed Alker. "Do you mean that while I've been peeking into night clubs –"

"I've been watching your office," inserted Renz. "I mean I've been doing that, regardless of your actions."

"I've stated my actions," retorted Alker. "My statement doesn't prove yours, too."

Renz gave a bow.

"Have it your own way, Alker."

The honors were divided. Alker and Renz each had a story, but with no one to back the alibi. As before, the odds were even. Either could be the Mask, but proving it was another matter. The man to blame for that was Commissioner Weston, and he knew it. Weston took the best way out.

"Sorry," he said. "I spoke too hastily. You're free, Alker, and so are you, Renz. I told each of you that I did not suspect the other of being the Mask. You both preferred to doubt me, so you watched each other. Whatever your differences, you can settle them between yourselves."

Abruptly, Weston turned on his heel and strode from the room, motioning for Cardona and Warrendale to follow. They went out, leaving Alker and Renz exchanging stares, which ended when the two men shrugged. Neither heard the stealthy departure from beyond the passage door.

It wasn't until The Shadow reached the fire escape that he indulged in a whispered laugh. The tone was grim, yet it carried a note of satisfaction. Though honors were divided between Roy Alker and Philip Renz, The Shadow was confident that the case would soon break.

Time was the factor The Shadow considered most important. Given a reasonable amount of it, he would surely uncover the Mask!

CHAPTER XI. THE MISSING EVIDENCE

THE news was out. For a few days, it had created an immense sensation, the true story of the Mask. The name of that extraordinary criminal represented more than a vague person with a blank face. It stood for a man who wore a false visage, perfectly designed to pass as the countenance of Hubert Warrendale.

Every newspaper carried Warrendale's picture. The financier had posed for it at Weston's request. Stiffly staring at the camera, Warrendale had shown what the Mask looked like. Everywhere, people were scanning faces, looking for an imitation one that had a high forehead and a square chin.

It didn't particularly inconvenience Warrendale, because he seldom appeared in public. The financier simply decided to remain constantly at home; except for brief excursions into the city to chat with Commissioner Weston. To make such visits agreeable to Warrendale, Weston arranged to hold all conferences in the evening, at the Cobalt Club.

To Cranston, as well as Warrendale, Weston expressed the conviction that the missing million would be found. The Mask had made a goat of Weston, at the commissioner's own game, but Weston had promptly parried by staying with it. His apologies to Alker and Renz were really masterful strategy, the best that Weston had ever employed.

Talking to Cranston one evening, while they waited for Warrendale to reach the club, Weston put it quite concisely, though it was the tenth time that The Shadow had heard the commissioner give the same statement.

"It came like an inspiration, Cranston," Weston declared. "I realized, when I looked at Alker and Renz, that one or the other still must be the Mask. My real worry was that the Mask had decided to flee the country; but, quite obviously, he hadn't. He was right there, with us."

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

At this point, it was proper for Cranston to supply the nod. If he did, Weston finished the tale more quickly.

"So I went right back to the original game," added Weston. "I gave the Mask the rope he needed. He still has it, whether he is Alker or Renz. I'm not watching either of them. I'm waiting for the right man – I should say the wrong man – to make the step that will betray him utterly.

"Meanwhile, Warrendale does not have to worry about his missing fortune. He will reclaim it, in full, when we find the Mask. It's one choice out of two. It can't fail, Cranston! So far" – Weston finished with a chuckle – "the newspapers haven't caught on to the situation. When they do, they will, for once, appreciate my real ability."

The Shadow glanced at his watch. Warrendale had started into town a half hour ago. He would arrive within fifteen minutes. Time for a telephone call; so, in Cranston's style, The Shadow excused himself.

His call was to Burbank, who was The Shadow's contact man.

Burbank reported as usual. Alker and Renz were no longer at their game of hide-and-seek. One night of it had been enough. Harry Vincent was making progress. He and Roy Alker were having another conference this evening, that might result in Alker accepting Harry as a junior partner in a new promotion company which was to buy up Malvin's interests.

As for Margo Lane, she was no longer working hit or miss. Instead of crossing Renz's path at every other night club, she had become a member of his crowd. This evening, Renz was throwing a party at a club called Chez Unique, and Margo was to be one of the guests.

RETURNING to the grillroom to rejoin Weston, Cranston was just about to hear the same old story, when Warrendale arrived. A few minutes later, Joe Cardona joined the group.

The discussion hedged for a while, and finally landed on the subject of Warrendale's missing wealth.

"I'm sure the funds are safe," asserted Warrendale. "Of course, the bonds aren't registered, because my list was in the safe–deposit box with them, and it was taken, too. Nevertheless, I feel secure. So does Renz, for that matter, except –"

"Except that he feels too secure," inserted Weston, as Warrendale hesitated. "So secure, that Renz might be the Mask."

"He might be." Warrendale spoke slowly. "However, I'm equally suspicious of Alker. You know, he banked at the Crescent Trust. Renz used to meet me there, to give me the safe–deposit–box key. Alker might have been on hand at the wrong time."

"Time will tell," declared Weston "I mean the right time, Warrendale."

Warrendale nodded. Then:

"The sooner the better," he said. "Maybe we could make it sooner, commissioner, if we found out more about the Mask."

"What more can we find out?"

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

Weston looked to The Shadow, who had an idea, but shrugged it away in Cranston's manner. The Shadow was already following a plan, and didn't care to add suggestions, just yet.

But Cardona kept pondering on the subject, and suddenly something struck him. From Joe's exclamation, The Shadow knew that it must be the point that had long been in his own mind.

"The mask, commissioner!"

"The Mask. Well, what about him?"

"I don't mean the Mask, himself," explained Cardona. "I mean the mask that he wore: the fake face that looks like Warrendale's. Where did he get it? How?"

"An excellent point, inspector," commended Weston. He turned to Warrendale. "What do you think? Could the replica of your face have been made from a photograph?"

"I doubt it, commissioner."

Warrendale was meditative. His eyes closed. He set an elbow on the table and propped his large forehead in his upraised hand. At last, he raised his face.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "The bust!"

Cardona stared. Weston saw his puzzled look.

"Warrendale means a statue," explained Weston. "You know, inspector, the kind that are life-size, just head and shoulders. Proceed, Warrendale."

"When I endowed a new room for the library at Marlborough College," explained Warrendale, "they wanted a bust of myself, to be placed there. The work was given to a sculptor named Leo Drock."

"And he completed the bust –"

"Not yet. But he made a mask of my face, to work from. One of those plaster things. I should have remembered it before, but I am very forgetful. I depended so much on poor Lathan. He made it a practice to remind me of such things."

"However, Drock, the sculptor, could have supplied the life-size replica of your face to the Mask?"

"Yes. Absolutely!"

Weston reached for a telephone book, to look up Leo Drock. Warrendale shook his head.

"You won't find Drock listed," he said. "In fact, it will be difficult to locate him."

"Why?"

"Because Drock went away for his health, which is why he didn't complete the assignment. I had a few letters from him and I understood that he would be back in town, at a new studio. But he never sent me his new address."

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

"Do you know any of Drock's friends?"

Warrendale nodded. He began to name them. Some were artists; the rest bartenders.

"Drock is very erratic," explained Warrendale. "He was always bothering me about trifling debts. When he didn't work, he drank. Whichever he did, he borrowed money. He used to call up, asking me to send five dollars here, five dollars there. In fact, he owed me the full amount of the sculpture job when he left town."

PROMPTLY, Weston decided to follow the leads that Warrendale had given. Remembering an appointment, Cranston decided that he would be unable to go along.

Leaving the group, he went from the Cobalt Club and rode, by limousine, to a very squalid district. There, dismissing Stanley, The Shadow alighted as The Shadow.

A few minutes later, a black-cloaked figure materialized itself in the little room where Nick Hemble lived. Startled by a whispered laugh, the peak-faced cabby turned to see The Shadow. Shakily, Nick stated:

"I haven't heard from any of them. Not even from Ernie or Tagger, let alone the Mask."

"I have come to ask regarding someone else," spoke The Shadow. "A sculptor named Leo Drock."

Nick shook his head. He didn't know what a sculptor was, and he had never heard of Leo Drock.

"Drock just returned from a long trip –"

"I've got it!" exclaimed Nick. "That's why Ernie had me stick around the piers where the cruise ships came in. I picked up some good fares there. But I figured there must be one guy, at least, that Ernie wanted to keep tabs on. He used to call up and ask where I'd taken passengers."

"And you remember –"

"All of them," assured Nick. "They all went to hotels, some of them dumps. My cab's out in the lot. I'll make the rounds whenever you want."

"Immediately," stated The Shadow. "I shall accompany you."

Back at the Cobalt Club, other men were prepared to make the rounds, but there were no hotels on their list. In fact, Commissioner Weston was rather doubtful of results, as he studied names of artists and bartenders. There were a large number, yet Warrendale couldn't guarantee that the list was complete.

"Suppose I call on the artists," decided Weston. Then, to Cardona: "You can try the taprooms, inspector."

Cardona didn't know whether he should accept the assignment as a compliment. However, he passed it off.

"I know how to talk to barkeeps," he said. "I'll handle them quick just by flashing my badge. But this may take us a couple of hours, commissioner. Even then, we may not find the person who can tell us where Drock is."

"I have other names, out at my house," stated Warrendale. "Lathan insisted upon receipts for all of Drock's trifling debts. They are all filed under Drock's name. If you wish, I can go and get them."

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"A good idea," agreed Weston. "Add all the names you find to both lists. Then call me up, at Montmorency's Studio, and give Inspector Cardona a call at Jake's Place. We shall be at those particular locations in about one hour."

The commissioner stepped into his official car, while Warrendale summoned a taxicab, since it was his chauffeur's night off. Cardona stalked off in the direction of the subway.

The quest for Leo Drock was under way, as an important step to the discovery of the Mask. The combined efforts of three men promised to produce results.

It happened that The Shadow was embarking upon a similar quest, but in a different manner. Who would finish first, The Shadow or the others, was still a question, and a highly important one.

Whatever the result, it promised another meeting between The Shadow and the Mask!

CHAPTER XII. CLUTCH OF THE MASK

RENZ'S party was really under way at the Chez Unique. Champagne was flowing in the customary fashion. Either Philip Renz was really confident that he would regain his lost wealth, or he was seeking to drown his worry with bubbly fluid. Margo Lane was not sure which was the case. She found herself wavering from one opinion to the other.

Of one thing, Margo was certain.

She was keeping track of Philip Renz. He hadn't been out of her sight during the evening. If he left the Chez Unique, Margo intended to find out why. For the present, she was keeping excellent tabs on Renz. He hadn't made a single suspicious move. It looked like another blank evening for Margo.

The break was the telephone call.

It was for Renz, that call, because a polite waiter approached him and gestured toward a phone booth. Everyone was polite at the Chez Unique, and Margo had to be the same. Hence, she couldn't poke her head into the phone booth while Renz was talking, and ask what it was all about. Instead, Margo watched for what happened next.

Coming from the booth, Renz sidled away from the party and claimed his hat and coat from the check room. Margo didn't have to claim her coat. She had left it on a chair behind a door, where she could get it in a hurry, because she would need it if she left the Chez Unique.

Renz's party called for an evening gown, and Margo was wearing one of the most advanced type. Having nothing on her shoulders but a couple of straps the size of shoestrings, she needed a wrap in order to go outside.

Bundled in the wrap, Margo watched Renz leave the night club. She hurried along; then paused when she saw a cab pull up for Renz. Margo smiled. The man at the wheel was Moe Shrevnitz. He knew Renz by sight.

Very neat, Moe taking Renz as a passenger. He'd been designated to take Margo wherever she wanted to go, but he also knew that her destination would be the same as Renz's. So, rather than let Renz take a different cab, which would mean trailing him, Moe had simplified the matter.

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Of course, Margo would follow, but Moe's process made it all the easier. She could take another cab and tell the driver to keep Moe's in sight. Of course, Moe would dawdle, to make sure that Margo didn't lose the trail.

"Good work, Shrevvy!" Margo spoke her thoughts half aloud as she referred to Moe. "Take your time getting Renz wherever he is going. I'll be right along."

"What's that, Miss Lane?"

The query came from the uniformed doorman outside the Chez Unique. He'd heard Margo's mutters, but hadn't understood them.

"I was saying I'd like a cab," declared Margo. "I was disappointed when I saw one start away."

"I'll get you another, Miss Lane."

The doorman waved, a cab jolted from a hack stand across the street and came slowly over. Margo was watching Moe's cab turn the next corner, when a hand brushed one of her arms.

"Got a dime, lady?"

The questioner was a panhandler, who looked reasonably respectable. His clothes were old, but not shabby. His voice had persuasion. Margo didn't like his eyes. They were ratty, a betrayal of a doubtful character that his dead pan otherwise concealed.

Turning, the doorman saw the panhandler.

"Get going, you!" he snapped. Then, to Margo: "Don't give him any money. He's made about ten bucks already. Here's your cab, Miss Lane."

MARGO didn't want to waste time in disputes. She knew the doorman, and trusted him; whereas, the panhandler was a stranger and an undesirable one. So Margo compromised by tipping the doorman with a half dollar.

The panhandler, following, thrust his face into the picture. He addressed the doorman.

"Didn't like me muscling into your racket, huh?" queried the panhandler. "What did you do to deserve a half a buck? You don't have to buy no cups of coffee. The dump you work for gives 'em to you free."

"On your way," growled the doorman; "or I'll start you going."

"You and who else?"

"I'll show you. I've had enough of this!"

Closing the door of the cab with one hand, the doorman shoved the panhandler with the other. As the ratty fellow tripped to the sidewalk, the doorman turned to go into the Chez Unique to summon a few strong-armed waiters. Glad she was in the cab, Margo spoke to the driver:

"Hurry! A friend of mine just left in another cab. I must overtake him —"

"No rush, lady!" The gruff voice spoke from Margo's elbow. "Your friend didn't ask you to follow him."

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Margo turned. A blunt-faced man was beside her. He'd been in the cab when it came from across the street. He had a revolver, but wasn't gesturing it toward Margo. Instead, the gun was poked through the crack of the front window, covering the cab driver. That was why the cabby was tolerating the blunt man's presence.

The man with the gun happened to be Ernie Bedlo, one of two star henchmen working for the Mask. Margo didn't know who Ernie was, but she could guess who had sent him. She grabbed for the door and shoved it open.

Ernie tried to clutch her with his free hand, and caught the evening wrap. Margo twisted from it and sprang for the sidewalk, only to be shoved back into the cab.

The man who stopped Margo's flight was the panhandler. He had a revolver, too, and he jammed it against Margo's ribs. As she sank back into the cab, the ratty man sprang in and slammed the door. He was the other of the Mask's reliables: Tagger Scherf.

At Ernie's growled order, the scared cabby started. Twisted toward the rear window, Margo saw the doorman come from the Chez Unique, accompanied by two bouncers. She grabbed at Tagger's gun, thrusting it aside, and started to scream. Her voice was not heard. Ernie and Tagger quickly suppressed Margo.

They simply used the wrap to smother the girl's outcry. Margo squirmed frantically, but finally subsided under pressure. Ernie and Tagger eased the wrap, so that she could get some air, but they kept her head partly buried in the folds. Hence, Margo could not even tell where the cab was going.

At times, when it stopped, she was sure they must be at a corner where a traffic cop ought to be on duty; but she couldn't be certain of the latter point. Any new effort would merely bring a tightening of the wrap, so Margo decided not to attempt escape that would probably prove futile.

So far, Ernie and Tagger had shown no inclination toward rough stuff, beyond insisting that Margo come along quietly. Evidently, their real job was to see that Margo didn't trail Renz. Since Moe was handling the Renz situation anyway, Margo decided that her plight was all she had to worry about.

After a dozen twisty blocks, the cab went into a parking lot. This cab wasn't Nick Hemble's; Ernie and Tagger were simply using one that they had picked at random near the Chez Unique. Nor was the parking lot anything like the tiny one where Nick kept his cab.

THIS lot was a large one, in a fairly respectable neighborhood. It was so large, that it was difficult for the lone attendant to keep track of cars as fast as they came in.

The cab rolled to a corner, where Ernie pointed. There, Ernie and Tagger dragged Margo from the rear seat and started to shove her into an old sedan.

Ernie spoke to the scared cabby; while Tagger was controlling Margo with gun pressure.

"Get going, guy," Ernie ordered. "Up to the Bronx, and don't stop until you get there! I've got a couple of pals ready to trail you, to see you don't squawk."

Both Ernie and Tagger guffawed when the cab sped wildly from the parking lot, with the attendant chasing after it yelling that the cabby owed him a quarter. Then, instead of getting into the sedan, they dragged Margo from it and shoved her toward a deep corner of the lot.

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Stumbling, Margo started to protest verbally, and, in reward, received a mouthful of fur from the wrap that still covered her head. It was Tagger who used that process to make sure that Margo didn't try another outcry.

Through a short passage between two buildings, Margo's captors stopped at a basement door and unlocked it. Inside, they shoved Margo into a chair and turned on a light. Margo looked around and saw what appeared to be a janitor's office.

From there, the crooks took her through another room, which was furnished as living quarters. Next, they reached a cut-off section of the basement, where Margo saw a row of compartments used for storing furniture.

Each of those lockers was a cage, much like a prison cell. Ernie and Tagger shoved Margo into one of the empty lockers and slammed the door. While Tagger was slapping a padlock on the outside of the barred door, Ernie began to smooth Margo's fur wrap.

"I'll check this for you, sister," said Ernie, sarcastically, "unless I meet up with a blonde who'd look better in it. Don't worry about catching cold. We've put you close to the furnace. Maybe we'll put you closer, if you start to yell. So close, you wouldn't like it!"

With that warning, Ernie beckoned to Tagger. The two went out, closing the door of the storage room, leaving Margo to wonder if they were staying near, or really going away.

Actually, the pair left the basement and returned to the parking lot. They took the sedan and drove away from the lot, paying their quarter to the attendant.

MEANWHILE, Moe Shrevnitz had reached the destination ordered by Philip Renz. It happened to be a subway entrance, on the downtown side.

Paid off, Moe watched Renz go down into the subway; then looked around, confidently expecting Margo Lane to arrive in another cab. It would be easy enough to point Margo along Renz's trail.

When Margo didn't appear, Moe was really puzzled. He couldn't follow Renz himself, nor could Moe understand why Margo had lost a trail which he had rendered very easy, by tangling the cab in traffic and stalling wherever possible. There was a chance, of course, that something had happened to Margo, and it worried Moe.

Going to a cigar store, Moe called Burbank and reported Margo's disappearance. Burbank gave the instruction Moe expected. He told the cabby to go back to the Chez Unique and see what he could learn.

Back in the cab, Moe decided that he might as well have gone to the night club first, and then called Burbank. The delay was something of a mistake.

For Moe remembered that Alker's office was on the way back to the Chez Unique. This evening, Harry Vincent was in conference with Roy Alker. Moe intended to take a look, when he went by the office building, and the sooner he looked, the better. Maybe Alker was going somewhere, like Renz.

How costly the delay could prove, Moe was to learn, to his great regret. Another development, as startling as Margo's capture, was already under way. Moe's tardiness was an element that would aid it.

True, The Shadow was on the trail of the Mask; but, meanwhile, the Mask was making moves that might balk The Shadow's best!

CHAPTER XIII. THE LOST TRAIL

HARRY VINCENT was learning a great deal from Roy Alker. Things that The Shadow had already analyzed and passed along to Harry, but which were becoming more established, the way Alker put them. Deeming Harry to be the sort of partner he needed, Alker was giving him inside facts on the Mask situation.

Maybe it was a cover-up; nevertheless, it included facts in plenty. Alker talked with a surprising frankness.

First, he described his own dealings with Cedric Malvin. He could compliment Malvin on one thing: the man had been a shrewd promoter. So shrewd, that he had found it difficult to get backers for his schemes, until Alker came along.

As silent partner, Alker had supplied the required cash, only to find that he owed Malvin more than he could raise, due to trick clauses in the agreements that they signed.

Alker produced the contracts in question. They supported his story. Most of Alker's cash came under the head of options, demanding further payments should Malvin call for them. Malvin had called for them, leaving Alker out on a limb.

"I'll tell you the real reason, Vincent," stated Alker candidly. "The man whose methods Malvin envied most was Hubert Warrendale. Malvin was small time, compared to Warrendale, and he knew it. He'd seen what Warrendale had done in finance.

"Warrendale didn't merely double money overnight. He tripled it and quadrupled it. He'd needed cash, too, Warrendale had, and Renz supplied it. I'd say that Renz placed more than a hundred thousand dollars with Warrendale, for investment. Look at what Warrendale did with it! He put it along with assets of his own, and built the fund up to a million dollars.

"Half for himself and half for Renz. That was Warrendale's way, because he was reliable. I knew that Malvin was imitating Warrendale. That's why I made the mistake of thinking that Malvin was honest, too."

Harry nodded in a convinced fashion, which wasn't at all difficult. Warming to his theme, Alker continued.

"Then Malvin learned that Renz was ready to retire," said Alker. "Renz had counted on staying with Warrendale until each had a million, but he suddenly decided that he'd 'made his pile,' as Renz put it. I guess he figured he was foolish, keeping his money all tied up while he was meeting so many beautiful blondes who were anxious to help him spend it.

"It was Malvin's chance. He went after Warrendale, and Renz, too. Half a dozen other people hopped into the race, but Malvin had the head start. Warrendale couldn't very well refuse him, with Renz more and more insistent about quitting. It all looked fair enough to Warrendale and Renz. Malvin didn't tell them that he was going to freeze me out."

Alker paused abruptly. He realized, perhaps, that the vehemence of his statements might have the wrong effect. His animosity toward Malvin could have caused Alker to masquerade as the Mask, posing as Warrendale, to settle scores with Malvin. However, those same statements also tossed suspicion at Renz.

The fact that Renz had originally intended to accumulate a million dollars, and had later decided to drop out with less, was, in itself, significant. Renz could have played the Mask, murdering Malvin first, to cloud the issue that came later: the robbery at the Crescent Trust Co.

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Assuming that Renz operated as the Mask, one fact would be certain: Renz, at this moment, would be the owner of a million dollars, his original desire. For the Mask had stolen the combined assets of Warrendale and Renz, which, according to Warrendale's detailed lists, totaled more than a million dollars in cash and securities, all of which had been stored in the bank vault.

Clever of Alker, to put it the way he did. He might be covering the fact that he – not Renz – was the owner of a million. Maybe Alker was the Mask. The thing baffled Harry. He kept mentally juggling those two names: Alker and Renz. Which was the Mask?

Of two things, Harry felt certain. One, that Malvin was dead; the other, that Warrendale was a loser. But those didn't settle the question of Alker or Renz – which could be translated to a single term: the Mask?

"MY present situation is this," stated Alker blandly. "I am in a position to exercise the options needed to acquire Malvin's business. Since Malvin isn't here to demand immediate payment, I still have time."

Harry nodded.

"I suppose," he said, "that you'd like me to convert my assets into cash and turn it over to you."

"Not at all, Vincent," returned Alker, in the same bland tone. "I want you to buy up Malvin's share – which you can do quite easily, since his lawyers are anxious to settle the estate."

"But you need money."

"Of course. I can get it, if given time; a few months at most. Malvin knew it, and that was why he was trying to rush me. He wanted to grab everything, so he'd have more to show to Warrendale."

"Suppose I should try a grab?"

"You won't, Vincent." Alker's shrewd face wore a smile. "I wouldn't be talking this way if I thought you would. I've been sizing you up the last few days. We've been together most of the time, you know. You'll give me the break I want, because you're honest. That's why I'm being honest with you."

It was really quite a compliment, unless Alker turned out to be the Mask, instead of Renz. But Harry wasn't thinking of compliments, except from The Shadow. Harry's real job was to keep tabs on Alker, so he spoke to that effect.

"Suppose we review the whole proposition," suggested Harry. "Right from A to Z. After that, I can make up my mind."

"Tonight?"

"No." Harry shook his head. "I'll have to wait until tomorrow. Those securities I showed you are at the bank, and I want to study them tomorrow. They're in a safe-deposit box." Harry laughed reminiscently. "And I don't trust the key to other people."

Alker laughed, too, but ended by shaking his head.

"Too bad, the way Warrendale trusted Renz." He gave Harry a shrewd look. "Not that I'm accusing Renz of being the Mask. Someone could have stolen the key. I'm willing to admit it, even though Renz accused me of being the man. However, since I'm not the Mask, it wouldn't be fair for me to say that Renz is."

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In substance, Alker was voicing the accusation that he denied. Harry had a feeling that Alker wanted to create that very impression. However, Alker was willing to review his proposition to Harry, and that was more important for the present. It was the telephone that spoiled Harry's plans.

The bell rang and Alker answered.

"Hello... yes, this is Roy Alker... Who?" Alker listened a few moments. "Yes, yes. Tell me more... I see. You say he's coming there... Certainly, I'm interested... Right away? Of course –"

There was an eagerness in Alker's tone, that Harry noted. With a sly look at Harry, Alker saw that his visitor had caught it. Laying the telephone aside, Alker gave a forced chuckle.

"Just what I told you, Vincent," he said. "I can get the cash to cover my options. My banker is arranging it. He wants me to see another chap, right away. Suppose you stay here and go over these papers" – he, was pushing a stack toward Harry – "and wait until I return, in about an hour."

It was policy for Harry to oblige, but as soon as Alker left the office The Shadow's agent followed. Alker was using the only night elevator in this outmoded building, so Harry hurried down the stairs.

Alker was gone, through a front entrance, when Harry took the side one. He had a car parked just around the corner.

Instead of immediately jumping into his coupe, Harry risked a peek around the corner and saw a taxicab hauling up in front of the building, to pick up Alker. Harry didn't give himself away to Alker, but he did to two men who were seated in an old sedan across the street.

Those two were Ernie and Tagger. They saw Harry; noted that he was checking on Alker.

They came from their car. Ernie approached the coupe on the street side, while Tagger played the panhandler again. Meeting Harry at the coupe, he started to ask for a match as a build-up to requesting a dime. Rather than be delayed, Harry fished in his pocket for some change.

Tagger made a lunge. With one hand occupied, Harry couldn't ward him off. Tagger put a punch past Harry's guard and reeled him toward the coupe. Its door came open and Ernie hooked Harry from within.

Rolled inside, Harry was suppressed in his own car under the combined efforts of the Mask's two followers.

ALREADY dizzy from punches, Harry subsided when he saw a gun butt poised for a harder slug. Tagger reversed the revolver and kept its muzzle against Harry's side, while Ernie fished the keys from Harry's pocket and unlocked the coupe.

Ernie sped the car around the corner, with Tagger darting quick looks back.

"Someone tailing us, Ernie," informed Tagger. "A hack. Maybe the guy saw something."

Hazily, Harry hoped the cab was Moe's. It was. Moe had arrived in time to spot the sudden spurt of Harry's car, but too late to help his fellow agent.

The earlier delay was therefore unfortunate. Doubly so, for by this time, Alker was gone. Moe actually thought, at first, that Harry was trailing Alker, but he changed that opinion when the coupe tried to shake him off the trail.

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After a twisty course, Ernie gave Moe the slip. He couldn't have done it ordinarily. Chance was the real factor. It happened that Ernie was just far enough ahead to wheel into the parking lot where he and Tagger had taken Margo earlier.

Another coupe was coming out, and Moe, turning the corner, saw it swing the next one. Mistaking it for Harry's car, he trailed it.

Shortly, Moe realized his mistake, but didn't know why he had been fooled. Meanwhile, Ernie and Tagger had unloaded Harry and taken him into their basement hide-away, where they shoved him into the storage locker next to Margo's. After padlocking Harry's door, they left, waving to Margo as they passed.

Harry was too groggy to catch their words as they went out, but Margo heard them.

"Well, that's what the Mask wanted," Ernie said. "Nobody else is going to have an alibi any time he hasn't got one."

"That's the way it is," agreed Tagger. "If we can't figure which guy is the Mask, how can the coppers?"

There was something else, that Margo didn't hear. The pair discussed it when they had left the storage room.

"What about Nick?" queried Tagger. "He wasn't at his place when you called, Ernie."

"He wasn't," returned Ernie, "and I haven't forgotten it. Nick may know too much."

"About Drock, you mean?"

"Yeah. So we'll go down there and take a look for him."

Leaving their hide-away, they took Harry's coupe and drove from the midtown parking lot, paying another quarter. Ernie and Tagger had accomplished much during the last half hour. They'd done the things the Mask had ordered, and in a way that he would approve.

Their coming plan, however, was their own. It meant more than merely finding Nick Hemble. It was the sort of trip that might carry Ernie and Tagger across the path of The Shadow.

How much the Mask would approve that happening, events themselves would disclose!

CHAPTER XIV. DEATH RIDES AHEAD

FOUR hotels, covered in an average time of ten minutes each, had failed to produce results for The Shadow. At each of those hotels, he had left Nick outside and gone inside as Cranston.

On each occasion, Nick noted that The Shadow wasn't wearing his cloak and hat, but he didn't catch a glimpse of his passenger's face. Always, The Shadow returned very suddenly, getting into the cab before Nick realized it.

The next hotel on the list was called the Baycroft, and Nick said he could reach it in another ten minutes. The list was getting very short, so the chances for results were on the increase, provided that results were obtained at all.

Results were certainly due.

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While The Shadow was still on his way to the Baycroft, Commissioner Weston was getting an expected telephone call. Weston was at Montmorency's Studio, waiting to hear from Warrendale.

By Weston's calculation, Warrendale should have reached his Long Island home within three quarters of an hour, and that time had elapsed, with nearly five minutes in addition. So when the telephone bell rang, Weston jumped for it.

Warrendale was on the wire.

"Any more studios on the list?" began Weston. "I haven't found out anything from the places where I've been. Some of the people didn't even remember Leo Drock, let alone know where he is."

"I have something better!" exclaimed Warrendale. "I've located Drock!"

"Located him? How?"

"From the last letter he sent me. It had an envelope that bore the name of the Hotel Baycroft."

"Here in New York." Weston knew of the place. "But he may have checked out."

"He has checked out," returned Warrendale. "I've called the Baycroft. But he told them the address of his new studio. It's in the Village. I'll give it to you, commissioner."

Weston took down the address. He instructed Warrendale to call Cardona at Jake's Place, the bar where Joe was waiting. That would enable Joe to reach Drock's studio at the same time as Weston. Remembering how the siren had caused trouble at Renz's apartment, the commissioner decided that he would meet Cardona a few blocks from Drock's.

"That will get us to the studio in half an hour," declared Weston "After you've called Cardona, you can start into town and come directly to the studio. We'll have a fifteen-minute chat with Drock before you arrive."

WITHIN a few minutes, Cardona was receiving a call at Jake's Place. He welcomed the news that Warrendale gave him, because Joe had been having a tougher time than Weston. Most of the barkeepers that Joe had interviewed remembered Drock as "just another dope," if they recalled him at all.

Half an hour.

Even with a few minutes gone, Cardona estimated that it would take him less to join up with Weston and reach Drock's. Glancing at the gaudy clock above the bar, Cardona checked the time and decided that he and Weston would be in Drock's studio a few minutes before nine o'clock.

Maybe it would be a few flights up, as most studios were, but that wouldn't matter much.

Leo Drock would prove important; of that, Cardona was sure. The sculptor might have the answer to the Mask. Maybe the Mask knew it, and had threatened Drock. Possibly he had actually bought the imitation face from the sculptor, which would account for Drock's way of keeping out of sight. Those things would certainly show themselves, once Drock was questioned.

He'd talk, Drock would. This time, Cardona wouldn't spare the heat. He was tired of the "guess-who" business, with the scales tipping back and forth between Alker and Renz as the evenly matched suspects in a case of open murder and gigantic robbery. Cardona rather fancied that the situation was irking Weston, too.

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There was another chance, of course. It might be that Leo Drock was the Mask. Cardona doubted it, but the idea was sound. After all, Drock had made the mask, straight from Warrendale's own face, and might have seen its possibilities as an aid to fortune, through crime. Sculptors, however, didn't bother themselves with finance on a large scale.

Still, the idea had merit. Enough for Cardona to treat himself to a trip by taxicab, instead of subway. Weston would probably grouse about the extra expense when he saw Joe show up in a cab, considering that a subway trip would actually have saved time.

But the Drock theory would silence the commissioner; he wouldn't worry about the cab fare, so Cardona bought one of Jake's ten-cent cigars as an added item for the expense sheet. A good smoke always helped bring out ideas during a cab trip.

One idea came while Cardona was lighting the cigar. It concerned The Shadow. He'd been in the case, definitely, at the time of Malvin's murder, saving both Cardona and Weston from possible death. The Shadow had figured at the Crescent Trust, too, but he hadn't caught the Mask.

Since then, no sign of The Shadow. Maybe he was slipping right out of the picture. Too bad, The Shadow losing his stuff. This was one time when he wouldn't even be around. Thanks to Warrendale, the law had picked up a trail all its own.

Maybe The Shadow hadn't even heard of a sculptor named Leo Drock. If he had, it wouldn't do him any good, unless he went to the Baycroft Hotel and found out Drock's new address.

But The Shadow hadn't been to the Baycroft. Cardona had asked Warrendale if the hotel had received any previous inquiries regarding Drock, and Warrendale had answered in the negative. Cardona really felt sorry for The Shadow. He wondered where The Shadow was, at present.

The answer was easy. The Shadow was at the Baycroft Hotel. He wasn't feeling sorry for himself; in fact, he wasn't himself at the moment. He was Lamont Cranston, but he wasn't telling his name to the clerk at the Baycroft. The Shadow was merely inquiring for Leo Drock.

Momentarily, the clerk was suspicious. Then Cranston's appearance settled his doubts.

"You must be the gentleman who just called by telephone," said the clerk. "I thought we gave you Mr. Drock's address."

"I didn't quite catch it."

"I'm sorry," returned the clerk. "I suppose it was a poor connection. But" – the clerk hesitated – "didn't you say you were calling from Long Island?"

"It must have been a very poor connection," parried Cranston. "I haven't been to Long Island this evening. I'm sure, though, that you'll recognize the name of Warrendale."

"Yes, Mr. Warrendale," the clerk said promptly. "I caught your name, all right. One moment, please, and I'll write out Mr. Drock's address for you. He's living in the new studio that I mentioned."

Thus, The Shadow received his first inkling of the fact that the others searching for Drock had divided the task. He could picture approximately what had occurred: Weston taking one beat, Cardona another, while Warrendale had agreed to go home and look over the data that Lathan had filed under Drock's name.

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The Shadow hadn't expected such rapid results on the law's part, nor that the searchers would divide. The situation offered complications of a sort that might bring trouble. Where trouble threatened, The Shadow would be needed. He lost no time in returning to Nick's cab.

SINCE the Baycroft Hotel was situated in the Seventies, it was a long ride to Drock's vicinity. The Shadow told Nick to take the West Side elevated highway, skirting the Hudson River. The high-level route might clip a few minutes from the race. So far, Nick had proven capable, but The Shadow regretted that he didn't have Moe Shrevnitz at the wheel.

Thoughts of Moe made him consider the other agents. A call to Burbank would have been in order, to learn if Margo and Harry had reported concerning Renz and Alker.

As Nick's cab sped southward, The Shadow took it more and more for granted that he was riding to another meeting with the Mask. He even considered Cardona's theory regarding Drock: the chance that the secretive sculptor might be the Mask. It was too inconclusive to warrant further conjecture, until The Shadow actually met Drock.

The Shadow had hoped to find Drock ahead of the law. He probably wouldn't, considering what he had learned at the Baycroft. He'd gained a few minutes, by letting the clerk think he was Warrendale and leading the fellow into prompt information.

But those few minutes weren't putting The Shadow ahead. They were merely helping him to catch up. Therefore, the Cranston part was useless. He would have to visit Drock as The Shadow.

As the cab swerved from the elevated highway, The Shadow reached for the cloak and hat that lay beside him. His guns were already packed in holsters, beneath his evening jacket. Garbing himself in the black garments, The Shadow whispered a soft laugh. Nick heard it, and it spurred the cabby to swifter work among the streets of Greenwich Village.

Nick had another block to go, when The Shadow halted him. Like a ghost of the night, the cloaked avenger slid from the cab and took a short route through a connecting street, to the address that he wanted.

Four floors up, like a beckoning beacon, The Shadow could see the blue glow of a skylight, which must mark Drock's new studio. It was just above the flat roof of an adjoining apartment building, which The Shadow suddenly chose to enter.

A clock in a third-floor apartment was chiming nine as The Shadow glided by. Whispery was The Shadow's laugh, as though he sensed some vital meaning in the hour. The Shadow had reached the end of a swift trip, and he was glad of it.

All during that journey, he had felt that death was riding ahead. Perhaps he was yet in time to forestall it. Death, by design of the Mask!

CHAPTER XV. THE MAN WHO COULD TELL

THE Mask stood in the bluish glow, his revolver pointed toward the cowering man before him. Those lights in Drock's studio gave an unearthly tinge to the false features that were molded in imitation of the face that actually belonged to Hubert Warrendale.

The cowering man was Leo Drock. Strange, that he should quiver at sight of his own creation – the mask that he had personally shaped. But Drock knew the identity of the real face that was hidden by the false one, and

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he understood the purpose of the conniving brain within the inner layer.

A brain that dealt in murder!

Tonight, the Mask had abandoned cumbersome accouterments. In place of an overcoat, he wore a high-necked sweater, which supported the lower edge of his imitation visage. His head was topped with an oversized skullcap, which was much more satisfactory than the jumpy derby. His present garb gave an effect of leanness and agility.

Its fault was that it made his mask more evident.

The Mask had the semblance of a creature from another world. Had his face been human, it would have tempered the illusion. But the fixed visage added a satanic effect to the get-up, to the point where its falsity seemed real.

There were reasons why the Mask had chosen his new rig. His game was known; no one took him for Warrendale any longer. He was recognized as an unknown crook with an imitation face. He was finding it necessary to depend on stealth, rather than imposture; hence he didn't want to be handicapped by derby hat and heavy overcoat. Besides, the Mask was working differently this evening.

He had come to see one person only: Leo Drock.

The Mask had no robbery in mind, for Drock was almost penniless. Murder, yes, if it proved necessary to his prime purpose. That purpose was to produce silence. For Drock, the threatened man, was the only person who could testify as to the Mask's actual identity.

Drock's thin face, lined and haggard from much dissipation, bore the added trace of fear. How long the Mask had been here, it was difficult to tell, for Drock was the sort who would weaken under a brief ordeal. Certain it was that Drock had made a bad mistake.

Under cross-examination, he had admitted that he knew who the Mask was – and Drock was now regretting that unwise statement. He shuddered when the Mask spoke:

"Foolish of you, Drock, to remember those boxes that you left in the storage room at your old apartment house. A mistake, too, to recall that you had mentioned them to me, stating that this mask was with them. You no longer needed it, so you should have forgotten it."

Eyes bleary, Drock was staring at the fixed lips from which the words issued. The tone was venomous, all snarl. On this occasion, the Mask had no need to talk in a tone resembling Warrendale's.

"I have forgotten it!" expressed Drock. "I'll forget anything... everything!" His words took a hoarse pitch. "Believe me, I will!"

"I should like to believe you, Drock," sneered the Mask. "Murder is a nuisance, in my opinion. It carries no thrill, because it is too easily accomplished. My one desire is wealth."

"And you have wealth," insisted Drock. "You can afford to allow me life."

"Not while you menace my wealth. The question, Drock, is how well you can tell a story and adhere to it. If you are capable at that art, you will be more valuable alive than dead."

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DROCK'S bleary eyes lighted. He came up from his cringing pose and approached the Mask, unalarmed by the leveled gun. Drock's eyes were almost seeing through the concealing mask, to the mobile face behind it. He was considering the Mask as a human being, not as a fiend.

With an angry hiss, the Mask drew back a pace, so that his shoulders brushed a pair of heavy blue curtains that draped off the end of the studio.

The hiss caused Drock to recoil as though a snake had challenged him. Directly under the square glass of the frosted skylight that centered the studio roof, he drew himself together.

"I've done exactly as you asked me," he insisted. "You found out where I was, and called me, telling me not to believe anything the newspapers said. You told me not to contact any of my friends. I obeyed your –"

Drock paused, hoping that the Mask would respond. All he saw was a steady glare of the eyes that peered through the changeless face. Though the replica of Warrendale's visage had a kindly mold, the glare of the real eyes made it ugly.

"And tonight," added Drock, "you came here. You said there were other things that I must do. I did them –"

"Under my persuasion," sneered the Mask. "You showed too much hesitation, Drock."

"Because I was frightened. I couldn't understand exactly what you wanted."

"It wasn't necessary that you should understand. This is my game, Drock, not yours."

"I know. But unless I understand it –"

Drock broke off as a hammering interrupted. It came from the door of the studio. He started to turn; then quivered, staring at the Mask in utter alarm. Drock gulped.

"It may be the police –"

"Very probably." The Mask's tone was contemptuous. "Remember your story, Drock. You were still working on the Warrendale bust when you came here, and this mask was in your possession. Two men entered the studio and stole it. Two men who had the look of thugs –"

The pounding was louder. Breaking off, the Mask made a gesture that stopped Drock's nods. The Mask was pointing toward the door. Drock turned, and moved shakily to answer the summons. He threw one wary glance over his shoulder, then started to unbolt the door.

With the glance, Drock saw the Mask turning toward a corner of the studio. The sculptor couldn't hide the relief that relaxed his face. The Mask saw it in the blue light and stopped short. Instead of retiring, he turned about and moved silently after Drock.

That unwise glance was a death warrant. Drock had shown too much eagerness to welcome the police. The Mask took it as a sign that the sculptor might betray him.

Drock opened the door.

On the threshold stood the very visitors he hoped for – Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona. Weston was in advance, for he had been doing the rapping. In the background, Cardona had a gun half drawn

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from his pocket. Joe thought he was ready in case of trouble, but he hadn't bargained for the trouble that he saw.

Beyond Drock stood the Mask, his gleaming revolver aimed straight between Drock's shoulders. The Mask in person, despite his new attire of sweater and skullcap. The garb accentuated his sham features, fixed in the same benign, yet fearful, expression that could never change. This was one time when the face could not be mistaken for Warrendale's, even momentarily!

It was a time, too, that called for emergency action. Instead of trying to shoot past the two men who blocked him, Cardona made a mad effort to insure their safety. Weston saw the Mask and stiffened with an instinctive recoil, which was helpful. It enabled Cardona to bowl the commissioner from the open doorway, into a safe corner of the hall.

Joe performed that move with a hard shoulder jolt, and grabbed Drock with the same motion, intending to wheel the sculptor from harm's path.

A hopeless effort, considering that Cardona was too busy to fire. Joe was merely making his plight the same as Drock's, giving the Mask two human targets instead of one. Double death would have been a certainty, if other intervention hadn't come.

The skylight brought it.

With a terrific smash, the frosted glass cracked apart, and with its tumbling remnants came a hurtling figure cloaked in black.

The Shadow!

THE master avenger was taking a ten-foot plunge, straight for the superfoe who wore the imitation face. Again: The Shadow versus the Mask. A duel that put all other matters in the discard. The Mask had just shifted his aim, intending to drill Cardona first, since Joe was armed, and then slaughter Drock.

Sight of The Shadow caused the Mask to place such trifling murders under the head of unfinished business.

Deftly twisting from under The Shadow's downward drive, the Mask sprang toward the front of the studio, instead of the back, thus avoiding the hard swing of a heavy automatic that The Shadow gave in landing. Full about, the Mask fired for The Shadow, only to find he wasn't there.

Cardona saw the roll that The Shadow took, after skidding across the new linoleum. It fooled the Mask, for he thought his cloaked foe would be springing up and at him, whereas The Shadow was playing for better position.

A neat trick, after a thudding drop that would have sprawled an average fighter. The Shadow was in form; by rights, he'd have a bead on the Mask before his enemy could find him.

Still, The Shadow was dealing with the Mask!

Considering the almost superhuman caliber of the murderer who wore the double face, Cardona wasn't leaving anything to chance. He aimed for the Mask, intending to riddle him in a hurry. Then, with an excited shout, Cardona was leaping into the studio, grabbing at thin air.

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The reason was Leo Drock. The sculptor had gone wild. The Mask had intended murder as a cure for Drock's case, and therewith had transformed a cringing dupe into a thing of fury.

Diving across the floor, ahead of Cardona's futile grab, Drock hurled himself bodily upon the man who had tried to kill him.

Therewith, Drock put himself past even The Shadow's aid. Coming around as Drock reached him, the Mask pumped bullets into his wild-eyed attacker, settling the Drock question permanently.

As luck had it, the bullet-flayed figure of Drock came between the Mask and The Shadow, cutting off the latter's chance at fire. Then Cardona was grappling with the Mask, and both were staggering toward the rear of the studio. Again, The Shadow couldn't aim.

But he was on his feet, now, The Shadow, lunging to end the fray before the Mask could serve Cardona as he had Drock. Joe was grabbing for the Mask's gun, forcing its spouting shots wide, which was a help.

They were at the curtains near the rear of the studio, when the Mask yanked the drapes and flung them, rod and all, upon Cardona, burying the inspector in the blue velvet folds. In his struggle to get loose, Cardona blundered into The Shadow's path.

The shots that Cardona heard sounded muffled. He was on hands and knees when he shook free of the curtain. He saw The Shadow, gun in hand, making a long dive toward a deep corner of the room. Joe thought that The Shadow must be taking another forced dive, to avoid the Mask.

For the Mask was straight ahead, in the gloom of the little alcove beyond an arch where the curtains had been. His fixed face caught enough of the blue light for Cardona to see it. The Mask's gun hand didn't show, but Cardona knew it must be there.

This was no time to give the Mask another opportunity. Cardona fired point-blank, three shots in quick succession, as the Mask had done with Drock. With those gun stabs came a triple tattoo of metallic clangs; as they echoed, the Mask's head and shoulders went backward in a slow-motion tumble.

Cardona understood, when he shook off the curtains and reached the spot where he thought the killer's body would be. It wasn't the Mask at all. Cardona's target was the bust of Hubert Warrendale, complete in bronze. Leo Drock had been keeping it in the alcove behind the curtains.

No wonder it had deceived Cardona, for the life-sized bust had been sculptured from the very mask that the Mask, himself, was wearing!

A good try on Joe's part, even though his shots had merely dented a bronze face that lacked a human one behind it. The Mask had taken another direction, to get clear of the studio. However, there was still a chance to overtake him.

From the corner where he had last seen The Shadow, Cardona heard the echoes of a trailing laugh, telling that the cloaked fighter was in pursuit of the Mask and calling for all who would, to follow!

CHAPTER XVI. PATHS IN THE DARK

BEFORE following The Shadow, Cardona looked about for Weston. He saw the commissioner near the center of the studio, stooped over Drock's body. As Joe called, Weston raised his head and gave it a sad shake.

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"Poor chap," said Weston. "The Mask didn't give him a chance. Drock tried to say something, but couldn't get it out. He gave one gasp, that sounded like the beginning of a word; nothing more."

"Come on," urged Cardona, waving his gun. "We're going after the Mask."

"Going after him?" queried Weston in surprise. "Why, I saw you shoot him –"

"That was a bust," interrupted Cardona. "Warrendale's bust, the statue he told us Drock was making. The Mask went that way" – Joe gestured toward the inner corner – "with The Shadow after him. Let's find out where they've gone."

There was a doorway in the corner, leading to a rear hall that terminated in a flight of stairs. The sounds that came up were evidence that the Mask had fled for the ground floor, and that The Shadow was still after him.

Again, a laugh came as a token. Perhaps a challenge to the Mask, possibly, another invitation for Cardona and Weston to join the chase. Without ado, inspector and commissioner started down.

The Mask was the first to reach the street. He was nearly a full floor ahead of The Shadow, but it was a very trifling advantage. The doorway from the rear stairs opened onto a side street, with a light close by.

Though the Mask's sleek attire helped his speed and kept the disguising imitation face upon his own, it didn't give him the ability to fade from sight. That was a system that only The Shadow understood.

In the open, the Mask was trapped, his situation much worse than in the studio. He could hear the laugh he hated, the oncoming mirth of The Shadow, as fateful as a knell of doom. For the first time, the Mask lost his confidence. He started one way, hesitated, turned back toward the stairs.

Seeing the doorway as a blackened block, he knew he couldn't fight The Shadow while his foe had the benefit of such darkness. The Mask turned away, ready to begin a frantic, futile flight.

It was then that he saw Nick's cab.

Parked right across the street, Nick Hemble was awaiting The Shadow's return. Seeing the Mask, Nick slid low behind the wheel, hoping his ex-boss wouldn't spy him. But the Mask recognized the cab and made for it, snarling for Nick to get him away.

If only Nick had played along!

All that he had to do was fumble with the door, have a little trouble with the starter, anything that would delay matters for a few seconds. It wasn't that those possibilities didn't occur to Nick. They did. There was something else, however, that impressed him more.

Nick was working for The Shadow on a trial basis. If there was anything that loomed important in his mind, it was the necessity of proving his real loyalty – to The Shadow. He wanted nothing to do with the Mask, except to punch in the fake face that the master crook wore.

Nick wasn't quite sure that The Shadow would understand, if he saw his new recruit letting the Mask into the cab. Nick was going to show The Shadow just how he really stood, and at the same time gratify his ambition of pushing in the Mask's dummy mug.

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It was the front door that Nick slapped open, not the rear one. He grabbed for the Mask and with his left hand got him by the sweater neck. Hauling him right around, Nick let go with his right fist, full tilt. It landed with plenty of poundage, and actually made a dent – in the side of the cab!

Just a quick bob of the Mask's head; that was all. Enough for Nick's hard swing to miss by the inch that counted. Nor was the Mask at all tardy in following his advantage.

He landed a blow, a downward stroke to Nick's skull, with the revolver as a bludgeon. Nick began a spiral sag that would have twisted him to the paving, if the Mask hadn't hooked him by the neck and hauled him upright.

The Mask wanted Nick alive, and not too groggy, to serve him as a shield. His right hand thrust under Nick's sagged arm, the Mask aimed for the black patch across the street. Before he could fire, he saw The Shadow speed out. The Mask snapped his trigger, but the burden of Nick's arm spoiled his aim.

Fading somewhere along the wall, uncannily eluding the light, The Shadow loosed a shot that clanged the cab door close to the Mask's shoulder. The Mask fired at The Shadow's gun spurt, to be rewarded by a taunting laugh that told him he had made another miss.

Snarling, the Mask restrained his finger, until he saw The Shadow wheel out into the light. Again, the Mask fired; too far ahead. The Shadow's spin was a reverse.

Bullet by bullet, The Shadow had coaxed the shots from the Mask's gun. He could tell from the three delivered that the Mask had a fresh revolver, for the killer had exhausted his other gun upstairs and couldn't have reloaded in the mad dash down the stairs.

A few more tricky moves by The Shadow, and the Mask's weapon would be stingless, thereby assuring Nick's safety. The Shadow started another weave out into the light.

JUST then, a coupe wheeled the corner, its brilliant headlights catching The Shadow in full glare. Guns roared, announcing Ernie and Tagger.

They'd have had The Shadow right against the wall, had he remained on the sidewalk. Instead, he took a spring across the street, toward the rear of Nick's cab.

The Mask couldn't swing Nick's swaying figure fast enough. Flinging his burden aside, he dived in The Shadow's direction just as the cloaked fighter whirled from sight behind the cab.

Ernie and Tagger were out of Harry's car, shooting as they came. The Shadow was just far enough away to dodge them. A street lamp showed him momentarily, but he melted from it, toward some doorways. Ernie and Tagger would have gone after him, and probably picked the wrong location, if the Mask hadn't stopped them.

The Mask was jumping into Nick's cab, yelling for Ernie to take the wheel. Ernie obeyed, and Tagger hopped back to the coupe.

Nick, by then, had stumbled across the street, into the doorway that led up to the studio, where he sprawled in front of Weston and Cardona, coming down. Two cars were under way: the cab and the coupe, both drivers anxious to obey the Mask's injunction for flight.

One needed to be stopped: the cab.

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Out from his doorway, The Shadow voiced a defiant laugh that must have worried Ernie, for the fellow veered the cab. The Shadow aimed for a rear tire, intending to blast it and end the Mask's flight.

The cab was picking up speed; but that meant nothing. The Shadow had the whole tread of the tire to shoot at. The trouble was that Tagger veered the coupe, too.

The coupe cut in back of the cab just as The Shadow fired. The bullet that should have burst the cab's rear tire, dented the coupe's front fender. The cab was turning the corner, the coupe after it. And other issues were at stake.

Out from their doorway, Weston and Cardona were in the light, dashing right out where the Mask could clip them, from the window of his swerving cab, with those last three shots.

The fact that the Mask didn't, could be attributed to The Shadow. The range was long, so he supplied rapid fire, instead of seeking accuracy.

His bullets must have whistled through the cab's windows, for the Mask's conspicuous face ducked from sight. The Shadow took a pot shot at the following coupe, but a fire hydrant deflected it, saving a tire. Both cars were gone.

Closer to the corner than The Shadow, Weston and Cardona started on the run, hoping to get in shots at the fleeing cars. The Shadow followed them, but both vehicles were a block away when he reached the corner.

Ernie made another turn, taking the cab around in front of Drock's building, while Tagger kept straight ahead with the coupe.

Since Weston and Cardona were still chasing on foot, The Shadow kept on, too, though chances of results seemed slight. Still, there was no telling what the Mask might do, for he was a master of peculiar strategy.

Even with The Shadow on the loose, the Mask might jump from his cab and take a trip up through Drock's studio, to make sure that the man who knew too much had really died. Yes, something might be due around that corner.

Cardona reached the corner first, outracing Weston by a dozen yards; while The Shadow, faster than either of them, was only a few paces behind the commissioner. Cardona yelled, proving that he had spotted something, and The Shadow swept past Weston, who was puffing heavily.

A blink of taillights showed the cab two blocks ahead. The thing that had attracted Cardona was much closer.

Two men were springing at each other – one coming out of the entry to Drock's building, the other bounding from across the street. They met in a terrific grapple that spun them in a circle.

Cardona met them as they reached the curb, and was flung aside like something tossed on a revolving flywheel, his revolver bouncing from his hand and striking near the grapplers.

They saw the gun and stooped as they struggled, each trying to scoop up the weapon. As they did, The Shadow struck them, and the grapple ended. The Shadow was a human monkey wrench, self-tossed into the works.

Two figures went sprawling in opposite directions, under the drive of that black-cloaked avalanche. The gun lay right where it was; the men who wanted it landed a dozen feet apart.

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CARDONA pounced back to grab the man who came his way, while Weston came up to throw his bulk on the other. Halted a way beyond, The Shadow was ready, in case the prisoners gave further trouble.

It took a few minutes for them to be suppressed, but at no time did they threaten to get free. Exhausted by their own preliminary bout, the two men finally subsided under the independent efforts of Cardona and Weston.

Merged with darkness, The Shadow watched the victors drag their captives into the light. A whispered laugh came from the gloom as The Shadow identified the glaring pair.

One man was Roy Alker; the other Philip Renz. The law's two suspects had met again, in a fashion that still kept the balance wavering.

Each was gesturing weakly, panting that he had seen the other come from the fugitive cab when it slackened speed in front of Drock's building. Weston and Cardona, guns in hand, were letting the disputants have their say, when Nick appeared.

He'd come from around the corner, the other way. He'd seen his cab go by, with Ernie at the wheel, and had looked for the Mask at the rear window, but hadn't spied him.

A police car whined up, attracted by the shots. Two officers sprang out, and recognized the commissioner. They took charge of the prisoners while The Shadow watched. Seeing that all was under control, the cloaked watcher began to glide away. He paused at the sight of approaching headlights.

It was a cab, but not Nick's. This cab was of a different color. Its passenger stepped out, peeled a bill from a roll of money and paid the driver. The Shadow recognized him before he turned around; but Weston and Cardona didn't. In fact, they were even more deceived when the arrival faced them.

They thought for the moment that they had the Mask!

Springing for him, they were grabbing him as the cab wheeled away. They caught his overcoat, and his derby hat flew from his head. They saw, then, that his face was real and that it had plenty of expression, mostly astonishment.

The man was Hubert Warrendale. They'd forgotten that he was due in from Long Island at about this time. With the Mask so heavily on their mind, Weston and Cardona had begun to think of Warrendale's face as the Mask's, instead of remembering that the situation was the other way about.

The group turned toward the doorway leading up to Drock's. Silently, The Shadow slid off through the darkness. He increased his stride when he had passed the corner. Again his laugh was low, confined to his own hearing. The Shadow had little time to lose.

First, a call to Burbank, to learn how Alker and Renz had slipped from sight of Harry and Margo. Then, as Cranston, The Shadow would return to Drock's studio to witness the new controversy, wherein Roy Alker and Philip Renz would explain themselves to the law.

Each, of course, would accuse the other of being the Mask. This time, there would be no alternative. The rivalry, and the dishonor that it carried, had been fanned into a heated blaze. The question of how the balance stood, would be discussed on the scene of murder – with Drock, the victim, on display!

Perhaps The Shadow, his own identity concealed, would use this occasion to decide who really was the Mask!

CHAPTER XVII. THE SHADOW'S PROBLEM

NEVER had Commissioner Weston faced such a problem. Under the blue lights of Drock's studio, he was staring from man to man, back and forth, until his neck began to ache.

Defiant at first, open in their animosity toward each other, the two suspects had gradually calmed. They differed only in their facial expressions; yet each was equally cryptic, in his way.

Roy Alker was steady, his pale face serious, though strained. Philip Renz wore a slight smile that barely fluctuated. Each, in his own special way, exhibited a coolness that could well have characterized the Mask.

This setting, the tenseness of the scene, made flexible features stiffen. Two candidates: each, potentially, the Mask; yet there was no way to decide between them.

There were others who witnessed Weston's dilemma. They, too, were confronted by a quandary. Joe Cardona, his own face set in deadpan style, was looking for opportunity to crack the case, by catching either Renz or Alker off guard; but, so far, the astute inspector hadn't found an opening.

Hubert Warrendale, hand in chin, was watching the procedure. His face, alone, showed mingled emotions. Though the Mask had worn Warrendale's visage under this same bluish light, the two countenances had nothing in common except a superficial surface.

The Mask's imitation face, frozen to a permanent shape, had been demoniac. Warrendale's real visage, by the mere fact that it was alive, produced a kindly, benignant impression, weighted with grief.

His sorrow was understandable, considering that Warrendale had personally located Drock, and sent the police to the studio to aid the sculptor. A noble effort, but futile, since the Mask had arrived ahead of the law.

Lately arrived, Lamont Cranston was the final member of the group. In a way, he was more cryptic than Renz or Alker, for his whole expression was immobile. Cranston's eyes, like his face, were hawkish, as he probed the faces of the accused. He covered his ferreting tactics by an air of indifference, created by gestures or casual comments.

The others were too intent to realize that Cranston still carried the challenging attitude of The Shadow. He was ready, should occasion demand, to spring into his other self with hair-trigger swiftness.

Commissioner Weston stopped his restless pacing and delivered himself of an oration, addressed to the two accused.

"Circumstance can produce strong evidence," Weston asserted. "Leo Drock lies murdered" – he was gesturing toward the body – "and outside this very building, we find you both.

"We know that one man, the Mask, killed Drock in cold blood. One of you is the killer" – Weston wagged his finger between Renz and Alker – "and whichever is the Mask gambled upon pinning the evidence on the other. I am going to find the guilty man!"

Again, Weston's eyes were searching back and forth. They finally rested upon Renz. Weston didn't like the fellow's satisfied smile. Mentally, the commissioner vowed that he'd wipe that smile away. Brusquely,

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Weston snapped:

"Let's hear your statement again, Renz!"

"It's very simple," declared Renz smoothly. "I was throwing a party at the Chez Unique, when I received a telephone call from Leo Drock. Offhand, I'd say the time was around half past eight."

"And Drock," put in Weston, "was a friend of yours?"

"No, indeed!" Still smiling, Renz was wary. "You don't catch me there, commissioner. I've already told you that I'd never even heard of Leo Drock."

Cardona supplied an interjection: "Then how did you know who Drock was?"

"He told me," returned Renz, "and what he said made sense, so I believed him. He said he'd made a mask of Warrendale's face; that it had been stolen. He believed he knew who took it, which meant that he could name the Mask."

"So Drock suggested that you come here." Trying new tactics, Weston prompted Renz along the lines of the man's own story. "He wanted to talk to you, in person."

"Exactly," nodded Renz. "He feared a visit from the Mask. Drock said he was going out, but would be back soon after nine. He wanted me to wait for him downstairs."

"So you took a cab from the night club and came here."

"Not so fast, commissioner. I took a cab to the subway and transferred there. After the subway trip, I strolled around, to make sure no one was watching me, and finally I walked over here."

"And then –"

"I had just entered the building," affirmed Renz steadily, "when I heard shots. A cab came around the block and made an abrupt stop, right out front. I thought I saw a crouching passenger inside the cab, a man who looked like the Mask. Then the cab was off again."

"I sprang from the building and saw a man across the street. I was sure that he had jumped from the cab when it paused. He was making straight for me. I met him, and he was Alker."

LETTING his gaze turn from Weston, Renz gave Alker a straight, accusing look. Alker's face showed twitch, but only because he was eager to refute Renz's story. Weston gave him the chance.

"Very well, Alker."

"I was in my office," declared Alker, in a quick, choppy tone, "talking business with a customer, when Drock phoned. Told me who he was; said he could give me the lowdown on the Mask. He was sure the Mask was going to show up, so I said I'd come here right away. Drock said all right, only he wanted me to wait around outside until after nine. Said he was going out, and would be back."

Alker paused, expecting questions. Weston had none, so Cardona kept silent, too. They were using a different system with the overtalkative Alker, hoping he would make an involuntary slip.

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"I was coming along the street when I heard the shots," continued Alker glibly. "I ducked when a cab came around the corner. Saw it stop a moment, and I had an idea its passenger hopped out. The cab sped away and I saw a man across the street, right by this building. I went after him. There he is!"

Alker thumbed at Renz, and relaxed.

The stories still balanced, much to Weston's annoyance. Open and shut, of course, but which was which? Identical statements, yet one, the Mask's, must be false. Unable to give himself an alibi while on a murder job, the Mask had obviously counterbalanced the situation. Weston looked at the two, hoping for some physical clue.

Renz was wearing a Tuxedo. He had a soft hat and a light topcoat, but he hadn't been wearing them when he met Alker. They'd been lying in the building entry, where Benz said he'd dropped them. Maybe he had stowed them there beforehand, to pick them up after posing as the Mask!

As for Alker, he had only a hat, a shabby brown one, that had stayed on his head during the struggle out front. But Weston recalled that the man who had driven Nick's cab, carrying the Mask as passenger, had worn a similar hat. The Mask could have snatched that hat in hopping from the cab as Alker.

Commissioner Weston decided to call in his surprise witness, Nick Hemble, who was out in the hall with the patrolmen. Nick was ushered into the studio. He shook his head when questioned about the hat.

"I saw the cab when it beat it," admitted Nick, "but I wasn't sure that Ernie was wearing a hat."

"Ernie?" Cardona voiced the name. "Who's Ernie?"

Nick hesitated. Challenging faces were all about him, but he saw a friendly one: Cranston's. Keen, steady eyes encouraged Nick; eyes that reminded him vaguely of The Shadow's.

"Ernie Bedlo," stated Nick, "and the guy who lammed in the coupe was Tagger Scherf. They thought I was working with them, for the Mask. Only I wasn't!" Nick tightened his hands, pleadingly. "I was working for The Shadow!"

Nick was apprehensive over doubts that didn't come. Both Weston and Cardona took his declaration at face value. Their recollections of the chase certified Nick's story. They didn't delve into Nick's past.

"Bedlo and Scherf." Weston turned to Cardona. "Do you recognize those names, inspector?"

Joe was picking up the telephone. He nodded.

"That pair always worked together," he said. "Find Ernie, and you'll find Tagger. I'll call headquarters and give orders for them to be picked up."

Cardona made the call, and after he gave instructions, his manner indicated that he was getting news from the other end. Finishing abruptly, he wheeled to Nick Hemble.

"Ever hear of a hackie named Steve Boyer?"

Nick shook his head.

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"He's up at a precinct in the Bronx," announced Joe. "Says a couple of gunzels used his cab to grab a girl outside the Chez Unique. Took her to a parking lot and shoved her in another car, telling Steve to get going. They sound like Ernie and Tagger."

With that said, Cardona swung to Renz.

"You came from the Chez Unique," reminded Joe Cardona. "Maybe those two were working for you."

"Or against me," retorted Renz. "The Mask apparently didn't want any of my friends to help me with an alibi, by following me down here."

Cardona swung to Alker, who merely stared. He was letting Renz's inconclusive argument stand. It didn't make a single change in the question of which was the Mask.

"I'm hopping to that parking lot," Cardona told Weston, "to find where Ernie and Tagger went from there. Maybe they don't know who the Mask is, but they're working for him. That's enough of a lead."

THE word from headquarters was of extreme importance to The Shadow. He had already contacted Burbank, and learned that both Margo and Harry had disappeared.

Margo's abduction was something of a mystery, though The Shadow attributed Harry's directly to Ernie and Tagger, considering that their coupe resembled the one that Harry drove.

Moe had practically witnessed Harry's capture, and had reported the details of his futile chase. So far, the vicinity where Moe lost the trail meant nothing, since the abductors might have carried Harry a long way farther. But the facts of Margo's capture, as detailed by Cardona, gave The Shadow a very definite idea.

He hadn't worried about his lost agents; not while he was with the group assembled here at Drock's. Obviously, the Mask had simply seen to it that followers be removed from two trails this evening. It was the riddle of Renz and Alker, up to usual par. As the Mask, either would have to see that the other obtained no special advantage. That wasn't all, however. The Shadow saw deeper phases of the case.

As Cranston, he strolled toward the door. No worry, of course, because the Mask wouldn't let harm come to prisoners until he looked them over. Persons like Margo and Harry might be useful to the Mask's later plans. As matters stood at present, the Mask wasn't in a position to interview the prisoners, because the Mask was right here, at Drock's.

Chances were, the Mask would stay a while. Commissioner Weston was getting ready for another cross-examination of the suspects, Philip Renz and Roy Alker. He was calling upon Hubert Warrendale to help him with the grilling, which Warrendale could, because he knew these men personally and might recall helpful points. Nick Hemble was useful, too, and Weston was keeping him as an added feature in the cross-examination.

The one man who really wasn't needed was Lamont Cranston, who, presumably, could supply no evidence in the case.

It pleased The Shadow to be regarded unimportant. This was his chance to depart, and take up the same quest as Cardona: the hunt for the missing abductors, Ernie Bedlo and Tagger Scherf, tools of the Mask.

Cardona was off to a few minutes start, but it didn't matter to The Shadow. He was quite sure that he could succeed in the hunt, long before Cardona did.

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A singular situation, Commissioner Weston keeping the Mask occupied while The Shadow traveled elsewhere, to counteract the accomplishments of the master crook! One that would persist as long as The Shadow needed, for Weston certainly wouldn't give up hammering at Renz and Alker until Cardona returned. With Warrendale and Nick as valuable helpers, Weston would keep it up as long as he could.

It might mean an all-night session. That depended on how stubborn Cardona proved at keeping up a hunt that probably wouldn't get him anywhere. For The Shadow could picture how Cardona would go at his task of finding Ernie and Tagger. Joe wouldn't do it scientifically, the way The Shadow intended. Not that Joe was to blame.

The real answer was that The Shadow had enough evidence to go at the matter right. Enough, too, for him to indulge in a whispered laugh as he entered his waiting limousine, there to smother the identity of Cranston in the guise of The Shadow.

This case was narrowing to another duel between The Shadow and the Mask. One that could be of The Shadow's choice, once he had located his missing aids, Margo and Harry, along with the captors who held them.

That done, The Shadow could make the most of certain theories, that he hadn't mentioned during Weston's quiz of Renz and Alker.

Theories which, if correct, would place the identity of the Mask squarely upon the deep-dyed schemer to whom the dishonor properly belonged.

The Shadow knew!

CHAPTER XVIII. QUIZ FOR QUIZ

WHILE the law was grilling its prisoners, crooks were doing the same with theirs. In the storeroom prison where Margo Lane and Harry Vincent peered through heavy bars, two tormentors were trying to trick the captives into unwary statements that might interest the Mask, when he found it convenient to join them.

The inquisitors were Ernie Bedlo and Tagger Scherf. Their ways were very foxy.

While Ernie, with his blunt face pressed against Margo's door, was speaking to the girl behind it, Tagger, at the next cell, was offering Harry a cigarette and giving him a sly, but ratty look.

"Don't mind Ernie," confided Tagger. "He won't get fresh with the girl friend. If you're worried, though —"

"About what?" hastily interrupted Harry. "I don't have time to waste around night clubs, or money to spend on parties. What makes you think I know the dizzy blonde in the next coop?"

"She ain't no blonde. She's got dark hair and eyes."

"So what? If she's hired you as press agent, save the build-up for your pal Ernie. He may worry about women. I don't."

Hand through the barred door, Tagger snatched away the cigarette as Harry was lighting it. The ratty man turned with a growl.

"No use, Ernie. This guy don't know the dame."

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"She don't know him, either," gruffed Ernie, stepping back. "Says that guys who move in her set wear formal clothes at night. I suppose that lets me out, too."

Corroboration came from Margo's cell.

"It does," she told Ernie. "But it's time you let me out, in the literal sense. I want to get back to the party. Phil has probably returned, and will be worried."

Tagger looked at Ernie, and said: "She means Renz."

Ernie nodded. He looked toward Harry's door.

"I suppose you'd like to get out, too," said Ernie. "On account of your friend may be missing you."

"It's rather an inconvenience, being cooped up here," conceded Harry, "unless it's Alker's own idea."

"Who said anything about Alker?"

"Then maybe it was that chap Renz, whose name was just mentioned."

Ernie thrust his blunt face forward.

"Any more cracks," he said, "and maybe you won't get let out at all! I'm wise to you, guy. The same goes for this smart dame who says she's never seen you. Both of you are working for The Shadow!"

"The Shadow?" Harry spoke the name in a surprised tone. "Who's he?"

"Never heard of him, huh?" quizzed Ernie. "Says you! Don't tell me you've never heard of the Mask."

"I've seen the name mentioned in the newspapers."

Tagger took over when Ernie stalled.

"Listen, you," he said to Harry. "Put us hep to this Shadow stuff, and we'll tell you what we know about the Mask."

Harry looked interested, but said nothing; nor did Margo, when Tagger threw a quick glance her way.

"I'll go even better," agreed Tagger. "I'll admit that we're working for the Mask, Ernie and me."

"All right," returned Harry. "Who is the Mask?"

"He's either Renz or Alker," declared Tagger. "One of those guys is framing the other, see? But which one is the Mask, we don't know. He's never told us. Anyway, we've cut it down to two chances. Maybe, now, you can give us an idea about The Shadow."

Harry was shaking his head, when Margo spoke, quite brightly:

"I think I know who The Shadow is."

"Yeah?"

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The query came from Ernie and Tagger together. They saw Margo smiling as she nodded.

"It's so very simple," said Margo brightly. "The Shadow and the Mask are enemies, aren't they?"

"That's right," put in Ernie.

"Well, then," suggested Margo, "find out which is the Mask: Renz or Alker. The other will be The Shadow."

ERNIE and Tagger looked at each other in disgust. It was Ernie who said:

"I thought it was blondes who were dumb."

"Maybe she's had a hair dye," said Tagger. "Let me talk to her. Listen, stupid." This was for Margo. "We're working for the Mask, see? The coppers have him figured as either Renz or Alker –"

"Just as I said. And The Shadow –"

"Leave The Shadow out. He ain't neither of 'em. One of these two guys is the Mask, and wants to pin it on the other. Tonight, he's got a job to do. So he calls up Ernie and me, right here in this hide-out, and says to check on Renz and Alker and grab anybody that tries to follow them. Get it?"

Margo stared; then shook her head.

"I get it," put in Harry. "The Mask couldn't afford to have anyone check where he went, and he didn't want the fall guy to have an alibi, either. You grabbed the girl because you thought she was with Renz. You came after me because you thought I was going to trail Alker."

"That's it. Now, give us a lead to The Shadow and maybe we'll let you loose."

"You already said to leave The Shadow out of it."

Tagger gave an ugly snarl and acted as though he wanted to take a punch at Harry through the bars. Ernie drew him back.

"Just a wise guy," said Ernie. "Wait'll the Mask gets here. He'll handle him! Let's take a gander out front and see if that cluck Cardona has got through snooping around the parking lot."

"He's through by this time," guaranteed Tagger with a chuckle. "He'll figure we just used the lot to change buggies. He'll spend the night looking all over town for us – everywhere except right here."

"Which is what the Mask said would happen."

"Yeah. Because the Mask's smart."

When the jailers left, they closed the door behind them. Pressing close to the front of his improvised cell, Harry undertoned to Margo:

"How's it going?"

"Pretty chilly, in an evening gown." Margo was rubbing her shoulders and arms. "Those louts walked off with my wrap."

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"I'll lend you my coat."

"No, you won't, Harry. It would show too much interest in my welfare. We've got to keep that pair guessing, when they come back."

Harry had taken off his coat, intending to toss it over the top of the partition between his locker and the next. He put the coat on again, reluctantly.

"I liked the quiz," said Margo sweetly.

"Which quiz?" laughed Harry. "The one they gave us, or the one we gave them?"

"Both. Theirs was funnier, though."

"But ours produced results."

"Yes." Margo was thoughtful. "We found out that the Mask really has them guessing, too."

"More than that. They admitted that the Mask called them this evening, if that means anything."

"I suppose it might. But why didn't they recognize his voice and learn whether he was Renz or Alker?"

"The Mask always fakes his voice. He tries to talk like Warrendale. That dummy face of his is made to look like Warrendale's. But both imitations are noticeable, I understand."

THEY halted their talk, to listen for sounds from the other room. None came, so Harry waited for Margo to say something else. Instead, he heard persistent creaks close to the partition, and finally located them as coming from the door of Margo's locker.

"What's up?" whispered Harry.

"We've got to get out," confided Margo. "Our lives won't be worth a nickel when the Mask shows up."

"Why not?"

"Because the only evidence we can give will hurt his game. His play is to keep the police guessing. As long as it's Renz or Alker, they can't accuse either."

"But we can't spill that game."

"We certainly won't help it."

Margo's logic impressed Harry. He hadn't figured it quite that way. He smiled grimly, remembering how Ernie and Tagger had classed Margo as being dumb. They'd conceded that Harry was wise, but he was thinking that it was the other way about.

The creaking continued. Harry undertoned that it would be useless to attempt to break the padlock; it was too strong. Margo informed him that she was working at the hinge side of the door; that it was keeping her warmed up, even if she wasn't getting results. So Harry attacked his own door at the hinge side. He couldn't get a creak out of it.

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An idea struck him. His cell was stronger than Margo's, which was why he had been put into it. If he could get at Margo's door, he might be able to handle it. Too bad they hadn't penned him in the weaker locker.

Harry was muttering his disappointment when his idea hatched. He took a look at the partition.

A few minutes ago, Harry had been going to toss his coat over the top of it. Two lengthwise beams ran above the row of storage lockers, and there was a space between them. A space that Harry had formerly thought large enough to push a coat through, but now he was considering sending the coat along, with himself inside it.

First, he had to reach the top of the partition. That was easy enough, for there was an old steamer trunk in Harry's locker. He stood it on end and climbed atop it.

The space looked larger when Harry's eyes were on a level with it. At first sight, though, it seemed too small. Harry tried his head and shoulders and discovered that the squeeze was less difficult than it seemed.

He pulled himself half through, making enough noise to attract Margo's attention. The girl looked up, rather amazed to see Harry sprouting through an opening that she hadn't noticed before.

Then Harry was tipping, as if for a headlong plunge. Margo threw her hands up to aid him, afraid that her slender arms couldn't support his weight. Her strength, however, was sufficient.

Partly wedged in the space, Harry helped hold himself. Finally, when only his ankles were there, he hooked the beam with them, firmly enough for Margo to continue the balancing act.

"Steady –"

At Harry's word, Margo tensed. Harry's feet came free; he flipped toward the floor, so deftly that Margo had no trouble giving him the needed support.

Taking a look at the hinges, Harry put his arm through the locker door and hoisted upward. The pins lifted in rickety sockets to the last fraction of an inch. Margo added a shove and the door swung wide, hinging on its padlock.

"Let's go," said Harry. "There's a chance that the way is clear, if those fellows are still out by the parking lot."

THEY crossed the storage room and opened the door. In the janitor's living quarters, which were very dim, they saw the next door, ahead. Before they could reach it, a snarl stopped them.

They turned, to see Tagger stepping from a corner with a leveled gun. At the same moment, the door of the outer room opened and Ernie entered. He also held a revolver.

"Hello, Houdini junior," sneered Ernie. "Looks like he's trying to do an act with his lady assistant, don't it, Tagger?"

"Yeah," added Tagger. "Maybe he'll saw her in half next."

"There's a quicker way to get rid of her," said Ernie, "and him, too. The coppers have gone. Nobody's going to notice a few shots."

"Naw. What's more, the Mask said we could rub out anybody that got too smart. They're too smart, Ernie."

With their guns, the thugs were shoving Harry and Margo to separate corners. Harry tightened, knowing that a mad break would be the only hope. He gave Margo a glance, that she understood from the direction of his eyes.

It meant that they'd have to dash for the outer door. What Harry didn't flash was the fact that he intended to block off shots when they ran; that Margo, at least, might have a chance for life.

Then, before Harry could give the signal, the way was blocked. Announcement came in the form of an ugly snarl that turned all faces toward the door.

Harry and Margo, as well as the men who threatened them, were staring at a sweated figure who commanded the scene with a looming gun.

The newcomer's head was topped by a skullcap that helped fix the imitation face which hid his own features which resembled the countenance of Hubert Warrendale.

The way to escape was blocked by the Mask!

CHAPTER XIX. THE STAGE IS SET

FORMIDABLE as ever, the Mask was commander of the scene.

To Harry and Margo, prospective victims of the disguised murderer, the power of the Mask came home more forcefully than they could have realized from mere description. False features transformed the man at the door into a monstrosity that could not be regarded as human.

Ernie and Tagger felt the effect. Sight of the Mask's gun indicated that their own would be unneeded. They lowered their revolvers, then pocketed them, at a gesture from the Mask. In a snarling imitation of Warrendale's tone, the Mask ordered:

"Bring the prisoners forward."

The tools obeyed, and the Mask motioned each to one side, leaving Harry and Margo in the middle. Though he could easily have handled the prisoners with a single gun, he drew a second weapon, at the same time sneering in that ugly tone of his.

"You fools!" spoke the Mask. "To believe that you could trick me. Fools, to think that you could possibly escape –"

Margo was giving a side glance toward Harry. She saw an odd, half-gaping expression on his face, as he stared at the Mask's guns. Margo looked, too, and at that moment the guns diverged, widening away from the two prisoners. Before Margo could understand it, she heard a tone that made her gasp.

The tone was a sinister laugh, weird in its whispery pitch. Mirth that was singular enough under any circumstances, but which approached the incredible, coming from the motionless lips of the Mask. A thing too unreal ever to be believed in a situation such as this.

It was the laugh of The Shadow!

Whatever startlement Margo felt, it was outdistanced by the amazement which swept Ernie and Tagger. Their hands lifted up as if springs had actuated them. They wanted to cringe, but dared not, for the spreading guns

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were covering them.

Of all the witnesses to that amazing reversal of a horrendous situation, only one had caught an inkling of what was to come.

Harry Vincent had recognized the Mask's guns as the big automatics which The Shadow always carried!

"Take their revolvers." It was The Shadow, speaking through the face of the Mask. "Keep them covered."

Harry and Margo obeyed. In Harry's instance, the case looked normal. Tagger was on his side, and Harry simply pushed the frail crook to one corner, while he hauled the fellow's gun from the pocket where Tagger had dropped it.

With Margo, it was different, much to the chagrin of Ernie, whose case she handled.

Here was a slender girl, gowned in evening dress, calmly relieving a bulky plug-ugly of a gun. Ernie looked as though he wanted to grab Margo's neck and wring it; but he didn't try. He knew what would happen, with The Shadow in control.

As she found the gun, Margo looked at Ernie and gave him a bittersweet smile that added to his distaste of the situation. With the gun in hand, Margo showed that she was quite the equal of Harry. Tagger's retirement toward one corner was matched by Ernie's retreat into the other.

Shoving his guns beneath the sweater, The Shadow removed the composition face, to reveal the features of Cranston. Harry and Margo recognized them, though their prisoners didn't.

In fact, Ernie and Tagger couldn't quite make out Cranston's real face, because he was drawing back from the light. Moreover, in retiring, he was peeling the sweater over his shoulders, so that it covered his face.

At that important juncture, Tagger made a slight move forward, only to stop when he pressed into the gun that Harry held. Ernie didn't even budge. Margo prodded him with her gun before the idea occurred to him.

With the sweater off, The Shadow removed the skullcap, adding it to the mask. By then, he was turning into the outer room. His face couldn't be seen at all.

The Shadow's return was prompt. He came in a style that forced the last shreds of rebellious thought from the minds of Ernie and Tagger.

The Shadow was garbed in black, slouch hat upon his head, cloak draping his shoulders. He wore his black gloves, and his clenched hands held their automatics. His eyes were burning as they roamed from Ernie to Tagger.

"THOUGHTFUL of you," declared The Shadow, "to leave the Mask's disguise in the janitor's office, where I could pick it up. I hoped that I would find those things, and they simplified matters very nicely."

He paused, to study the glum looks of the prisoners. They knew what else The Shadow's discovery meant. In finding the Mask's attire, The Shadow had learned that the master crook was expected by his henchmen.

"Perhaps my visit astonished you." The Shadow's tone was sibilant. "You supposed that I would be misled, as the police were. Unfortunately, you gave yourselves away. Your swift capture of two of my agents proved that you could not have gone far from your base. I had to wait until the police left the parking lot; then I was

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able to search close at hand."

That point settled, The Shadow asked his agents what they had learned. Margo let Harry do the talking. He told how Ernie and Tagger had admitted that even they were in the dark as to the real identity of the Mask, having genuinely debated the question of Renz versus Alker.

Harry added that the Mask, himself, had kept the issue still veiled by telling his tools simply to take followers from each trail indiscriminately, when he called Ernie and Tagger earlier in the evening.

The Shadow's eyes swept the faces of the prisoners. He spoke commandingly:

"Which of you answered when the Mask called?"

"He did." Tagger spoke hoarsely, nudging toward Ernie. "Ask him. He'll tell you so."

Ernie nodded.

"I don't know which guy he was," insisted Ernie. "Maybe he was Renz, maybe he was Alker. He never gave it away. He always talked forced-like. I'd tell you if I knew who the Mask was."

From The Shadow's low-toned laugh, Harry knew that the cloaked investigator believed Ernie. More than that, Harry was seized by the sudden conviction that The Shadow could, at this very moment, settle the all-important question: the identity of the Mask.

What the clue was; how The Shadow might end the curious balance between Renz and Alker, Harry couldn't understand. Neither could Margo, yet she was gripped with the same conviction as Harry.

With his agents keeping the crooks well covered, and his own presence insuring full control, The Shadow put his automatics away and stepped to the telephone. He dialed the number of Drock's studio.

At the other end, Commissioner Weston answered the call. Weston was weary from the grilling that he had given Renz and Alker. He waved for Warrendale to take over the questioning, while he answered the telephone. The voice that Weston heard electrified him, taking away that tired feeling.

The voice of The Shadow!

Weston didn't give the fact away. Instead, he talked as though the call were a matter of routine, for he heard The Shadow instructing him to follow such policy. The demand that The Shadow made was something else again.

At first, Weston did not want to accede to it. Finally, under the hypnotic persuasion of The Shadow's sibilant speech, the commissioner agreed.

Ending the phone call, he looked from Renz to Alker. Very coolly, Weston bluffed the rest.

"I've just talked to Inspector Cardona," he said. "He's found out nothing about those men we want. I'm afraid" – his tone was reluctant – "that I haven't enough evidence to hold either of you."

In separate styles, Renz and Alker looked pleased.

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"You both tell practically the same story," continued Weston. "If one stands, the other must. I'm sorry that I placed you under undue suspicion. You will not be inconvenienced in the future, beyond a matter of routine questioning."

WESTON called the officers and had them usher Renz and Alker downstairs. It was Warrendale who questioned:

"You've learned something, commissioner?"

"Enough to believe that my old policy still stands," assured Weston. "'Give a man enough rope –' You know the rest. I still have high hopes for Renz and Alker. I only wish that whichever is the Mask will make just one slip."

"I hope so, too. I think I'll stay at a hotel this evening, commissioner, in case you need me. I'm worried, too, about returning to Long Island. Drock's death is bringing things close to home. I'm sure I made trouble for the Mask, this evening. He may have some designs in my direction."

"Quite right, Warrendale. I'll have a police escort take you to your hotel."

"That won't be necessary, commissioner." Warrendale turned, to clap his hand on Nick's shoulder. "Here's one man I can trust. He actually defied the Mask this evening, I understand. I'm quite sure I'll be safe in his cab."

Nothing short of commendation from The Shadow could have gratified Nick as much as Warrendale's expression of trust. The cabby had a swagger as he went downstairs with Warrendale and opened the cab door for the financier to enter.

Weston followed with the officers; he saw the cab off, and then turned to the bluecoats.

"I shall need some men for another task," said the commissioner. "Since Inspector Cardona isn't here, I'd like one of you to call headquarters –"

An arriving cab interrupted his speech. From it stepped Joe Cardona, shaking his head glumly as indication that his quest had failed. Weston promptly drew Joe aside and buzzed the facts of The Shadow's phone call. At first, Joe listened. Then he exclaimed:

"What! The Shadow wants us up by the parking lot? That's crazy, commissioner. It's a hoax!"

"Who could have hoaxed me?" demanded Weston. "Renz and Alker were both on hand when the call came in, so it couldn't have been from the Mask."

"Maybe one of his men pulled it, either Ernie or Tagger."

"It sounded like The Shadow. So I released the suspects, as he ordered. If you'd been here, inspector –"

"But I wasn't. Why didn't you ask Warrendale's advice?"

"He couldn't have understood. He doesn't know as much about The Shadow as we do. We'll go through with what The Shadow wants."

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Cardona nodded. It was the only thing to do. He, too, had followed tips from The Shadow, in the past. He'd take a gamble on them anytime, if he was sure they really came from The Shadow. Joe simply doubted Weston's judgment on the matter.

He was doubting it more and more, as they rode toward the parking lot. Somehow, Cardona couldn't hold a right hunch on the matter. He hoped that The Shadow was behind this odd game.

But Cardona saw the more plausible likelihood that the law had been tricked once more – by the Mask!

CHAPTER XX. MASTER OF CRIME

THE stage was really set. In the outer room beneath the apartment house, the proper articles awaited the coming of the Mask. Sweater, skullcap – more important, the mask itself – were in the janitor's office, where The Shadow had earlier found and used them.

Lights were off in that room. The Mask preferred darkness when he put on his disguise.

In the middle room, The Shadow stood in black, weighing a pair of automatics which covered two very dejected crooks: Ernie and Tagger.

Those tools of the Mask had retired from the light, each toward a gloomy corner, but the illumination was sufficient for The Shadow to discern their faces. Gunless, the pair could do nothing. Harry and Margo were not in sight.

Sounds came from the outer room. Faint, those creeps in the janitor's office, but from them The Shadow detected the arrival of the Mask.

He waited, his back turned toward the office door. It was dangerous, but it was the only way to bait the Mask. The creeps came closer; still The Shadow did not stir. His ears had caught something else: the click of a light switch in the office. The light would help.

Then the creak of the opening door.

For the first time The Shadow moved, turning slightly about, but still keeping his gaze on Ernie and Tagger. They were looking toward the door; they moved slightly, but not enough to warn The Shadow. Perhaps it was their restraint that brought the sarcastic snarl that The Shadow heard.

The forced voice of the Mask!

"So you are here ahead of me." The voice came from the doorway. "I have you covered, Shadow –"

Ernie shifted – involuntarily, it seemed. So did Tagger. As they moved The Shadow wheeled, to stop half short. He had a gun partly toward the doorway. Framed in that opening was the Mask, his revolver almost raised. Each seemed to know that another inch would force a duel. Both waited.

"Wise of you, Shadow," spoke the Mask, "to talk before you fire. This promises death to both of us, which would be quite useless."

The Mask was showing a semblance of Warrendale's tone, the proper accompaniment for the artificial face that hid his real identity.

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Whether Renz or Alker, he was hiding it. He was the Mask at this moment; no one else. A personality that crime itself had built; a wealth-seeker who seemed willing to compromise; to preserve the gain that he had made through evil.

"I have my ways," reminded the Mask, "and you have yours. Let us lower our guns and talk –"

He was suiting words with the deed he suggested. As the Mask's gun went down, so did The Shadow's. Then the eyes that glittered through the imitation face saw opportunity. The period of compromise was no longer needed. The Mask proved his treachery by a quick triumphant sneer. Though wordless, the utterance was an order.

It was a call for Ernie and Tagger to spring upon The Shadow from their corners, to grab him and hold him as a target for the Mask. With the cry, the Mask wheeled backward through the doorway. Quite as quick, The Shadow faded across the middle room.

Guns spoke, coming up, both shots going wide. The Shadow laughed as he fired, but the Mask's fierce sneer was louder. Missed shots suited the Mask, with Ernie and Tagger to aid. He saw his two followers lunging forward.

They stopped, short of The Shadow.

Two reasons displayed themselves: Harry and Margo. So far unnoticed by the Mask, they were behind Ernie and Tagger. The moves that the Mask had seen his followers make were the result of gun-prods by The Shadow's agents.

Actually, by their forced actions, Ernie and Tagger had signaled to The Shadow, telling him when to turn to meet the Mask!

MADLY, the Mask dived for the outer room, blazing shots as he went. The Shadow was reversing his fade, shooting back at his frenzied foe. Harry and Margo were not in danger; they had the Mask's own men in front of them as shields.

In this duel, the Mask was forced to a lone fight against The Shadow, in a setting which the cloaked avenger had arranged!

The Shadow was through the door, while the Mask was diving to a corner. A blast from a .45 shattered a table the Mask was flinging as he dodged. The shot missed by scant inches, and the Mask was away again, shooting over his shoulder, wide by a yard.

Again, The Shadow fired, this time, it was a lamp that saved the Mask. The metal standard took the bullet; the lamp toppled, crashed to the floor.

Still, the office had light from the inner room. The Mask lunged, hurling a chair ahead of him. Stepping aside to ward off the missile, The Shadow was absent when the Mask blasted another shot.

A laugh, in the killer's very ear, reminded him that he was wasting bullets as he had before, while The Shadow, at this moment, was reserving them.

Again, the Mask turned and fired at the laugh. It was all that he could shoot at, the mirth, for it was everywhere. A taunt that continued as the gunshot echoed, telling the Mask that the doom which he had dealt to others was to become his own.

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Lunging, the Mask reached the door that led out to the parking lot, and turned as he grabbed the knob. He saw The Shadow this time, and tugged the trigger of his gun.

The revolver didn't respond. It was empty. The Shadow had counted six shots in the wild fray, while the Mask hadn't kept track. Desperately, the Mask flung the empty weapon The Shadow's way, and yanked the door open.

He was on the threshold, with the whole outdoors awaiting him, yet destined never to reach the outside air. The Shadow had him covered.

Finger on the trigger, The Shadow let his gun flip up, the bullet loosed toward the ceiling, instead of the door. For the Mask was already diving, as though a shot had reached him. Diving right into the midst of new attackers, who were surging in from outside. Weston and Cardona were the leaders; behind them came a pair of charging detectives.

Under the four-man drive, the Mask came flinging backward. Fortunate it was that The Shadow had diverted his fire, or he would have found targets other than the Mask. The law was taking over The Shadow's duel, yet the cloaked fighter remained ready, which was well.

Snatching a gun that slugged toward him, the Mask wrenched it from the detective who owned it. He was going down under the drive of numbers, but he twisted aside and shoved his gun toward his attackers. It was then that The Shadow fired – a perfect shot, that bashed the Mask's wrist.

With an agonized shriek in a voice no longer disguised, the Mask tried to roll away as police guns roared. He stretched upon the floor, his artificial face turned upward in the light that came from the middle room.

Two men were pouncing, one from each side. Weston and Cardona were each trying to get the mask from the dead wearer's face. They succeeded between them, but as the imitation face came free, each grabber lost the grip he had on it.

They halted on either side of the dead master crook, their eyes as fixed as the Mask's own glassy stare.

Sight of Philip Renz could not have so transfixed those two viewers; nor would the face of Roy Alker have accomplished such result. The only face that could have frozen Weston and Cardona was the countenance they actually saw; one that made them disbelieve their own senses.

A mask had been lifted, yet its frozen mold still remained. This man of crime who called himself the Mask was the very man whose face he had so often borrowed: Hubert Warrendale!

Strange was the laugh that swept the room of doom – a weird tone of deeper understanding, that faded as it trailed out through the open door, to vanish into the night. It told that one person had expected this revelation of Warrendale as the Mask. He was the being who himself had paved this climax.

The Shadow!

WHEN they discussed it in the Cobalt Club an hour later, the strange case of Hubert Warrendale took on plausibility. By then, Commissioner Weston had listened to Harry and Margo, while Inspector Cardona had quizzed Ernie and Tagger.

Philip Renz had been summoned from the party at the Chez Unique, while Roy Alker hurried over from his office. Still, none of them could unravel the details of the mystery. That took sheer reasoning power, as

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evidenced by Lamont Cranston after he heard the points of evidence.

"I've been blind all along," admitted Commissioner Weston. "I should have known that Warrendale had a motive. After all, he could have wanted to double his assets at your expense, Renz. Quite as much as you might have wished to profit through Warrendale's loss."

"Perhaps more motive, commissioner," put in Cranston, while Renz was nodding thanks to Weston. "Don't forget that Warrendale, not Renz, was the man who had charge of their mutual funds."

Weston looked puzzled, but Cardona didn't. Joe had just received a call from detectives who had gone to Warrendale's Long Island residence.

"You've hit it, Mr. Cranston!" exclaimed Joe. "They've found those securities that were taken from the Crescent Trust. But they don't come to a million bucks. Not even a hundred thousand!"

Renz stared, astonished, as the truth dawned.

"Then it's all money that I gave Warrendale!" he blurted. "His big financial deals were all a fake! He had me thinking that he was doubling and tripling everything I gave him, so I'd dig up more for larger propositions!"

It was Cranston who nodded.

"That was unquestionably the game, Renz," he said. "You decided to draw out much earlier than Warrendale expected, and that put him on the spot. He had to rob the safe deposit box to cover up the shortage."

"But he murdered Cedric Malvin, first –"

"Certainly. To block a deal he couldn't avoid, that would have demanded an immediate settlement with you. Successful in that crime, he went ahead with the safe–deposit box robbery as a logical sequel."

The Shadow turned to Roy Alker.

"You were too logical a subject," he told Alker, "because of your quarrel with Malvin. That was why Warrendale shifted half the weight to Renz. As long as it lay between you two, he was safe."

"Absolutely safe!" Commissioner Weston pounded the table. "It was preposterous to suppose that a man would disguise himself as himself, which is what Warrendale did!"

"And purposely let us catch on," inserted Cardona. "Remember how he muffed the mask at Malvin's? He did the same thing at the Crescent Trust. He wanted us to know the face was a phony!"

"As for Drock," said Weston, "he must have known that Warrendale had the mask. So Warrendale had to kill him."

"Sure," agreed Cardona. "So he made Drock call you fellows" – Joe gestured from Renz to Alker – "and get you both down there. He had you both right on the ground after the murder."

Cranston was smiling slightly as he listened. All very nice so far, but The Shadow foresaw the coming snag. It was Weston who suddenly exclaimed:

"But Warrendale was out at his house every time crime happened! How can anyone account for that?"

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

IT was The Shadow who accounted for it, in Cranston's even-toned style. His initial statement cleared the way for others. His premise was that Warrendale could not have been at home on any of those occasions.

"The night of Malvin's murder," he said, "we both called Warrendale's, commissioner; but it was Lathan we talked to, not Warrendale. Obviously, Warrendale had instructed Lathan to say that he was at home, which Lathan did, not knowing that crime was involved.

"Returning from Malvin's, Warrendale shot Lathan and imprisoned himself. He blamed it on two men who weren't there at all. Lathan's earlier statements stood, because he wasn't alive to admit that he had spoken falsely when he said that Warrendale was home."

Cranston's words so clarified the case that Weston sat speechless, waiting for his friend to take the next in order.

"When he went to the Crescent Trust," The Shadow continued, "Warrendale stopped at Renz's first, and took the key, disarranging the place to make it look as though someone like Alker was responsible. He had Ernie and Tagger help his fake get-away, so the police would report that the Mask had two helpers, thus bolstering Warrendale's story of what happened at his house the night Lathan died.

"I called Warrendale soon after the Crescent robbery, and received a busy signal. I realize why. Nick, the cab driver, has testified that the Mask called him that night and had him leave his phone off the hook. Warrendale did the same, thus keeping an open connection all the while. The busy signal resulted, and indicated that he was home."

This time, Weston had an objection. "But I received a call from Warrendale –"

"Not from his home," interrupted Cranston. "He called you from somewhere on the way to Long Island and said he was calling from home."

Weston wanted Cranston's theory on the Drock murder. It proved even simpler than the others.

"Warrendale separated from you and Cardona," The Shadow told Weston. "He didn't have to go home to look up data on Drock. He already knew it. He went directly to Drock's and used a gun to force him into phoning Renz and Alker.

"Then Warrendale called the hotel, and notified you and Cardona – all from Drock's. Warrendale was right there, as the Mask, when you arrived. Drock didn't have a chance to stop anything that Warrendale did."

Weston nodded.

"You've analyzed it perfectly, Cranston. The only trouble is, The Shadow figured it all out before you did. Probably not until tonight; otherwise, he would have picked the Mask sooner. What I'd like to know is how The Shadow obtained his lead!"

Smilingly, Cranston gestured to Harry and Margo, who were seated nearby, remarking that they could give the answer. Both Harry and Margo stared, amazed, until Cranston prompted them with a question:

"Didn't Ernie and Tagger admit that the Mask called them this evening, telling them to seize anyone who followed Renz or Alker?"

Nods responded.

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK

"Then the Mask couldn't have been Renz," decided Cranston. "You were with Renz all evening, Margo. You'd have known if he'd made that call. Nor could the Mask have been Alker" – Cranston turned to Harry – "because you were with Alker and would have known if he'd contacted the men who later abducted you. Renz and Alker received calls, decoying them to Drock's, but those couldn't have been the call in question.

"So" – Cranston shrugged as he arose – "it all reduced to Warrendale. He had to be the Mask. The Shadow must have known."

Bowing good night, Cranston departed, leaving all to ponder on his words. Singularly, the quiet tone of Cranston faded in every mind, blending to a more vivid memory of a powerful tone of challenge: The Shadow's.

Purposely, The Shadow had blotted the personality of Lamont Cranston, to produce recollections of his cloaked self.

He wanted these witnesses to remember The Shadow, master of justice, as conqueror of the Mask, the man of crime who had masqueraded as himself!

THE END