

SILVER SKULL

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. DOOM'S TOKEN

THERE was something in the night air that Mildred Wilbin did not like. Perhaps it was the fog, a muggy mist not usual during this mild season. But Mildred had driven through such fogs before, when she went to her uncle's home on Long Island.

As she swung her trim canary-hued roadster along the road beside Long Island Sound, Mildred brushed back the stray locks of light-brown hair that had settled toward her eyebrows. With the same sweep, she seemed to take the troubled furrows from her forehead. Her attractive lips lost their solemn droop and favored her with a smile from the rear-view mirror.

She was worried about her uncle, that was all; and with very little reason. The fog had suggested a danger, but the menace was too remote to be given further consideration.

Tonight, Mildred's uncle, Herbert Wilbin, was taking a transport plane for Los Angeles. Within the past month, two such ships had crashed among the Rocky Mountains. Therefore, Mildred had logically been worried when her uncle had mentioned that he was going West by air.

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Logic of a different sort had ended the girl's qualms. Herbert Wilbin had argued that the planes were flying higher, taking more precautions, because of the recent disasters. That had satisfied Mildred, until this fog had come along. With it, her sense of an existing menace had returned.

But she was reasoning that menace out of mind. This fog was local, confined to Long Island alone. It couldn't bother pilots of a westbound plane. As if in answer to that bit of common sense, the fog began to clear before the roadster's headlights.

Mildred had reached the rise of ground outside her uncle's estate. She turned the car in between two stone gates and drove slowly along the curved drive that led to the mansion.

There was a light beneath the portico that fronted the great stone house. By the glow, Mildred saw a limousine parked there. A gray-haired man – Herbert Wilbin – was standing beside the car, talking to someone within it. Rather than interrupt her uncle's conversation with a parting guest, Mildred cut through a side drive that led to a circle in back of the huge house.

The fog was very slight where Mildred parked, but pitch-blackness settled in the moment that she turned off the roadster's lights. The circular drive was flanked by cedar trees that hid the lower windows of the house. Mildred had to grope past those screening trees, to sight the dim light from the house door that opened onto the rear drive.

She had a key to that door, and while she used it, she felt nervous. She was worried again, not by thought of the fog, but by something that she couldn't explain. There was no breeze in the fog-stilled darkness, yet the cedar trees seemed to whisper.

Mildred's lips were tight, when the door finally unlocked. She felt very grateful for the lights in the rear hall. Grateful even when she saw Fortner, although she didn't like the fellow.

Fortner was her uncle's secretary, a smug, middle-aged man whose hair was prematurely gray.

Perhaps Herbert Wilbin found Fortner indispensable as a secretary; but that, in Mildred's opinion, didn't make up for the man's sneakiness.

For once, she had noticed Fortner before the secretary spied her. He was on his way to Wilbin's study, and it was almost laughable, the sudden jump that Fortner gave when he heard Mildred speak. A moment later, he was stammering – something that Mildred had never known him to do before.

"Why... why, you startled me, Miss Wilbin!" the secretary wheezed. "I thought... well, you said good-bye to your uncle, awhile ago. But... but –"

"But I'm back again," interposed Mildred, with a smile. "I happened to forget my suitcase. It's upstairs in my room. Would you get it for me, Fortner?"

The secretary hesitated; he looked toward the study door, as though duty called him there.

"It's very heavy," added Mildred, "and besides, I left some books in the library. If you bring the suitcase while I'm getting the books, it will save me a lot of time."

Fortner nodded. He glanced toward the front of the house. Noting no signs of Herbert Wilbin's immediate return, Fortner decided to get the suitcase. But he spoke a reminder before he started upstairs.

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"Mr. Wilbin has some important letters to dictate," said Fortner. "He can't afford much time, or he will miss his plane. It's a long trip to the airport."

"I've already said good-bye to Uncle Herbert," smiled Mildred. "You won't even have to tell him that I came back."

Quite relieved, Fortner headed for the stairway, while Mildred went into the library. She was picking out the books, when she heard the smooth purr of the departing limousine out front. She glimpsed her uncle when he came in from the portico, but she did not call to him as he went past the library door.

HERBERT WILBIN was smiling as he strolled into the study. He was remembering some quip that he had exchanged with the visitor who had just left. They had chatted previously in the study, for on Wilbin's desk was an ash tray containing cigar stumps, and tall glasses empty except for remaining fragments of ice.

Sitting down at his desk, Wilbin stiffened suddenly, with a slight instinctive recoil. His eyes had encountered a strange object that glimmered dully from the desk: a thing that seemed alive, although it symbolized death.

The object was a silver skull remarkably like an actual death's-head, though it was small enough to have rested within the palm of Wilbin's hand.

Ostensibly, the skull was nothing more than a paper weight, for it rested upon some papers that were on the desk. Nevertheless, Wilbin reached for the skull as though he feared it would burn his fingers. Laying it gingerly aside, he began to paw through the papers beneath.

A chill gripped Herbert Wilbin; his breath hissed between his gritted teeth. There should have been an envelope among that bundle; one containing a paper more important than any in the stack.

The envelope was gone, its contents with it.

Hands clamped upon the desk edge, Wilbin eyed the silver skull. This time, his lips hissed words that he spoke as though they were a name:

"Silver Skull!"

The title fitted a certain person, for a reason that Herbert Wilbin knew. A man who should be trustworthy, yet who, by this token on the desk, was otherwise. A flood of thoughts rushed through Wilbin's brain, began to link themselves into connected ideas.

So intent was Wilbin upon his theories, that he did not hear the sound of a motor in the rear drive. It was Mildred, departing in her roadster; but Wilbin knew nothing of his niece's brief return.

In the stillness of the study, he was sliding open a desk drawer; his eyes fixed upon the door of the room, he reached for a revolver. Herbert Wilbin was quite sure that he could solve the riddle of the silver skull. Not once did his eyes waver from the door that he so grimly watched.

Soon, the door opened. Into the room stepped Fortner. The smug secretary closed the door behind him and turned toward the desk. The look that he gave was as startled as the one that Mildred had previously witnessed.

Herbert Wilbin spoke in a tone as level as the steady aim of his revolver.

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"Tonight, I received a guest," he told Fortner. "A man who presumably knew nothing of my affairs. A man, therefore, who could be left alone in this room, where a most important document was within his reach.

"He found that paper, Fortner, and took it. In its place" – Wilbin gestured with his free hand – "he left this skull! A curious token, because it fits with his identity."

Fortner said nothing. His eyes were gazing at the skull, his lips giving a twitch that tried to express ignorance, but failed.

"As I analyze it, Fortner," added Wilbin, "my visitor – let us call him Silver Skull – could have left this token for one purpose only: to notify someone that his task was done. Since you and I are alone in the house; you are the person for whom the information was meant!"

"NO, no!" Fortner was advancing, shaking his head, raising his hands pitifully. "I know nothing!"

"You know everything," corrected Wilbin. "Halt where you are, Fortner, and tell me what Silver Skull expects to gain. Tell me what you were supposed to do, after you found his token; what measures you were to take to cover the theft of the envelope.

"Unless you speak, Fortner, your plight will be as bad as that of the man who hired you. I shall call the police" – Wilbin's free hand was moving toward the telephone – "and denounce you, too, when I tell them that Silver Skull is –"

Wilbin failed to add the name. He had something else to occupy him. Fortner was leaping for the desk. The man's pretense of innocence was gone; hence, Wilbin did not hesitate.

Coolly, Wilbin aimed point-blank and pressed the gun trigger.

The click did nothing to halt Fortner. The gun was empty. Fortner, himself, had seen to that earlier; it explained why he was willing to take a chance. Viciously, he sprang across the desk and locked with Wilbin before the latter could recover from his surprise.

In the tussle that followed, Fortner fought with the frantic instinct of a cornered rat. He managed to twist away from a choking clutch Wilbin got on his neck, and with each spell of freedom, he supplied wild measures to beat off the next attack. At last, luck served the secretary.

Half across the desk, Fortner wriggled free from Wilbin and tried to grab for the swivel chair. He landed in it at an angle and the chair levered backward. Fortner's feet went up into the air, straight toward Wilbin.

Partly through sheer inability to halt his backward plunge, partly through his ability to grasp quick opportunities, Fortner let his left foot fly high in a sideward kick that took Wilbin underneath the chin.

The stroke had more power than Fortner could possibly have put into a punch. Its chance accuracy gave it a knockout force. When Fortner crawled from the chair, he saw Herbert Wilbin lying stunned beside him.

Panting, the secretary went to a window, raised the shade, then the sash. Reaching back to the desk, he picked up the silver skull and showed it at the window. There was a stir from the cedars; hard-looking men came through the open window, and grinned their understanding when they viewed Wilbin's prostrate form.

They took the unconscious victim out through the window. Locking the sash and drawing the shade, Fortner picked up the telephone and ordered a taxicab. He was tidying the room, when the telephone bell rang.

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Answering it, Fortner heard a chuckle, as his tone was recognized.

The voice at the other end spoke a single word:

"Silver –"

"Skull," replied Fortner. Then, in panting tone: "It's done! Everything worked out –"

A drop of the distant receiver cut off any further report. Silver Skull was satisfied with the news. Fortner gave a shrug, then grinned. There was more work for him to do, but it would be easy; very easy.

When the taxi arrived at the Wilbin mansion, Fortner was standing beneath the darkened portico, a heavy suitcase resting beside him. When he and his luggage were inside the cab, Fortner gave the brisk order:

"Newark Airport!"

CHAPTER II. LINKS FROM THE PAST

ON the day following the stroke against Herbert Wilbin, rumors of another air tragedy swept suddenly upon the public. A cross-country plane had vanished somewhere in the Rockies, exactly like the two that had been lost before.

Among the passengers listed was Herbert Wilbin, millionaire manufacturer from Long Island.

There was little doubt as to the plane's fate. By this time, the public had learned what to expect when such ships were last reported over the mountains. A few days would bring the discovery of scattered wreckage, in which no person would be found alive.

Until that time, searchers were expressing the usual hopes that they themselves invariably ended.

Midafternoon found two men discussing the missing ship in surroundings quite remote from the Rocky Mountains. The two were in a sumptuous hotel suite in New York City, and though they presented a marked contrast in appearance, both were experienced in the same subject – aviation.

One was Kent Allard, an aviator with a singular career. Years ago, he had had a forced landing in Guatemala, where he had become the white god of a tribe of Xinka Indians. Returned to New York, Allard lived at this hotel, with two faithful Xincas as his servants.

Allard's appearance was as remarkable as his career. His face was hawklike in expression, as solemn and as firm-molded as the features of an Aztec idol. His speech, calm and even-toned, was as lacking in emotion as his countenance. The only expression that might have betrayed his thoughts, came from his keen eyes. But there was something in that gaze that left all viewers baffled.

The other man was Norwood Parridge, a wealthy sportsman whose chief hobby was flying. He was tall, like Allard; but his shoulders had a forward tilt, as though they carried some constant burden. Parridge's face was handsome but haggard, and the lines that creased his forehead had the look of grooves.

"It can't happen again," Parridge was saying, as he paced the floor. Then, bitterly: "That's what I said before, Allard. But it has happened!"

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Allard's eyes had a sympathetic gaze. Parridge noted it; his shoulders straightened as he stroked a hand through his rumpled dark hair.

"It's not the money in it," he declared. "I'm not worrying about the cash that I've invested in Federated Airways. It's aviation that counts, and that applies to both of us."

"Quite," agreed Allard.

"I'm going to join the search again," asserted Parridge, grimly. "Like I did when they hunted for those other ships. Thanks for your offer to pinch-hit for me, but I've got to go through with it myself.

"Yet what will it bring? Nothing, except the finding of twisted metal; human bodies charred beyond all recognition. There will be talk of further safety measures, but nothing can come of it. Federated Airways already have every possible safety device upon their planes.

"It's the human element, Allard; the mental hazard that hits every pilot, no matter how experienced he is. That's why these crack-ups always come in cycles. All we can hope is that this particular one is ended."

AFTER Parridge had gone, Kent Allard stood at the window of the spacious living room watching the millionaire's car drive from the hotel. Fixed lips moved; from them came the tone of a whispered laugh. Mirthless, it was a grim echo to the matters that Allard and Parridge had discussed.

Though Norwood Parridge did not know it, his fellow aviator, Kent Allard, had more than an airman's interest in those tragedies among the Rockies. For behind the calm personality of Kent Allard lay a strange identity.

Kent Allard was The Shadow.

Master fighter who battled crime, The Shadow had come face to face with a chain of mystery that carried him into the field of aviation which he, as Allard, knew so well.

To date, The Shadow had accepted these air tragedies as the accidents that they appeared to be; but the third crash, only a few hours old, had produced features that linked with the past.

Stepping to a writing desk, Allard drew typewritten sheets from a drawer and studied them intently.

The first was a report on a man named Carter Gurry, a wealthy Californian who had died in the first crash. Gurry had been planning to place most of his fortune in a motion-picture enterprise, when death had intervened. His wealth had gone to a cousin in California, who had promptly set out for Australia.

Next on the list was Roy Breck, a victim in the second crash. Breck, it seemed, had been traveling West to marry a girl in Arizona. His death had placed his entire fortune, the Breck lumber millions, in the hands of a brother who had already squandered his own inheritance.

Breck's brother, like Gurry's cousin, had promptly faded from the public eye.

Today, close upon the third plane disaster, agents of The Shadow had supplied prompt data regarding a new victim – Herbert Wilbin. There were two possible heirs to Wilbin's wealth: one, a niece, Mildred; the other a nephew, Roger. They were brother and sister.

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The two presented an absolute contrast. Mildred's affection for her uncle was marked; and from all reports, Wilbin had cared for his niece. But Roger had shown no regard whatever for his uncle. In fact, Roger Wilbin was at present in South America, for a reason known to The Shadow, although it had not been revealed to the law.

The reason was that Roger had forged his uncle's name to checks totaling some twenty thousand dollars, and Herbert Wilbin had stood the loss.

Nevertheless, The Shadow's report sheets showed that Wilbin's lawyers, believing his death a certainty, had searched among their client's papers and had learned that two thirds of the fortune was to go to the renegade nephew, with only one third to the faithful niece.

As yet, The Shadow had not learned the date of the will in question; but he was sure upon one point – namely, that the will must have been made prior to Roger's crooked work. Likewise, The Shadow was positive that a later will, as yet unfound, must have been extracted from among Wilbin's papers.

Those two points added up to one conclusion: that last night's plane crash had been something other than an accident. Tracing back, the same could properly apply to the previous disasters that had harried Federated Airways.

The Shadow folded the report sheets. His hand was reaching for a telephone, when the bell rang. Answering it in Allard's tone, The Shadow learned that a visitor had arrived to see him. A moment later, the visitor's name was announced across the wire:

"Miss Mildred Wilbin."

THERE was no smile on Allard's lips as he gravely received the caller. Nothing told Mildred that she, of all persons, was the one that Kent Allard had been most anxious to meet at this particular moment. She was conscious, though, of a keen gaze that seemed to sweep her.

In Mildred Wilbin, The Shadow observed a girl of rare charm. Her face had a beauty that strain could not mar.

The girl was not wearing mourning clothes. Until she learned the positive news that the lost plane had crashed, Mildred Wilbin would refuse to believe that her uncle was dead.

Within a few minutes, Mildred was talking of the very subject that she had come to discuss: her uncle. More than that, she was telling Kent Allard why she had chosen to confide in him, although she had never before met him.

"You are a famous aviator," said Mildred, her tone as sincere as her gaze. "More than that, you have undergone hardships. They say that you are wealthy, yet care little for wealth. That is why I believe that you will do what I request, and understand fully why I ask it.

"My uncle may be dead. If he is dead, his death was designed. Therefore you, in the interest of aviation, should investigate the cause."

Allard's nod showed interest. Then:

"What proof can you offer?" he asked. "There must be some reason –"

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"There is a reason," interposed Mildred. "I have heard from my uncle's lawyers. His will leaves two thirds of his estate to my brother. I assure you, Mr. Allard, that my uncle must have made a later will.

"He intended to leave everything to me. But my feeling in the matter is not selfish. I would give every cent" – her eyes were flashing – "to charity, rather than have the slightest share go to Roger!"

"Then you believe that your uncle's wish –"

"Was precisely the same as mine. There are reasons, Mr. Allard, that I cannot reveal, because my uncle, himself, chose to keep them secret."

It was plain that Mildred was holding back any statement of Roger's forgeries, which proved the sincerity of her story. Sensing that Allard was impressed, the girl pressed her cause with facts that she felt she could properly reveal.

"Fortner could be the man responsible," she declared. "He was my uncle's secretary."

"Tell me about him."

Mildred described the smug secretary, and detailed her impression of Fortner's soft-footed ways. Though Allard listened placidly, his eyes almost shut, Mildred thought she detected a flicker of interest on his part when she mentioned the grayness of Fortner's hair.

"What you have told me may be quite important," decided Allard. "However" – his lips showed the semblance of a smile – "it is a problem for a detective, rather than an aviator. You will pardon my absence for a few minutes, Miss Wilbin?"

Mildred nodded. Allard strolled from the living room; when he returned, a few minutes later, he again displayed his slight smile.

"The matter is in competent hands," he told Mildred, "and I can promise my own cooperation, so far as the aviation angle is concerned. Meanwhile, I must ask one question. Has anyone followed you since last night?"

Mildred shook her head. She was emphatic on that point. From the window, she pointed out the yellow roadster parked near the hotel. From his own scrutiny, Allard seemed assured that the car was unwatched.

"I have some excellent advice for you," he told Mildred. "You are to take a vacation. Forget everything, until you hear from me. Everything, including your uncle."

"Do you mean" – Mildred's eyes were wide with hope – "that Uncle Herbert may still be alive?"

"Anything may be possible," assured Allard. He was watching a taxicab park across the street from Mildred's car.

"But where am I to go?"

ALLARD gave Mildred the name of a lodge on a Connecticut lake, with instructions how to reach it. He added that she was to use another name while there, so that she could be reached only by persons who were supposed to know that she was at the lodge.

Such precautions, instead of dismaying Mildred, served to intrigue her. She felt sure that the person contacted by Kent Allard must be an investigator of high repute. Confidence gripped her, as she walked with Allard to the door.

"Do not worry about followers," remarked Allard, in parting. "Your trail will be protected."

From his window, Kent Allard watched Mildred leave the hotel. The girl's white attire, with its trimming of brown, made her quite conspicuous as she entered the canary-yellow roadster. The car, too, was easy to observe, as it rolled away through traffic. Those points, as affairs stood, were in Mildred's favor.

A soft laugh came from the lips of Kent Allard. Again, the sibilant tone was the mirth of The Shadow. This time, it carried a note of satisfaction. With Mildred Wilbin safe, available if needed for future information, The Shadow was ready to take up a trail of crime. For he was the investigator whose advice Kent Allard had seemingly sought by telephone.

There were times, however, when chance could mar even The Shadow's plans. In the case of Mildred Wilbin, The Shadow had laughed too soon!

CHAPTER III. SERVERS OF THE SKULL

WHEN Mildred Wilbin drove away from Allard's hotel, a taxi took up her trail. It was the same cab that had parked across the street and it was driven by one of The Shadow's agents, summoned by that telephone call.

After a dozen blocks, Mildred turned into a side street and made a stop at a jewelry store, where she had left her watch to be repaired. The cab was waiting there when she came out; behind it was a coupe, driven by another of The Shadow's agents.

The coupe took over the trail. Mildred was being watched by Harry Vincent, most capable of The Shadow's aids. With his coupe, it was Harry's task to convoy the girl beyond the limits of Manhattan.

Mildred made another stop, at a drug-store. From his coupe, Harry watched the doorway and satisfied himself that no one had trailed the girl. In fact, at that moment, Mildred Wilbin was entirely safe, forgotten even by the hidden criminal who had plotted against her uncle. There was no way for Harry Vincent to guess the part that chance was about to play.

Making a purchase, Mildred opened her handbag and drew out a change purse. Among the coins, she saw a folded slip of paper and opened it. She recognized the slip as a shopping list that she had used a few days before. About to tear the paper, she saw a notation on the back.

It was a telephone number, Hyacinth 4-9328, and it was written in a meticulous hand that Mildred identified as Fortner's. She remembered instantly that she had found the slip of paper on the telephone table in the hallway of her uncle's home, but not until this moment had she noted the writing on the under side.

Prompted by an immediate impulse, Mildred entered a phone booth in the drugstore. For a moment, she thought of calling Allard first; but she had forgotten the number of his hotel. Dropping a nickel in the pay box, she dialed the Hyacinth number.

A voice answered promptly; a voice that said "Hello!" in a great hurry. Mildred repeated the greeting; the voice evidently expected a woman's call. Across the wire, Mildred heard a smooth-voiced statement:

"John Lenville will be next. All is arranged; but be ready, in case you are needed."

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There was something insidious in that smooth tone, that made Mildred's thoughts flash to her uncle's fate. Her fears of crime were not idle; nor was crime ended. She stood at the telephone, too stunned to speak. The voice was repeating the name of John Lenville. Finding her own voice, Mildred asked coolly:

"And after Lenville – will there be others?"

The question was not immediately answered. Mildred found time to scrawl the name of John Lenville on the envelope on which she had written the address of the Connecticut lodge. Then came the voice across the wire, speaking a single word:

"Silver –"

The word meant nothing to Mildred. She supposed that her question had been misunderstood. Calmly as before, she asked if there would be others after Lenville. This time, after a moment of hesitation, the voice replied:

"Yes," it said, briskly. "There will be another. Dr. George Slead!"

THERE was a click of a receiver. Hanging up, Mildred hurriedly consulted a telephone directory. She couldn't find the name of John Lenville, but she discovered a listing for Dr. George Slead. His address was in the Eighties, the very direction in which Mildred intended to drive.

Going out to her car, Mildred drove north. Remembering her interview with Kent Allard, she decided that before she called him, it would be best to gather all the information available. That could best be acquired by calling upon Dr. Slead, a man who, like the unknown John Lenville, was living under some threat.

Reaching Slead's address, Mildred found it to be a pretentious brownstone house that had been converted into a store and apartments. Leaving her car, she ascended the high steps; in the lobby, she found a bell button that bore the name of Dr. George Slead, with the listing 2B. She rang the bell; there was a prompt buzz from the automatic door. Mildred entered.

At the top of the stairs, a door had opened; in the waning afternoon light, Mildred saw a uniformed nurse, who greeted her with a slight bow. She inquired Mildred's name; receiving it, the nurse ushered the visitor into a tiny waiting room, then asked:

"Does Dr. Slead expect you?"

"No," replied Mildred. "But it is very important that I see him."

"Very well, Miss Wilbin. I shall inform him that you are here."

Mildred began wondering what to say to Dr. Slead, when she met him. Wrapped in thought, she scarcely noticed that the little waiting room was very stuffy. She was roused suddenly by the opening of an inner door. Against the light from an office, she saw a bearded man standing on the threshold.

"Dr. Slead?" Mildred was rising as she spoke. "I've come to see you because –"

The room was whirling suddenly. Mildred would have fallen, except for Slead's quickness in catching her arm. He helped her into the office, calling excitedly for Miss Royce. The nurse arrived to find Mildred sagged in a chair, laughing hysterically.

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"This patient is very ill, Miss Royce," announced Sled, reprovingly. "She must be kept quiet. Put her to bed at once!"

Mildred tried to protest, but her voice only choked. The nurse helped her to her feet; instantly, Mildred felt a return of dizziness. She let Miss Royce help her along a hallway, into a white-walled room furnished with a hospital bed and a few chairs. From a chair beside the bed, Mildred watched the nurse close the door, then bring a nightgown from a closet. Placing the garment on the bed, the nurse methodically turned down the covers.

"I'm all right," began Mildred. "Really –"

She gasped, hysterically. She realized that she wasn't all right. Then the nurse was beside her, helping her remove her clothes.

The soft nightie felt very comfortable when it slid over Mildred's shoulders. The bed was comfortable, too. Mildred gave a sigh; nestling her cheek against the deep pillow, she watched Miss Royce gather scattered clothes from the floor and pile the discarded garments neatly on the chair.

"You must rest," advised the nurse, soothingly. "Close your eyes. The dizziness will pass."

MILDRED closed her eyes. Comfortable moments passed until she heard a sharp sound, like the closing of a door; next, a subdued, persistent hiss. Coming upright in bed, Mildred was puzzled by the sight of daylight through clear panes above a frosted window. Her fingers plucking the nightgown, she wondered why she was wearing it instead of her own clothes.

It struck her that she should be in her car driving to Connecticut, instead of in this room. Springing from the bed, she hurried to the window.

Through the clear panes above the frosted ones, Mildred looked out on the front street and saw her yellow roadster parked there. She must get to it.

Going to the room door, Mildred found that the knob would not turn. She pounded for a few moments, then decided that she could save time by getting dressed, while she waited for the nurse. Mildred was slipping the nightgown from her shoulders, when she turned toward the chair beside the bed. A surge of complete hopelessness rendered her immobile.

Her clothes were gone from the chair. Miss Royce had taken them. Mildred's face went pale with despair; a chill seemed to sweep her, as she understood how capably her plight had been planned.

She had walked into a trap the moment that she entered that outer office. Her hysteria had come from laughing gas, piped into the waiting room. She could have been overpowered then and there; but these crooks, Dr. Sled and the nurse, Miss Royce, would have had a more difficult charge on their hands. They hadn't wanted a chance visitor unconscious in the waiting room, where someone else might arrive.

Instead, they had let Mildred add to her own dilemma. She had become a patient, and had willingly let Miss Royce put her to bed. As she now stood, Mildred hadn't a single possession by which she could identify herself, for her handbag, with all its contents, had gone with her clothes.

Out of a blur of thoughts, Mildred caught the reason why she had thought of laughing gas. The hissing sound, still persistent in this room, had given her the explanation. More gas; but this dose was not of the same variety. Before Mildred could start a frantic dash toward the window, a blackness swept over her.

SILVER SKULL

With a sudden sigh, the girl sank softly to the floor.

In the hallway outside, the bearded man who called himself Dr. George Sled was watching a dial attached to the wall. The indicator had reached the required point; with a smile that parted his beard, Sled turned off the gas.

Going back into his office, Sled picked up Mildred's handbag from the desk. He was interested in the large amount of money that it contained; also in the automobile keys and the licenses that went with them. But he widened his overlarge grin when he found the slip of paper that stated Mildred's destination and the name she was to use in Connecticut.

Sled rapped on a door, gave the quick admonition: "Hurry, Thelma!"

The door opened. Out stepped the Royce woman, attired as a nurse no longer. From tan-trimmed shoes to brown-ribboned white hat, her clothes were those that had belonged to Mildred Wilbin.

"How do you like me, doc?" asked Thelma, her voice no longer modulated. "Do I look as classy as the Wilbin dame did, when she walked in here? I ought to, because everything she was wearing fits me perfect!"

"You're about her build," agreed Sled. "Only, your hair is darker. Tilt that hat a bit."

Thelma obliged. She walked across the room, in excellent imitation of Mildred's style. Sled beckoned her to the desk.

"More luck," he said. "The Wilbin dame pulled a boner, calling Silver Skull; and another, coming here. This medico racket proved better than I figured it would. But this is the real break. Do you know what the dame has up her sleeve?"

"Nothing!" snorted Thelma. "Nighties don't have sleeves!"

"I mean what she did have up her sleeve. She was going to slide out of sight. This is where she was going." Sled pointed to the address on the slip. "So that's where you start; but shake the trail before you get there."

Thelma Royce nodded her understanding.

"That's settled," said Sled. "So let's hurry and stow the girl away, so she can be shipped out with the equipment."

ENTERING the little bedroom, Sled stripped the blankets from the bed and spread them on the floor. Thelma helped him wrap Mildred's nightgowned form in the blankets. The girl looked like a mummified figure, when they placed her in a longish padded box that Sled had kept here in case a human shipment should be required.

Hurrying downstairs, Thelma strolled out into the gathering dusk. From across the street, Harry Vincent recognized the brown-and-white clothing that she wore and mistook her for Mildred.

Thelma drove away in the roadster. Harry followed. As the ride progressed, he had less and less cause to suspect that an impostor was in the car ahead. He had clocked Mildred's stay in the brownstone house, but the interval had been too slight to provide a clue to the misadventure that she had met.

Reaching a main highway in Connecticut, Thelma Royce glanced into the roadster's mirror, to notice a coupe that dropped her trail. Thelma's laugh was harsh. It told that servers of Silver Skull found their chief delight in adding new victims, like Mildred Wilbin, to those already in the power of an insidious master!

CHAPTER IV. WORD TO THE SHADOW

THE same darkness that marked Thelma's final departure in the attire of Mildred Wilbin, was a useful cover for The Shadow. No longer in his hotel suite, he was garbed in a cloak of black, shrouded by night itself. He was a strange visitor to a place where callers had been coming all day – the Long Island home of Herbert Wilbin.

The callers had been the missing man's attorneys. Like The Shadow, they had been surprised at the terms of Wilbin's will. So they had come to the mansion, bringing assistants with them, to make a thorough search of the premises, hoping to find a later will.

When the black-cloaked figure of The Shadow glided up beside a hedge that flanked the house portico, the lawyers' hunt was almost over. Scarcely a rustle marked The Shadow's course; he paused just beyond the fringe of light that showed beneath the portico.

A final car was waiting out front, a chauffeur at the wheel. Two men stepped from the house; one a lawyer, the other a servant. They were waiting for a third man – obviously, another servant – who was locking up the house.

The lawyer, a man with a troubled face, began to ask some quiet questions.

Darkness encroached from the gloom of the hedge, as though a tree had leaned to stretch its shadow into the sphere of light. That shadow was a living one – The Shadow! He was catching a conversation that he did not want to miss.

All tallied with certain facts that Mildred Wilbin had mentioned, plus later details that The Shadow had hoped to learn.

Herbert Wilbin had intended to make a long trip, hence had decided to close the house. That was why Mildred, like the servants, had departed, leaving only Fortner, the secretary. A trusted man, Fortner, in the servant's estimate.

One fact that the servant mentioned did not seem odd to the lawyer. It concerned Fortner. The secretary, ending his term of employment with Wilbin, had received a sizable bonus and was going on a long vacation. Just where, the servant did not know, but he recalled that Fortner had talked about taking a cruise, or going somewhere away from all work.

To The Shadow, the news signified that Fortner had found very good reasons to disappear completely.

The light above the portico was suddenly extinguished. The last servant came from the house and in the darkness locked the big front door. The final words that The Shadow heard the lawyer say were indication that there would be no further search.

All of Wilbin's papers had been found in order inside a locked safe; with them, a duplicate copy of a glowing recommendation that he had written for Fortner, to assure the secretary of another job. It didn't seem possible that Herbert Wilbin could have lost or mislaid a new will; not with so competent a man as Fortner in his employ.

SILVER SKULL

The case, as Mildred had suspected, rested squarely upon Fortner; and the very steps that the secretary had used to establish himself, were opposite evidence to The Shadow. Particularly, that duplicate recommendation. Perhaps it was actually an original that Fortner had typed with the word "copy," then left in the safe, where it could be found.

But Fortner, no matter how clever he might be, could rate no higher than a tool in schemes of supercrime. He could not have had a hand in arranging the plane crashes that had disposed of Carter Gurry and Roy Breck. The thrust against Herbert Wilbin was but the third episode in a chain of heinous deeds.

ENTERING the locked house was a simple matter to The Shadow. Using a rough stone corner that offered toe holds, he ascended to a second-story roof and soon worked open a window. His flashlight blinked a path that took him downstairs, ending in Wilbin's study.

There, lighting the desk lamp, The Shadow began a survey of some records that he had brought with him.

All pertained to men who answered Fortner's description; not the sort much wanted as crooks, but those who had traveled the border lines of crime. They were comparatively few, for Mildred's description of Fortner had included a most valuable point: namely, that the man, though comparatively young, had gray hair.

Extinguishing the light, The Shadow began a probe with his tiny flash. He needed enveloping darkness, because he was raising the shades to begin an examination of the windows. As yet, he had not pictured those windows as a place of needed entry, for there was no evidence of any trouble at Wilbin's home.

The Shadow's conjecture was that Fortner might have recently opened and closed one of those windows, merely for ventilation. If so, the pane might show the clue that The Shadow wanted.

It wasn't long before The Shadow's flashlight was glued to the bottom of the window sash, where his free hand was brushing a black powder upon a telltale spot. A fingerprint grew into sight; a low laugh toned from The Shadow's lips. Stepping to the desk, he ran the flashlight along a row of papers that looked like leaves from a rogue's gallery.

Finding the sheet he wanted, he took it to the window and made a close comparison. The print tallied; The Shadow had identified Fortner. Drawing the shade, he returned to the desk and studied the record.

Fortner's real name was James F. Eylan; the middle initial probably represented his alias, although none was listed as habitual with him. He had been the secretary of a fake oil company operating from Texas but had covered himself well enough to be whitewashed by the law.

At that time, as recently, Fortner had merely been a tool. His face, pictured on the sheet, indicated his caliber. Smugness was written all over the features of the youngish gray-haired crook.

Finding Fortner would have to be a future step, even though the trail might begin from here. There was a point, though, that The Shadow emphasized, by writing it in blue ink on the margin of the record:

"Gray hair."

A soft laugh quivered through the room; as it faded, so did the ink that composed The Shadow's written thought. That gray hair was a link – an outlandish link, perhaps between Fortner and his employer, Herbert Wilbin.

SILVER SKULL

If it meant what The Shadow knew that it could mean, strange adventures lay ahead with persons to be sought other than Fortner, or the master crook who had employed the fellow. The Shadow could picture huge crime with a double purpose; the sort that seemed impossible to fail.

But, should it fail, The Shadow would reap a mighty reward; not only in disposing of crooks, but through reclaiming the lives of innocent victims.

The thought offered other moves. The Shadow's black-gloved hand picked up the telephone, for a call from here would not be amiss, since persons had just left the house. He dialed a number; a quiet voice answered:

"Burbank speaking."

"Report!" ordered The Shadow, in low-toned whisper.

Burbank, the man who contacted all The Shadow's agents for him, was methodical. He reported that the missing plane had just been found, wrecked in the Rockies. All on board had died; their bodies were unrecognizable. Herbert Wilbin, therefore, was officially dead, for he had been checked as a passenger on the ship.

That early discovery of the lost plane would be a blow to Norwood Parridge, for The Shadow knew that the millionaire aviator had hoped to uphold Federated Airways by finding the ship himself. Parridge, however, had left New York only a few hours ago and could not possibly have aided in the search.

Burbank was beginning another report; one that suddenly snapped The Shadow's reverie.

"Report from Vincent," stated the contact man. "Mildred Wilbin did not go directly to Connecticut. She stopped at this address –"

The Shadow was writing down the address as Burbank gave it. He knew, despite the evenness of Burbank's voice, that the statement was preliminary to bad news. The words came.

"I have called Connecticut," announced Burbank. "Mildred Wilbin is not at the lodge, either under her own name or the one she was to use."

"Report received!"

WITH that announcement, The Shadow became a being of speed as well as stealth. He shaded the speed regulations as he whirled toward Manhattan, for every second could be precious.

From Harry's reported position when the agent had dropped the roadster's trail, Mildred should have reached the lodge a half hour ago. Whatever her purpose in stopping in the Eighties; whether or not she had actually left there, as Harry positively believed, the house could hold some answer to her subsequent disappearance.

The brownstone building was dark when The Shadow arrived there. A gliding shape as evanescent as a blackish smoke, he reached the top of the steps and blinked his flashlight on the name plates in the darkened vestibule.

One listing was vacant. It went with the suit that had the number "2B."

With deft jiggles of the loose-hinged front door, The Shadow released the automatic latch. Upstairs, he found the door of 2B unlocked. His probing flashlight showed the arrangement of the rooms to be very much like a

doctor's offices, except that all furniture was gone.

Lack of dust was proof that the moving had been very recent. Entering the tiny bedroom, The Shadow closed the door behind him and made a flashlight survey that brought an unusual discovery. There was a light switch, so attached to the wall that it had an open space behind it. The wall was made of thin partition board.

Removing the switch, The Shadow found a two-inch hole, evidently designed to receive a pipe.

Reaching for the doorknob, The Shadow found it would not turn. He was locked in the little room by an automatic door lock, as Mildred had been. The Shadow was anxious to return to the hallway without the long waste of time needed with this tricky sort of lock. He wanted a trail, too, that would lead him to Mildred's abductors.

Suddenly, a solution was promised to both problems. A muffled click came from the hallway; with it, The Shadow saw a dim light through the two-inch hole. Someone was coming along the hall unguardedly.

The footsteps halted at the door. Waiting with a drawn automatic, The Shadow was ready for it to open.

Then the footsteps shifted farther – toward the hole that had once contained a gas pipe. The person had decided not to enter the little room. That change of intent could have ended opportunity for anyone but The Shadow. He, however, turned it promptly to a new advantage.

With a quick whip of his gun, The Shadow prodded the muzzle through the wall hole just in time to jab the ribs of the shuffler who was starting past. That jab of steel told the man outside that he had encountered a gun mouth. The Shadow's fierce command, coming sibilant through the improvised loophole, accomplished the rest.

"Stretch!" ordered The Shadow. "Not for the ceiling, but for the door! Open it! You have three seconds –"

One of those seconds produced a gulp from the hapless man outside; the next, a hurried fumble for the doorknob. With the third second came the awaited click that brought the door inward.

Through a tiny loophole in a solid wall, The Shadow had gotten the prisoner he wanted, with a strategy so sudden that the man had obeyed every term of capture.

And from that capture, The Shadow was to gain a trail straight to the crooks who served the master whose title, as yet, The Shadow had never heard: Silver Skull!

CHAPTER V. DEATH RIDES ANEW

IN a stone-walled, windowless room, the man called Dr. Slead was wiping lather from his cheeks as he stared into a mirror propped on a large box. Slead paused to grin at a face that he hadn't seen in a long while – his own.

His part as a false medico ended, Slead had divested himself of the beard that went with it. The move was a useful one, for his appearance had become so different that none of his recent acquaintances would have recognized him.

The beard had given Slead's face a fullness that it lacked in its present state. His cheeks were actually hollow; their color, too, was conspicuous. Slead's complexion was almost olive. Most noticeable of all, however, was his chin. It, alone, was sufficient reason for the beard that he had worn.

SILVER SKULL

Zigzagging from the right of his lips down to the left of his neck, was a faint scar that showed a thin white line every time Slead tilted his head into the light that glowed from above the mirror.

Too old to prevent the growing of a beard, the scar was also faint enough to be hidden by a simple process of make-up. But Slead, at present, had no equipment for facial improvement except his razor and the soap and brush that went with it. He rubbed the scar with a fingertip, shrugged, and decided to let it remain that way awhile.

A buzzer sounded from beside the wall. Slead listened, heard a repetition of the sound. He pressed a button; there was the noise of an opening door above. High-heeled shoes clicked from a passage outside. Slead opened the door of the room to admit Thelma Royce.

The dark-haired woman was still wearing Mildred's clothes – a fact which brought a frown from Slead.

"Why don't you change that outfit?" he demanded. "Somebody may spot you and link up what's happened!"

Thelma delivered a smile with her over-rouged lips.

"I saw this same ensemble in a Fifth Avenue window," she told Slead. "The Wilbin dame didn't have any copyright on the idea. What's the matter, doc – got the jitters? I didn't have, driving out to Connecticut."

"What did you do with the car?"

"I left it at the right place, when I doubled back to town. I told them it was hot; they said they knew how to freeze it."

Slead was rubbing his chin; his face looked worried. Thelma opened Mildred's bag, took out a powder compact and tossed it to him.

"Dab that scar," she said, "and you'll lose it. I know what's the matter with you. It makes you feel funny, not having your whiskers."

Slead shook his head.

"It's those truckers," he growled. "They were supposed to bring all of the stuff here in one trip, but they took two. Even then, they sent a guy back to make sure they didn't forget anything. I don't like it!"

"They didn't get wise to anything, did they?"

Slead shook his head negatively. Thelma, meanwhile, was glancing about the room; she smiled when she noted that a certain box was absent.

"Anyway, you've shipped baby doll," chortled Thelma. "What did you do – label the box 'Handle With Care' and let the mob take it away?"

Slead nodded.

"Where they took it," he declared, "nobody will find it. I didn't tell them what was in it, though. Headquarters will know, when it gets there."

"And all this junk of yours?"

SILVER SKULL

"It can stay here. We're ducking for a new hide-out. Things are going to pop fast. John Lenville is already on his way."

Thelma whistled incredulously.

"You mean," she asked, "that tonight's plane is going to do a dive, so soon after the other one?"

Sleed nodded. It was his turn to show confidence. The designs of Silver Skull seemed to satisfy him. Soothed by his recollections of his insidious chief, Sleed turned to the mirror and began to dab his chin with Mildred's powder puff.

"Better go get the car," he told Thelma. "Have it out back. I'll join you in about ten minutes."

AS the door closed behind Thelma, Sleed smoothed his chin. The scar still showed; angrily, he plastered it with another blot of powder. He was muttering his annoyance because Mildred's clear complexion did not require the dark make-up that was needed for his olive skin, when something, reflected in the mirror, caused his eyes to give a squint.

It was gloomy by the door, as Sleed saw in the glass; but he had gotten a peculiar illusion of melting darkness. No waver of the light could have caused it. Actually, it seemed that some human figure had shifted from Sleed's range of vision.

Sleed spun about, his hand going to his hip. He was greeted with a whispered laugh, weird, chilling, cold as the sight of the gun muzzle leveled straight in his direction. He saw the shape in black; this time, there was no illusion.

The figure was cloaked. Burning eyes gleamed from beneath the brim of a slouch hat, steady as the .45 that was gripped by the gloved hand below. Sleed's own hands came up, as his lips gasped a name in one long breath:

"The Shadow!"

Slowly; The Shadow moved toward the terrified crook. The silence that followed the whispered taunt chilled Sleed as effectively as the laugh. He knew that The Shadow had recognized him by the scar, which, though hidden, proclaimed its presence by the unspread dabs of powder.

Known as Jigsaw Randley, George Sleed had dabbled in many rackets along with his fake medical game. Murder had been a part of them, and The Shadow knew it. Sleed, in his turn, knew the punishment that The Shadow could mete to killers.

His terror was greater than that of the innocent truck driver who had released The Shadow back at the brownstone house. That fellow had babbled all he knew, told where he had taken the doctor's packing cases, thinking that he had met a ghost. But Sleed, a crook by profession, would have faced a hundred ghosts rather than meet The Shadow.

Sleed tried to plead, but couldn't find the words. Momentarily emboldened, he tried to change his cringe into a sideward sneak among the boxes. The Shadow let him get halfway to the door, then stopped him with a menacing laugh.

Turning, with his own back toward a closet door, The Shadow nipped Sleed's shift with such sudden aim that the crook dropped to his knees, raising his hands to hide sight of the gun muzzle.

SILVER SKULL

"I'll talk!" gulped Sled. "We took the dame, but she's not hurt! She's safe enough... like –"

His voice ending, Sled made a violent fling to one side. Before The Shadow's hand could swing, his cloaked form was jarred by a swinging object that carried him half across a packing box. The thing that had thwacked him was the closet door, flung open with a lusty heave.

Pouncing across the threshold of the closet was Thelma Royce, aiming a glittering revolver. The top of the closet had an opening in the shape of a trapdoor. Returning because Sled had not joined her, Thelma had stopped to listen on the floor above.

She had opened the trap and let herself through, with a skillful silence that had deceived even The Shadow. In her swing of the door, she had again shown nerve. As a marksman, she began to demonstrate that she was the equal of any crook in the service of Silver Skull.

ONLY The Shadow's amazing side twist saved him from the bullets that peppered the packing box, coming in a hot stream from Thelma's gun. His jerky writhe carried him over the box and beyond it, down among other boxes.

Thelma shifted to get a new aim before The Shadow could change position. By her quickness, she retained the odds – or would have, if it hadn't been for Sled. He thought that Thelma had clipped The Shadow. Bounding forward, swinging a drawn gun, Sled hoped to supply the finishing touches.

His charge carried him across Thelma's path. His guess was bad as to The Shadow's location. Halting suddenly, Sled found himself directly between a rising shape in black and his only ally, Thelma.

A gun was swinging straight toward Sled. Shifting, The Shadow intended to shoot him from the path, then settle scores with Thelma. Sled flung himself across an oblong box standing on one end, to take a futile gun swing at The Shadow's fading form. The box went over with a crash.

In the split-seconds while Sled was falling with the box, The Shadow changed his tactics. He dropped to pick an opening that would offer shots at Thelma, intending to handle Sled later. The choice was a smart one, but it didn't allow for the contents of the box that Sled had overturned.

The box cracked open; a big gas tank struck the floor. The cap of the cylinder bashed loose; with a furious hiss, a deluge of the vapor swept over The Shadow. Sled, rolling in the opposite direction; Thelma, diving across from the closet door – both escaped before the gas reached them.

They were at the front door, aiming toward The Shadow, who had somehow come to his feet amid a yellowish cloud. They could hear his laugh, strangely maddened. They saw him aim his gun and fire. The shots were wide, as the black figure wavered. Sled shoved Thelma through the door and slammed it.

Gas trickled beneath the barrier; they could smell it when they reached the stair top. It seemed to carry echoes of The Shadow's insane laugh, that faded while they listened. Sled drew Thelma out through the front door of the storehouse and locked it with a key.

"We'll double around to the back," he told Thelma. "We can lock the rear door when we get there."

"But what about The Shadow?" Thelma demanded. "We can't give him a chance to stay alive."

"He hasn't a chance!" chuckled Sled. "I shut the door, didn't I? That settles him. There's twice enough gas in that tank to saturate the room. Which means there's twice enough to kill anybody, even The Shadow!"

The scene in the lighted room below the ground would have added weight to Slead's argument. There, flat on the floor, his laugh ended, The Shadow lay among billows of the yellow gas still pouring from the broken tank.

Crime still ruled. Death was to ride the air again. Tonight, and in the future – so it seemed – Silver Skull would fear no interference from a being once known as The Shadow!

CHAPTER VI. CRIME'S NEW TRAIL

DAWN was streaking Manhattan's skyline, bringing an end to a night that had been disastrous for The Shadow's cause. Day's approach promised nothing but ill news; for with darkness gone and no word from The Shadow, it was a certainty that the cloaked fighter must have come to grief.

Such was the firm opinion of a man who sat stolidly in front of a switchboard, his back toward the dim light that illuminated a small room. Burbank, The Shadow's untiring contact man, was still on duty, patiently awaiting a call from his chief.

Burbank's figure galvanized suddenly at sight of a light that was now twinkling from the switchboard. His hand inserted a plug into the switchboard; his voice announced automatically:

"Burbank speaking."

The tone across the wire would have been incoherent to any listener other than Burbank. Yet Burbank recognized it as The Shadow's, and from the blurry statements gained facts that he repeated.

"John Lenville" – Burbank spoke the name methodically – "in danger... Passenger... aboard a westbound transport plane... Warning needed –"

The voice of The Shadow kept repeating the warning message.

"Your own number," said Burbank, breaking in. "Needed for return call. Your number... Return call. Your number –"

That drill of words ended The Shadow's repetition. A pause, then a voice, keyed to a last effort, coughed the number that Burbank wanted.

The call was ended, and from the forced tone that issued from The Shadow's throat, Burbank could only conjecture that his chief had subsided into senselessness.

As quickly as he could, Burbank contacted Newark Airport, calmly announced that danger threatened a westbound plane that had left Newark the evening before. The news electrified those who heard it, for Burbank's tone was too businesslike to meet with argument.

The Shadow's message had gone through. Excited voices were promising to warn the planes by radio. Then, as Burbank opened a directory that listed New York phones by their numbers, he contacted Harry Vincent.

Checking from the telephone number, Burbank gave Harry the address from which The Shadow had called. He stated that other agents would cover Harry's search for The Shadow. The moment that Harry's receiver clicked, Burbank began to call other numbers.

SILVER SKULL

DESPITE the dawn, the streets were still gloomy when Harry Vincent reached his destination, twenty minutes later. He saw an old squatly building once used for offices, but which had evidently been turned into a very poor warehouse.

There couldn't be much of value in the place, for the locked doors looked unprotected by any alarm system. Harry, aided by other Shadow agents who were gathering, broke in the rear alley door.

They waited to make sure that the sound had not been heard, and while they tarried, they scented the nauseating odor of a sickly gas. Then, with nostrils muffled in handkerchiefs, the rescue squad invaded the premises that Slead and Thelma had abandoned.

In a tiny office on the ground floor, they found The Shadow. He was motionless, but his breathing was steady. While the others carried the cloaked victim out to the cab, Harry made a rapid investigation.

He found that The Shadow had crawled up from a cellar room, where the gas was stronger than anywhere else. It was there that he had been overcome; and Harry wondered, at first, how The Shadow could possibly have recuperated while in that cellar chamber.

Then Harry saw the closet door, wide open, with the gaping hole above it. In his hurry, Slead had forgotten about that outlet. Through it, much of the gas had gone to the floor above, and dissipated. The Shadow's recovery had followed.

He had made that trip to the floor above much sooner than any ordinary person could have managed it; which accounted for his collapse, after he had called Burbank. Harry was sure, however, that The Shadow would rapidly get over his relapse.

SEVERAL hours later, Harry's belief was realized. The Shadow awoke to find himself in a little hospital room, which he promptly recognized, because he had been there before.

Unlike the premises maintained by the faker, Slead, this was part of a bona fide physician's office. It belonged to Dr. Rupert Sayre, a personal friend of The Shadow.

Sayre knew The Shadow as Lamont Cranston, a wealthy New York clubman and world traveler, for The Shadow usually donned the Cranston make-up whenever he ventured forth in black. Resting in bed, with eyes half closed, The Shadow heard the door open softly. He looked up to see Sayre.

Noting that his patient had recovered, Sayre solemnly produced a newspaper, with the comment:

"This may interest you, Cranston."

The headlines told another harrowing story. Again, a westbound transport plane had crashed in the Western mountains, this time under circumstances that were more tragic than ever.

A mysterious warning had been received regarding that very plane. Who had sent it, and why, no one knew. The airports had radioed the plane to turn back, but it had already reached the fatal zone. Radio replies had suddenly ended; nothing more had been heard from the doomed ship.

Searchers expected to locate the wreckage within the next few hours, for they had reports of the plane's last location. Among those already in the vicinity was Norwood Parridge, who had started West the previous afternoon. Mention of Parridge interested The Shadow; but there was another name that seemed more important at the moment.

SILVER SKULL

That was the name of John Lenville. Listed as a passenger on the crashed plane, Lenville was reputed to be the wealthiest of all the victims. He was not a New Yorker; he came from Chicago, but he had been in Manhattan the day before.

Lenville, it seemed, was a man of many enterprises, who often visited New York on business. His best friend in town was a man named Louis Harreck, who had seen him just before plane time, yesterday evening.

As Cranston, The Shadow could definitely place Harreck. Like Cranston, the chap was a member of the exclusive Cobalt Club.

Doctor Sayre saw Cranston roll shakily from bed, heard him call for his clothes. Though he tried to recommend more rest, Sayre knew it was no use. Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow, was one patient who decreed his own orders.

Within the next hour, Lamont Cranston strolled into the elaborate foyer of the Cobalt Club, with only a slight pallor visible upon his masklike face. It was the luncheon hour; as he expected, he found Louis Harreck in the grillroom. Harreck looked very gloomy.

Then he was hearing words of calm-toned sympathy. To his surprise, Harreck learned that Cranston had also known Lenville. He didn't realize that all the details that Cranston supplied came from the newspaper report.

"Poor Lenville," groaned Harreck, for the tenth time. "If he had only missed that plane, as he nearly did!"

Cranston's eyes showed an interest that produced further details.

"Lenville was stopping at the Hotel Gladmere," explained Harreck. "Just why, I don't know, for he had never stayed there before. I suppose he liked to try new places. Anyway, I knew he was in town, and I'd called two dozen hotels to find him.

"They said he was leaving when I finally tried the Gladmere, so I hurried over there. The clerk told me he was in the lobby, but I didn't see him, until the clerk said he'd just spotted him going out the door.

"I headed after him, but Lenville was in his cab pulling away, before I could overtake him. His back was turned, so he didn't have a chance to see me. and I suppose he didn't hear me call. The doorman said he was in a hurry to reach the airport, but I found that out too late to follow."

WITHOUT knowing it, Harreck was revealing a remarkable fact. It was possible that the man he had run after was not John Lenville at all. That hadn't occurred to Harreck; but it did to Cranston.

It fitted with a theory that The Shadow had already considered; and this case might strengthen that very theory to a high degree.

"Have you been to the Gladmere today?" asked Cranston, quietly. "Possibly Lenville left some belongings there, or maybe some messages."

The suggestion appealed to Harreck. He decided to visit the hotel, and invited Cranston to come along.

Everyone proved most obliging at the Gladmere. The manager produced everything that pertained to Lenville, including the card on which the Chicago man had registered. That card particularly interested The Shadow.

SILVER SKULL

It resembled other cards that lay on the manager's desk, bearing the imprint of the Hotel Gladmere. But when The Shadow casually handled the card, he noted a slight thickness that differed from the others.

Harreck identified the signature as that of John Lenville; and Cranston offered no dispute. The signature could be Lenville's, but it was possible that he had been induced to put it on that card in some place other than the Hotel Gladmere.

It would have been easy, also, for someone to have posed as Lenville, by simply sliding that card on the hotel desk already signed. Subtly, The Shadow used Cranston's casual methods to sound out the clerk who had last seen Lenville

His description tallied with Harreck's, but only roughly. He remembered Lenville as tall, rather nervous of manner, and very choppy in everything he said. A man whose face was rather roundish, but conspicuous chiefly because of the heavy gold-rimmed spectacles that he wore.

By the time they went up to Lenville's room, The Shadow was more than ever convinced that the guest had not been John Lenville. In these crimes, crooks had a clever way of taking persons out of circulation and letting others carry a false trail – as in the case of Mildred Wilbin and Thelma Royce.

The evidence in Lenville's room convinced Harreck that his friend had been there. On a table were some folded memo sheets, printed with the name of one of Lenville's companies. In the wastebasket were two envelopes addressed to Lenville, which had been torn open.

When the group left the hotel room those objects, again consigned to the wastebasket, were in Cranston's pocket. Also the memo sheets. Oddly, he was the only person who had handled them, and he was wearing gloves. It was after he had left Harreck that The Shadow made use of those finds.

Riding by cab, Lamont Cranston reached a rather dingy neighborhood, where he disappeared in broad daylight. He reappeared in a black-walled room, where only a single light glowed blue upon a corner table. The room was The Shadow's sanctum, somewhere in the heart of New York City and known only to himself. He kept his complete file of records here.

From the envelopes and memo sheets, The Shadow obtained an excellent collection of fingerprints, which appeared to belong to one man. From their general classifications, The Shadow reduced the search to a few hundred file cards, that he placed in a sorting machine.

Automatically, cards were rejected, until only one dropped into a special compartment. That card bore the name and photograph of a crook named Nick Delt, who bore a fair resemblance to John Lenville.

Delt wore no glasses in the photo. By appearing with conspicuous spectacles in a hotel where Lenville had never previously been, the crook had passed as the Chicago man; but only by dodging Lenville's friend Harreck. The missing John Lenville, supposedly a victim in a plane crash, had not gone to the Hotel Gladmere at all.

Like Wilbin's secretary Fortner, Nick Delt had performed a fade-out. His part as a tool was ended. What The Shadow wanted to know was where Lenville had actually disappeared to, before Delt had taken his place. Somewhere in New York Lenville must have met a false friend, just as Mildred Wilbin had encountered the alleged Doctor Sleed.

The clock on the sanctum table showed three p.m. A soft laugh issued from The Shadow's lips. There was still time in which he, as Cranston, could solve the riddle of Lenville's disappearance, by visits to offices

where the Chicago man had been. The bluish light clicked off. Complete stillness came with the ensuing darkness. The Shadow had left that gloom, to begin a hunt by daylight.

CHAPTER VII. WORD TO THE SKULL

DURING the next few hours, The Shadow was covering a route that had taken John Lenville an entire day. During that course, he met bankers, brokers, business men, who were pleased to meet a friend of Lenville's. There wasn't a doubt that the real John Lenville had met these men, a day ago.

By dusk, it seemed that The Shadow's trail was due to be a barren one. He stopped at an insurance office, which everyone believed was the last place that Lenville had gone. There, talking with the man who had interviewed Lenville, The Shadow struck a fortunate clue.

"Lenville was going somewhere else," recalled the insurance men. "Come to think of it, I remember where. Did you ever hear of a promoter named Alfred Zurman?"

There was a negative headshake from Lamont Cranston.

"Neither did I," said the insurance man, "but Lenville asked me about him. He said that the fellow had some stock that might prove valuable. Let's look up the name Alfred Zurman."

The name was listed in the telephone book, with the address an old office building far from the beaten track. Riding to that objective, The Shadow felt no doubt that Alfred Zurman could supply facts concerning Lenville. Zurman's place of business had an obscurity similar to the offices of the pretended Dr. Slead.

Zurman's office was on the third floor, with a light showing through the transom, and it opened into a courtyard. With Cranston's usual calm, The Shadow entered, to find a man rising startled from behind an old desk.

Sallow, sharp of feature, Alfred Zurman looked like a criminal and a very worried one. He wasn't happy to receive a visitor, and began to mutter something about "closing up the office." The Shadow, meanwhile, placidly placed a briefcase on a chair and sat down on the other side of the desk.

Introducing himself as Lamont Cranston, The Shadow brought up the name of John Lenville. Apparently not noticing the twitch that came to Zurman's face, he told the man that he was interested in acquiring any stocks that Lenville had wanted to buy.

"I never met Lenville," objected Zurman, sourly, "so I don't know what stuff he wanted. Come around tomorrow, Mr. Cranston, and maybe we can do business."

To Zurman's relief, his visitor bowed agreeably and went from the office. Listening at the door, Zurman heard footsteps descend the stairway. Finally, he latched the door and started pacing back and forth, eyeing the telephone all the while.

When, at the end of ten minutes, the telephone bell began to ring, it brought a grateful gasp from Zurman's lips as he answered it.

There wasn't any need for Zurman to identify himself; his hoarse voice told who he was. In fact, Zurman was so frantic that he actually began to chide his master, Silver Skull.

SILVER SKULL

"You should have called me earlier," he said. "I've got the jitters, waiting here!... No, nothing bad has happened... No, nobody has been asking after Lenville. Except –"

Zurman's voice broke suddenly. During his hoarse conversation, he hadn't noticed that the door had opened. A skillful hand had settled the latch silently, almost while Zurman had watched. The personage who had entered had advanced to the desk entirely without Zurman's knowledge. But he was manifesting his arrival at this moment, in a fashion that brought a chill to Zurman.

The round muzzle of an automatic was freezing the back of Zurman's neck, while a tone, low–whispered in the fellow's ear, added further emphasis.

A full–fledged crook, Zurman knew the intruder's identity, but he didn't voice it. The whisper was warning him against that deed, and it was in the tone of The Shadow!

ZURMAN might have been a ventriloquist's figure, the way his mouth began to open and shut. When he finally spoke, his words were the ones The Shadow ordered – words that reached Zurman's ear in a sibilant whisper, and seemed to pop from his mouth but in Zurman's own voice.

"Nobody has been asking after Lenville," repeated Zurman. "I was just trying to say that it worries me, staying here, with nothing to do –"

The receiver was leaving Zurman's hand, plucked away by The Shadow. Zurman caught the words that came from it, but The Shadow heard nothing but the slam of the receiver.

Whatever the voice had said, Zurman would know. The Shadow's gun left the crook's neck, to bob suddenly between his eyes. Zurman knew what The Shadow wanted and gulped the information.

"He said I could lam," declared the crook. "That's all he said. Then he must have hung up."

The Shadow did not inquire who had spoken. That could be wangled from Zurman later; for the present, it was sound policy to let the crook think that The Shadow knew all about his master. Reaching his free hand to the desk lamp, The Shadow extinguished it. The room was dark, save for a dull glow from the courtyard.

In that dimness, The Shadow became an invisible shape; but Zurman's face, pale despite its normal sallowness, showed white and terrified. In a sense, The Shadow had increased the criminal's disadvantage; and the effect on Zurman was visible.

"I didn't snatch Lenville," the fellow protested. "It was the others – the ones who came here!"

"State at whose order!"

Totally unwitting, Zurman would have spoken the name that The Shadow wanted, except for a most startling interruption.

So suddenly that it left Zurman breathless, a blinding light glared from across the courtyard, flooding all but the most remote corners of the little office!

Instantaneous though the occurrence was, it failed in its immediate purpose. Before any eye could have benefited by that probing light, The Shadow swept Zurman to a corner and dropped beside him, away from the glow.

SILVER SKULL

To all appearances, the office was empty. There wasn't a living target in sight for any gunners to mow down.

ZURMAN'S quivery voice was grateful. He was suddenly accepting The Shadow was his protector. He thought that Silver Skull had double-crossed him; for Zurman hadn't known that his chief had a headquarters in this very building, that it was from there that the telephone call had come.

Unfortunately, Zurman didn't say the name of his master; nor did The Shadow question him further. Zurman was so cowed that The Shadow could forget him while other business needed attention.

That light, for instance.

Close to the floor, The Shadow reached the window. Below the level of the sill, he poked his automatic straight for the glowing spot of light. Unseen, The Shadow was prepared to shatter the brilliant floodlight – not only as a challenge to its owner, but to produce an added effect upon Zurman.

Before The Shadow could press the gun trigger, the light flickered. It was a small light, not much larger than a motion-picture projection, and the thing that had caused it to flicker was a slide.

His attention centered upon gaining a perfect aim, The Shadow still gazed across the courtyard. It was Zurman who took a look toward the inner wall of the office. There, pictured upon the whitish surface, the crook saw the gigantic outline of a silver skull!

To Zurman, that was a promise from his former master: a pledge that Silver Skull would still stand by him. It was a call for Zurman to rally, with future reward his claim if he did. Granting Silver Skull an insight that could match The Shadow's, Zurman believed that the master crook knew all.

Perhaps Silver Skull did. At least, his stratagem brought results. Cowed no longer, Zurman leaped from his corner, flung himself toward The Shadow. The crook was yanking a revolver as he came. His wild, defiant cry was a shriek that penetrated to the office beyond the courtyard.

The slide dropped from the light. Again, the spotting glare ruled. It showed Zurman driving toward the window, his revolver pointing downward.

The Shadow, warned by Zurman's cry, to protect himself jabbed a shot that clipped Zurman.

Faltering sideward, the crook collapsed half across the window sill, as The Shadow twisted away.

Even in that move, The Shadow showed keen calculation. The corner that he took was toward the door. He was aiming when the door crashed inward bringing two marksmen into sight. The Shadow met them with gun blasts that jolted one, then the other, out into the hallway.

There were shouts, as other crooks hauled away their overbold comrades. With a stairway near, they were stumbling toward safety when The Shadow arrived. The Shadow ignored them, to seek a corridor to that other office across the courtyard.

There was none. The Shadow encountered an intervening wall. From a window, he saw that the light was gone. His superfoe, whoever he was, had finished the thrust and made a hurried departure. The only possible clue that might remain still rested with Zurman.

Returning to the office, The Shadow saw the criminal make a dying gesture. Zurman had dropped his gun, but he was pulling his fist from his pocket as if trying to draw a weapon. Before The Shadow could reach

him, Zurman sagged. His fingers loosened, as his hand stretched across the window sill.

He was dead. The Shadow departed by the stairway route that gunman had used, to find it totally deserted.

Back in the office, the body of Alfred Zurman lay with downward-tilted face. The crook's sightless eyes were bulging toward the courtyard. There beneath a grating, where it would be unnoticed amid accumulated rubbish, lay an object that The Shadow had failed to see when it fell from Zurman's hand.

That object was a tiny silver skull, a token that Zurman had carried to identify himself as the server of an insidious master, whose title, Silver Skull, was still unknown to The Shadow!

CHAPTER VIII. THE DELAYED CLUE

BY the next afternoon, The Shadow had good cause to regret the too-early death of Alfred Zurman. The facts that the cornered criminal could have supplied were becoming more important than ever, in The Shadow's search for some unknown crime chief.

Every lead of The Shadow's had reached a dead end.

To begin with, there were such men as Wilbin, Lenville, and the other victims who had gone before them. The law had given them up as dead; and their past affairs were practically a blank.

Crooks like Fortner and Delt had vanished as completely as the victims – a fact that helped The Shadow's theory, that some of the supposed dead men might still be alive. But the theory did nothing to create a trail.

There were other tools, lesser ones; but only Zurman had come into the limelight, and he was gone. As for "Dr." Slead and his slim-figured companion, Thelma Royce, though The Shadow knew that they had captured Mildred Wilbin, he had not learned how she had been lured into the predicament that had resulted in Thelma's acquisition of Mildred's clothes and car.

According to Slead's interrupted testimony, Mildred was alive and unharmed; but how long she would remain so, was another question; which meant that a trail was imperative, even though it might prove costly to The Shadow.

Late in the afternoon, The Shadow, as Cranston made a stop at the Cobalt Club, intending to look up Harreck, on the flimsy chance that the fellow might recall some odd clue regarding Lenville. Harreck wasn't at the club, but another man was there, waiting especially to see Lamont Cranston.

The visitor was Norwood Parridge, returned from the West. The fact that he was here to see Cranston was in itself unusual, for the two had seldom met. It was only as Kent Allard that The Shadow had met Parridge frequently, and there was no way where the man could have linked the two personalities.

Hence, The Shadow treated Parridge almost as a stranger, scarcely recognizing the wealthy aviator until a club attendant pointed him out. Once they were together, Parridge saw no identifying resemblance between the calm, masklike features of Cranston and the thinner, longer face of Allard.

Parridge talked as one wealthy man to another, treating aviation from the commercial standpoint. He stated that he had hardly reached the West to investigate one plane crash, when he had learned of another. The news had brought him back to New York immediately, to confer with the directors of Federated Airways.

SILVER SKULL

"Last night," explained Parridge, seriously, "I ran into a most unusual coincidence. I learned that one of the victims in the latest crash had intended to invest heavily in Federated Airways. I refer to John Lenville. Did you ever meet the man, Mr. Cranston?"

Remembering his chat with Harreck, The Shadow nodded; then stated quietly that he and Lenville had been acquainted.

"Did he ever speak to you about investments?" persisted Parridge. "Would you have known that he intended to buy half a million dollars' worth of shares in Federated Airways?"

There was a shake of Cranston's head. Parridge looked disappointed, but his eyes had a hopeful gleam, despite his haggard expression.

"We called Chicago," declared Parridge, "and talked half the night. We learned that Lenville had actually spoken of a half million that he intended to invest in Federated Airways, but his associates cannot find a trace of his funds.

"Federated needs money badly. We'll have to fight down the stigma of those horrible tragedies, or go bankrupt. Like the other big stockholders, I'm already in up to the neck. On top of it, one of our own unfortunate crashes produces this mystery of a missing half million dollars."

THOUGH Cranston's features remained immobile, the brain behind them was rapidly at work. Here, at last, was reason why crooks had dealt with John Lenville. Unlike the cases of former victims – Gurry, Breck and Wilbin – there had been no question regarding Lenville's will. His estate, it seemed, had been in thorough order.

The catch lay in Lenville's finances. Why should some master crook connive to get cash after Lenville was dead, when it could be acquired before? It seemed obvious to The Shadow that Lenville must have somehow been parted from five hundred thousand dollars before he was abducted.

As with all the dealings of Silver Skull, the matter seemed outlandish. Even Parridge had not picked up such a theory, while with the directors of Federated Airways. They were distracted, those men, but not crazed enough to propose the seemingly preposterous.

Parridge, in fact, had a much different and very plausible theory, which he advanced in a tone of confidence.

"We know that Lenville wanted to invest," he asserted, "but for some reason, he had postponed meeting us. We attributed it to the air crashes; but that could not have been the reason, for Lenville, himself, booked passage on one of our ships.

"We can only assume that Lenville did not have the money that he claimed. He may have found it good policy to let his associates think that he kept a special fund of half a million dollars. But most of Lenville's wealth was all on paper.

"This morning, when I stopped at my office, I found a letter that had evidently been delayed, or delivered there while the place was closed. It was from Lenville, written before he left Chicago. It mentions you, Mr. Cranston, and it seems to fit with my opinions."

Parridge produced both the letter and its envelope. The Shadow saw that the postmark was several days old, The letter itself was quite formal, addressed to Norwood Parridge as a director of Federated Airways.

SILVER SKULL

It stated that Lenville was interested in the purchase of Federated securities, but that he would first have to conclude another business deal with Lamont Cranston, a wealthy New Yorker. That failing, he might have to make a trip to the Pacific Coast; but in any event, he would see Parridge within a week.

The situation was curious. Here was a letter from Lenville, claiming the very sort of acquaintance with Cranston that The Shadow, as Cranston, had pretended with Lenville. The letter was signed with Lenville's scrawly signature, and there was no doubt about its authenticity.

There was a chance, however, that Lenville had not written it a few days ago, as the date proclaimed. Remembering the registration card at the Hotel Gladmere, The Shadow could picture Lenville signing this typewritten letter under threat, just as he might have been forced to sign that card.

The letter could be a cover-up, to encourage the theory that Lenville was seeking funds. His half million dollars could logically be regarded as a myth, on doctored evidence such as this. The one brightening fact was that Lenville, though being used, was probably still alive, as The Shadow had hoped.

Parridge didn't seem puzzled that Lenville had mentioned Cranston in the letter, in view of their supposed acquaintance. The Shadow, however, was looking for the reason, knowing that it must have been the idea of a hidden crook, not of Lenville.

The answer was plain. Through Harreck and others, it had become rumored that Lenville and Cranston were friends. Because of Cranston's reputed wealth, his name was the sort that would seem plausible when mentioned in connection with the turnover of a mere half million dollars.

From across the table, Parridge was tapping a paragraph in the letter, while he commented:

"This is the one part that puzzles me. The address where Lenville said he could be reached while in New York. That isn't the address of the Hotel Gladmere."

Parridge was right. It wasn't the Gladmere address. It was a number on a side street, in a forgotten area of Manhattan. It reminded The Shadow very much of the hide-outs used by such crooks as Slead and Zurman.

Perhaps the game was to bring Parridge there, but The Shadow could see that the haggard, darkish man had no intention of visiting the place; for the simple reason that Parridge agreed with the supposition that Lenville was dead. Therefore, he would logically regard the trip as useless.

It might not prove useless to The Shadow. He was more than eager to find a trap like the one that had discommoded Mildred Wilbin. In the indifferent manner of Cranston, he returned the letter to Parridge, with the comment that he would notify him if anything turned up concerning Lenville.

LEAVING the club, The Shadow calculated that he had half an hour before dark settled. Time enough to make crooks think that their snare had bait. Though they might be trying to lure Parridge, because he might know too much about Lenville, they wouldn't be totally disappointed if they saw Cranston as the nibbling fish.

All that The Shadow intended to do was nibble. He was carrying no guns at present, and he simply took the first cab that came along. Stopping at the corner nearest to the address in Lenville's letter, The Shadow strolled along the block until he came to the house in question.

He ascended the house steps and entered an open vestibule, very much like the one at Slead's. Though the place seemed deserted, there was a button at the side of the vestibule. Whether it connected with some

apartment or with a caretaker's room, did not matter. The Shadow intended to tingle the bell, wait a few moments and stroll away in the dusk, allowing himself to be noticed as a visitor.

But when The Shadow pressed the single button, the result was quite unexpected. He received perhaps the most jolting surprise of his singular career. That contact changed the innocent-looking vestibule into a quick-acting trap.

The floor slithered inward beneath a locked door, sweeping right out from under The Shadow's feet. Almost from midair, The Shadow performed an amazing dive toward the outer steps; but that desperate recovery was blocked by a heavy door that slashed across the opening.

Outwardly, the barrier looked like a house door, but its inner surface was of steel that The Shadow's hands could not clutch. An instant later, he was spinning down into the basement below, and only a series of quick acrobatic twists saved him from serious injury.

Though jarred when he landed, The Shadow was half to his feet when he heard the trap slide in place above his head. The dull clang told him that the floor of the vestibule was metal-sheeted on the under side. Once shut, it inclosed The Shadow in a pit of absolute darkness.

No laugh came from The Shadow's lips as a dull glow suddenly appeared, rising painfully from dimness to illuminate the scene about him. Whatever this plight, he intended to retain his pose of Cranston for the present.

His face was calm, his manner a trifle dazed. But despite their listless look, The Shadow's eyes were keenly interested in the increase of the light. For as that glow rose to a ghoulish, greenish gleam, the trap became an inhuman scene.

The Shadow was facing one of the strangest sights that his eyes had ever seen!

CHAPTER IX. THE SKULL SPEAKS

THE room itself was bare-walled, unfurnished; scarcely ominous, except for the fact that the walls were stone, and windowless. True, the place was sealed, and its grimy interior had taken on a deadly green from the indirect illumination high in the corners. But The Shadow had been in worse spots than this.

What made the room insidious was the fact that it was occupied – not by a human master but by a thing which, though seemingly alive, should have been dead!

Set in a niche at the far wall of the room was a life-size living skull which glared at The Shadow, even with its eyeless sockets. A skull that gritted its teeth to emphasize its unchanging grin.

Green light shimmered from the death's-head, giving it an olive tone that looked like withered flesh. The thing could do more than glare. It spoke, with words that grated from its tight-closed teeth.

"You are welcome here, Shadow!" rasped the skull. "Welcome, even though you have come earlier than I hoped!"

Another listener would have felt full horror at hearing the skull speak. Not so The Shadow. Those words, despite their sepulchral note, merely dispelled the illusion that first had seized him.

SILVER SKULL

No lipless mouth could have supplied the perfect pronunciation that the skull had used. With all its lifelike appearance, the head was no more than a mechanical contrivance wired for sound.

The distant speaker who was using it had no way of seeing what The Shadow did, nor could he hear what the prisoner said. The Shadow demonstrated that to his satisfaction, by strolling close to the skull and addressing it in the cool tone of Cranston.

The thing merely spoke again, as if by prearrangement. Its manipulator, in his ignorance, displayed a false contempt for The Shadow's courage.

"You cringe, Shadow!" jeered the skull. "You wonder how I know your identity; how I learned that you call yourself Lamont Cranston. When you have ceased to tremble, I shall tell you!"

By the time that last sentence came, The Shadow, far from cringing or trembling, was standing close beside the skull, examining its construction. The object glittered when viewed at close range. It was made of silver, and only at a distance did the green light's reflection make it look alive.

"I am Silver Skull!" The tone was boastful. "I am the one that you have sought and failed to find, until I chose. You are but the last of my many victims. Others have lived, but you shall die!"

From those bragging words, The Shadow divined that the master crook had proclaimed the actual title by which he was known to his followers: Silver Skull. Moreover, a quick link with a fact that The Shadow already knew, was proof of who the master killer was.

In an instant, the whole game was swept into sight. It fitted with everything that The Shadow had surmised; and this revelation added all the needed details. But with it came the stark realization that Silver Skull would not have so disclosed his game, unless positive that The Shadow could never escape this trap.

Therefore, escape was doubly imperative.

Through it, The Shadow could not only preserve his own life; he could hunt down Silver Skull. Once away from here, The Shadow could produce that master crook at almost any moment that he chose!

SILVER SKULL was gritting the details that he had promised; how he had learned that Cranston had sought facts concerning Lenville, and had therefore been the man who visited Zurman the night before. That, according to Silver Skull, had proven Lamont Cranston to be The Shadow.

"One thing alone remains," concluded the metallic voice, while The Shadow was rapidly tapping walls to see if any one offered an outlet. "That is the manner of your death. Your doom is already on its way. Listen!"

The Shadow listened. From vague spots high on the walls, came the rapid hiss of gas. Those pipes were too many to reach and plug. Within a very few minutes, this room would be completely filled with the asphyxiating vapor.

"Do not console yourself," came the harsh voice of Silver Skull, "with the thought that you may escape, as you did once before. This room is tightly sealed, and will remain so until the time comes to dispose of your corpse! That will be done automatically."

As proof of that future event, there were sharp crackles from live wires at intervals along the ceiling. The Shadow knew exactly what they signified. Once the room filled with gas, the sparks would ignite it. The Shadow would be blasted into nothingness, along with the masonry of this subterranean snare!

SILVER SKULL

"You have entered by the only way," reminded Silver Skull. "That entrance is closed. You will go out by the only possible exit. A route that will take you from this world!"

The Shadow's fists tightened suddenly. His eyes burned from the fixed features of Cranston as vividly as the sparks that crackled from above.

Why had Silver Skull so carefully emphasized those points?

Because, besides those ways that he had mentioned, there was another; one that would serve both as entrance and exit. A way that Silver Skull had wanted The Shadow to overlook.

Followers of Silver Skull had planted this trap. Their work must have depended upon easy access to the place. Staring at the skull, The Shadow noticed the niche beyond it. It looked like an archway, but it had been camouflaged. It had been originally a doorway, leading to the back of the cellar.

The base of the niche was masonry, but the back of the recess might be wood. Stretching above the metal skull, The Shadow began to pound the plaster. It was woodwork, yes; but stout, and heavily bolted from the other side. Too strong to be demolished with bare hands.

Gunless, The Shadow had no way to blast that barred half door. Nor did he have a single tool that would be useful in the work. He had found the way to escape, but through his own folly in coming unequipped, he was still trapped.

Dropping back from the alcove, The Shadow could smell the strong odor of the gas. He wavered, as he inhaled it. Soon, what strength he had would fail. All the while, those taunts from Silver Skull were maddening him.

Quickly, The Shadow ripped off his coat and tie.

Of a sudden, The Shadow clamped his hands upon the shelf that bore that skull of metal; the projected mask, as it were, of the person who called himself Silver Skull. Gritted teeth were still issuing that laugh Silver Skull had railed too long.

By forcing his taunts upon The Shadow, the master crook had suddenly awakened his visitor to a solution of the present problem!

CLAMPING both hands to the metal skull, The Shadow ripped it from the shelf. The wires that were used for the remote control, were broken by the yank. Short-circuited, they added sparks to those that crackled from the ceiling. But the mechanical skull no longer transmitted laughter.

It had become nothing but a chunk of metal, and a very heavy one, for its size. A battering ram in miniature, that skull; the very type of tool that The Shadow required. With both hands, The Shadow bashed the skull against the back of the alcove. Woodwork crackled under the stroke.

More blows followed. Powerful ones, that splintered the stout half door. Unmindful of the increasing gas, The Shadow had literally pounded a path to freedom. Hurling the skull to the floor, he doubled himself into the alcove and drove his full weight against the weakened wood.

The barrier split, sending The Shadow headlong into the rear cellar. Rolling over, he came to hands and knees and raised himself, to begin a sprint through the darkness that lay ahead.

The gas, however, was issuing from its many pipes much more rapidly than The Shadow supposed. He had not gone more than a dozen feet before the vapor ignited. There was a terrific tremor through the whole house, as the gas chamber burst with one huge explosive puff.

A sheet of green flame roared through the space that had been The Shadow's outlet, overtook the fugitive as he was sprawled by the blast. For an instant, The Shadow seemed lost in that licking streak; then the flame was gone.

Blinded by the sweep of flame, The Shadow could not see the route ahead. Deafened by the blast, he could not hear the crashing masonry about him. Half paralyzed by the long hurtle that he had taken, he was unable to raise his hands and ward off chunks of stone or falling beams that came in steady rain.

He seemed to be staggering into endless space, black space, soundless space, where things struck against him with jolts that he could not feel. For moments, he seemed to stumble upward; then he took a short downward lurch that flattened him. After that, it was a crawl along the level.

His eyes saw glimmers of light, his ears caught a jargon of sounds. Objects weren't hitting him any longer; but it might be that he simply didn't notice them. For The Shadow's strength was slipping, along with oozes of dampness that he did not recognize as blood.

Gradually, all effort failed him. His crawl ended as his limbs stretched forward to flatten, helpless. His recuperating senses left him. Nearer to death than life, The Shadow could no longer seek to escape the toils of Silver Skull.

CHAPTER X. CROOKS FROM THE PAST

THE neighborhood about the old blasted house was filled with stirring clangor. First-comers converged upon the street in front of the ruined house. Fire sirens were wailing, bells clanging, above the crackle of flames that weaved from the broken brick walls.

In the rear street, their faces reddened by the glare, two persons were seated in an old two-door sedan. Their expressions had a demoniac touch, for they were pleased by the event that they had witnessed. Those watchers were George Slead and Thelma Royce.

"Come on, doc." Thelma's voice now showed anxiety. "Let's scam! There's no percentage in sticking around. We know the guy must've got the works."

Slead shook his head. He was straining from the window, trying to make out something on the ground just beyond the range of the ruddy glow. Suddenly, his heavy lips emitted a harsh exclamation:

"Look there!"

Thelma looked. Slead was pointing to an alleyway that led to this rear street. A flicker from the burning house showed a human shape, prone and limp, upon the paving. Slead was out of the car an instant later, hauling Thelma with him.

Together, they rolled a man's form into the car, and while Thelma was still pulling the door shut, Slead started to wheel away.

In the course of fifteen minutes, Slead parked in a space behind an antiquated apartment house. He and Thelma carried their inert prisoner up an inside fire tower and laid him on a couch in a poorly furnished

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living room.

"It's Cranston, all right," declared Slead, after poking through the scorched pockets of the unconscious victim. "The guy that Silver Skull was out to get. I guess I told you why, didn't I?"

"Yeah," returned Thelma. "Because he's supposed to be The Shadow!"

Her tone was somewhat dubious. Slead noticed it and raised an objection.

"He's The Shadow, all right," declared the fake physician. "Only The Shadow could have gotten out of that warehouse cellar where we left him, and only The Shadow could have squeezed from the tighter jam he was in tonight."

"All right," agreed Thelma. "So what? The guy's croaked, and that's the end of The Shadow. All we've got to do is sink the body somewhere; then you can carry on the phony trail, like Silver Skull told you."

Slead shook his head. He was eyeing very steadily the prone shape of Cranston.

"He isn't croaked," he decided. "He's pretty bad off from loss of blood, but he's not dead yet – and won't be!"

In professional style, Slead brought a physician's kit from a corner. Thelma guffawed, when she saw him open the bag and take out instruments and bandages.

"What do you think you are?" she queried. "A doctor?"

"Why not?" returned Slead, coolly. "I had an office once, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but no patients ever came there!"

"The Wilbin girl did. She took me for a doctor and accepted my advice."

"Sure! But you had to turn her over to me. I get the credit for prying her out of those fancy duds that we needed in our racket."

Slead scarcely heard what Thelma said. He was busy probing The Shadow's wounds, stanching the flow of blood in expert style. He was humming to himself when he began to apply bandages, in a fashion so rapid that Thelma gaped.

"Say!" Thelma's voice showed admiration. "You are a medico, after all!"

"I was one," returned Slead, "until reasons came along that made me quit the profession, just when I'd gotten into it. By the way, Thelma, where is that nurse's outfit of yours?"

"I put it away. You told me to wear a dark outfit tonight."

"I've changed my mind. Get into that nurse's dress, while I call up Silver Skull."

WHILE Thelma was making the change, she could hear Slead on the telephone. He was giving Silver Skull a firsthand account of the explosion. Slead made the description impressive.

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"If the guy wasn't blown into chunks," Sled told Silver Skull, "he's nothing but a mash, anyway. Because the roofs, walls, everything, was falling down into that cellar. There's not a chance that he's still alive!"

The Shadow was stirring very feebly as Sled hung up. Thelma stepped into sight, giving a final pat to her nurse's costume. Sled gave an approving nod as he noticed her trim, spotless appearance.

"I've figured it out, doc," said Thelma. "You're a smart guy, and I'm sticking with you! You've got a right to look out for yourself. What Silver Skull won't know, won't hurt him."

Sled raised his eyebrows, interested. Thelma proceeded with her statement.

"Silver Skull told you to head for the West coast," she said, "pretending that you're Lamont Cranston. When you get there, you'll pick up ten grand that's waiting for you; then you lose the trail. Good enough.

"Only, Silver Skull don't always bump off these boobs that disappear. He keeps 'em alive, whenever he can use them in his business. So you're going to try that stunt yourself. Why not?"

"You've got The Shadow, haven't you? There's plenty of big-shots – counting Silver Skull – who would hate to see The Shadow get back into circulation. You've got a gold mine, doc –"

She stopped suddenly, staring at the pale face of Cranston. The Shadow's eyes were open; in them, Thelma saw a faint trace of the glitter that she had observed on another occasion. She felt an instinctive fear. Even in his present state, weakened and helpless, The Shadow was a factor to dread.

Sled saw the reason for Thelma's qualms; but he noted, also, that The Shadow still lacked strength to strike. Coolly, Sled brought a hypodermic syringe from his medical kit. While he was preparing it, he remarked:

"This will hold The Shadow for a while. It will keep him out of the picture a lot longer than you'll need, Thelma. Because you won't have to look out for him very long."

He punctured the flesh below The Shadow's shoulder, injected the contents of the hypodermic. The Shadow's eyes had already closed; he made no further effort.

"You've got a good bean, Thelma," approved Sled, "but you don't want to get too far ahead in your ideas. Shaking down a lot of big-shots could become a pretty tough proposition. My own idea is somewhat different."

He stood back, to study The Shadow carefully. He decided that the patient needed another coat, and Sled had one that would do. Thelma brought it from the closet; The Shadow was limp in their grasp, as they put the fresh coat on him.

Sled glanced at his watch. He had plenty of time before his plane started for the West. He picked up the telephone and called a taxi.

"I'll wait out front," he told Thelma, "with the doctor's kit. I'll bring the taxi driver up with me, and when he sees a swell-looking nurse like you, he'll figure I'm a real medico, sure enough."

"And he can help us lug The Shadow," nodded Thelma. Then, her eyes suddenly puzzled: "But where are we taking the guy?"

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Perhaps it was Slead's recollection of The Shadow's recent recuperation that caused the crook to become suddenly secretive. At any rate, Slead did not reply in his usual tone. Instead, he leaned close to Thelma's ear and whispered words that caused her to look puzzled, until he supplied an explanation.

As that came, Thelma's face showed sharpness. She was hearing Slead's tale of a double cross that left her breathless; and she listened, with a tightening smile, to the final details that concerned it.

When Slead had hurried downstairs to await the cab, Thelma took a look around the hide-out that they were about to leave, then gazed contemptuously at the doped form of The Shadow.

"You're smart, Shadow," sneered Thelma, "but not as smart as Silver Skull. Maybe Silver Skull can be outsmarted, too, but you won't be around when that happens!"

By which Thelma Royce implied that The Shadow, wherever he might be imprisoned, would find no future chance to deal with Silver Skull.

CHAPTER XI. DEATH IN THE AIR

A HUGE airliner was wending westward, away from the pursuing dawn. Below lay a sleeping world, but the myriad lights of cities had been left far behind. Ahead lay mountains, their summits dim against the starry sky.

The plane was the Traveler, speediest skysleeper in the service of Federated Airways, bound on a trip wherein flying conditions had proven ideal. With dawn about to break, the altimeter registering a height much greater than that of the loftiest mountains, this skyliner was showing that some of the Federated ships could fly without mishap.

This was the plane upon which Silver Skull had booked passage for Lamont Cranston, only to turn the ticket over to George Slead, that the crook might lose the trail.

At the front of the aisle that led between the rows of sleeper berths, a blond stewardess was glumly studying the many unmade beds. Until a month ago, those berths had always been filled with passengers. Then business had dropped off in proportion to the number of accidents that had befallen Federated Airways.

Thought of those accidents was very bitter to Geraldine Murton, the stewardess. The newspapers had sobbed black ink over the deaths of passengers. She wondered what those same newspapers would have to say, if this trip ended in a crack-up, This was one voyage where passengers were distinctly in the minority.

In fact, there was only one passenger on board, as drawn curtains outside a single berth gave proof. It was something of a mystery to Geraldine why even one passenger would ride the Traveler. It was common knowledge that Federated simply ran the skyliner to keep up what little company prestige was left.

Forgetting the sleeping passenger – Lamont Cranston was the name he was booked under – Geraldine let her thoughts drift to the past. The smooth flight of the Traveler always made her ponder over a problem that was very close to home, particularly as her home was aboard a plane.

Why, with the flight officers that Federated ships carried; with two-way radio that gave them contact with the ground; with a course marked by hundreds of beacons, and a steady signaling radio beam – why could these ships meet with such frequent disaster, even when among the mountain-tops?

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The crack-up hoodoo didn't hound the planes of other lines. They had courses as difficult as Federated, and their ships were no better equipped. The tendency had been to blame the smashes on the pilots; but on that point, more than any other, Geraldine could offer sound dispute.

She knew these pilots, understood how confident they felt. Far from being nerve-shaken because of the recent crashes, they took the viewpoint that the jinx was ended. Tonight Geraldine, knowing the competency of the men at the controls, had felt safer on the Traveler than she could have on any other plane.

Faint dawn was streaking through a window near the rear of the plane. Passing the lone berth that had the drawn curtains, the stewardess reached the rearmost window and glanced downward. Below were peaks of mountains, gray in the darkness of the ground; black patches, that meant clusters of trees nestled in lower gullies.

Then, against a patch of black, Geraldine saw a streak of silver – a winged arrow, driving upward.

It was smaller than the airliner, and speedier. As it zoomed up beneath the tail of the larger ship, Geraldine recognized it as a pursuit plane. She saw a machine gun mounted above its cockpit, and wondered why an army aircraft should be navigating these mountains at dawn.

Then a tiny figure hooded with a silver helmet, was busy with the gun. In the confines of the airliner's air-conditioned cabin, Geraldine could not hear the sound that followed, but she saw the spurts of flame that issued from the machine gun.

As she recognized the horror of what was to come, Geraldine Murton had solved the riddle of past disasters.

That pursuit plane with its demonish silver-hooded pilot, intended to shoot down the giant Traveler. It was to be murder in midair, the thrust of a pirate plane against a defenseless skyliner!

Here was to be another tragedy; and from the closeness of the pirate plane, Geraldine realized that she had no more than a few seconds in which to hurry a warning to the pilots.

TURNING to dash along the passage, Geraldine saw a stir of the curtains at the one closed berth. Out from his nest swung the lone passenger, apparently just awake, although he was fully clad except for his coat. He stared at Geraldine as she shouted; she noted the blink of his eyes, the hollowness of his checks.

The stewardess didn't have to tell what she had seen. The passenger knew it. Like Geraldine, he could hear a crackle from the pilot's room ahead, see the chunks of metal popping from the passage near the connecting door. The machine-gun hail had already reached the skyliner.

The closeness of his own doom seemed to drive the lone passenger berserk. Flinging his arms wide, he threw himself in Geraldine's path. Though she knew that a warning could no longer aid the pilots, the stewardess was stubborn in her effort to reach the door ahead. In the struggle, the man started to push her toward the plane's stern.

Across the man's shoulders, Geraldine saw the door of the pilot room fling open. One of the flight officers rolled through, a bloody sight. Machine-gun bullets had finished him; and the other, at present handling the controls, was sinking from his seat.

No longer resisting the trapped passenger's drive, Geraldine flung her arm across her eyes.

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The skyliner had begun a nose dive toward a mountain ridge. Flame spurting from its sides, the big ship was beyond the sight of the killer plane that had crippled it. A mass of plunging metal, the Traveler sheared off the tops of trees that snapped like slender saplings. It struck into rock and soil with a force that broke wings from the fuselage, twisting the whole ship into a distorted ruin.

Flames enveloped the thing that was no longer recognizable as an airplane, except for its uptilted tail. The nose had taken the brunt; the wings, as they shattered, had protected the ship's long stern.

As the flames licked high, a tiny door cracked open. Out pitched the uniformed figure of the stewardess, to land on the ground beside the settling tail.

Then came the passenger, in a grotesque sprawl that carried him beyond the girl. Eyes opening, Geraldine could see the rising figure of the man against the sweep of flame. The thought struck her that he must have realized what was due, the moment that he had seen her excitement.

A killer, like the silver-helmeted murderer in the plane! Probably the man whose life the vengeful attacker had sought, in a duel between crooks.

In that frantic analysis of the lone passenger, Geraldine Murton had summed the very intentions that normally belonged to the crook who styled himself Dr. George Sleed. But in this emergency, the passenger from the plane did not act in the ratlike fashion that Geraldine expected.

Beneath the glare of the flames that were consuming the plane, he stared blankly at the half-stunned stewardess as though wondering who she was. In dazed fashion, he leaned forward, plucked her uniform and dragged her away. Once clear of the furnace-like heat, he hauled the helpless girl half to her feet and steered her toward the nearest cluster of trees.

The metal of the shattered skyliner was white-hot. The withering fuselage curled like a burning match. The tail from which the stewardess and her rescuer had escaped, was twisting downward into the half-melted mass. Soon, it was a coiled lump of ruined metal, that no observer would consider to have been a place of temporary refuge after the crash had come.

Flames faded; but daylight was plain in the sky. From a distance came an increasing hum; a tiny airplane appeared above the ridge. It was the pursuit plane that Geraldine had seen, come to make sure that none aboard the skyliner had survived. After circling twice, the ship departed.

Standing close to a tree, Geraldine's rescuer watched the plane head toward the irregular horizon. His expression was dull no longer. Instead, his eyes were keen; in their sharpness, they had observed the insignia painted on the side of the scouting pirate plane.

Those eyes had seen a black triangle centered with a most appropriate symbol a skull, painted in silver. A token that denoted the identity of the murderer who had added one more airliner to his toll: Silver Skull!

From his hiding spot upon the ground, the lone observer phrased a laugh so sinister that it faded as reluctantly as the dwindling darkness. With that laugh, he proclaimed a most singular fact.

This rescuer who had saved Geraldine despite her own opposing struggles, was not George Sleed, the crook who had been scheduled to make the trip in place of Lamont Cranston.

The passenger from the skyliner was The Shadow!

CHAPTER XII. THE SHADOW'S PLAN

UNTIL nightfall, The Shadow and the rescued stewardess trekked their way among the mountain slopes, seeking a route back to civilization. They stopped at times, to rest at shady spots where they found mountain pools; and with thirst quenched, they made light of hunger.

During that intermittent hike, Geraldine gained a more accurate impression of Lamont Cranston. At one of their resting places, she told him of an earlier opinion she had formed.

"I thought you were a crook," she said. "The way you looked at me last night, when you were placed on the plane! Your eyes had a horrible stare; your face was distorted!"

"This morning, when I encountered you, I saw traces of that same expression. Knowing that murder was in the air, I thought you were a party to it."

A slight smile came to Cranston's thin lips. This was the time to question Geraldine regarding certain matters.

"You say that I was placed aboard the plane," he remarked. "I suppose that the man who brought me there also looked rather a doubtful character."

"He did," recalled Geraldine. "He said he was a doctor, but I mightn't have believed him, except for the nurse he had with him. She appeared to be quite competent."

"He told you his name?"

"Yes – Dr. Slead. And the nurse was a Miss Royce. But I noticed something odd about Slead."

"I can tell you what it was. A diagonal scar that ran across his chin."

Geraldine nodded. She remarked that the scar had made her suspicious, because of Slead's efforts to keep his chin from view. Anyone might have a scar, but only a crook would seek to hide one.

It was then that The Shadow, with Cranston's inimitable calmness, explained how he had fallen into the hands of crooks. An adventuresome individual, so he said, he had delved too deeply into the affairs of a master criminal called Silver Skull.

Last night, he had been doped, which accounted for his condition when he was started on the trip. But his experience represented but a part of the whole story. It was simply an index to the cunning of Silver Skull.

"Certain men of wealth were supposed to die," explained The Shadow, "because, in every case except Lenville's, Silver Skull had seen to it that their money would go to persons for whom it was not intended.

"For that very reason, the victims – Gurry, Breck and Wilbin – did not die. The reason" – he was staring at Geraldine's astonished look – "is quite obvious. Silver Skull intends to bleed the heirs who received those fortunes.

"He can do it, quite easily, if he has not already done so. Very easily, because he can prove to them that the real owners of the fortunes are still alive. Remember, he is dealing with renegades, who are not much better than crooks themselves. They will play the game he wants, rather than lose their share."

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The dry chuckle with which Cranston ended that comment, gave Geraldine another thought. Cranston evidently foresaw that by the time Silver Skull had finished bleeding the weaklings, they would have none of their wrongly inherited wealth. Silver Skull, it seemed, was a master of the double cross.

The Shadow's next statement proved that point.

"To fake the deaths of victims," he resumed, "Silver Skull had them booked as passengers aboard Federated planes. Persons had to go in their places; and in arranging that, Silver Skull was more than ingenious.

"He sent his own crooks as substitutes; the very ones who had helped dupe the victims. For Wilbin, he sent the man's own secretary Fortner. In place of Lenville, he sent a crook named Delt, who had posed as Lenville for a day.

"They thought that their own trips would be safe; that they would lose the trail and receive a reward, when they reached the Pacific coast. Instead, they died while on their way there."

GERALDINE began to understand Cranston's own case. She listened with added interest, as he detailed it.

"My death was planned as a real one," he stated. "Sleed was to carry the trail. But Sleed was a better calculator than those who had gone before him. He guessed what had happened to others, like Fortner and Delt.

"When I fell into his hands, he saw his opportunity. He simply placed me aboard the plane, where I was supposed to be, and let Silver Skull do the rest. A very grim jest on Sleed's part; one that to all appearances was completed."

As they hiked farther through the mountains, Geraldine began to hear The Shadow's future plans. Since both Silver Skull and Sleed believed that Lamont Cranston was dead, it would be best for him to continue the illusion.

Sleed, of course, would be keeping out of sight, letting Silver Skull believe that it was he – not Cranston – who had been lost in the crack–up.

It would be necessary, too, for Geraldine to disappear. The world could think, along with Silver Skull, that no survivors had left the wrecked Traveler. That suggestion so appealed to Geraldine that it brought a firmness to her determined lips.

She would be able to do her part in hunting down the mysterious Silver Skull; in gaining vengeance for her friends – the pilots and others of the personnel – who had died in the series of disasters. She was willing to cooperate in any way that Cranston required.

With dusk at hand, it seemed that their campaign against Silver Skull would have to be delayed at least another day. But Cranston had hopes of an earlier beginning. He hadn't tramped these mountains without purpose.

Often, he told Geraldine, he had been lost in such mountains as the Himalayas, where habitations were far less frequent than in this section of the Rockies. All through the day, he had been gauging their course to gain outlooks over new valleys.

From the knoll where they stood at present, he picked out a feeble curl of smoke rising from among some trees. They promptly took that direction.

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It was dark when they stumbled upon a cabin in the forest. The door was open; they found smoking embers in the fireplace that occupied a wall of the single room. There were crackers and canned goods on the shelves; an oil lamp on the table.

While they were eating, Geraldine asked: "Where are the people who own the place?"

"Out searching for us," replied Cranston, promptly. "Or to put it more accurately, for our plane. There is a town near here" – he pointed to an outspread map that he had laid on the table; the map had been in a hip pocket – "and the chaps who live here must have been there some time today."

Thought of the town pleased Geraldine, until she realized that she and Cranston could not come into sight without revealing the very facts that they planned to keep secret. If radio reports had reached the near-by village and searchers were scouring the mountainsides, the future might prove very difficult.

She watched Cranston's finger move along the map, saw his eyes show a gleam. He looked at the pencil flashlight that Geraldine carried and gave a smile.

"Let's rearrange things here," he suggested, "so that there will be no traces of our visit. Then we'll start along. We haven't very far to go."

They used the flashlight to pick their way through the darkness, with Cranston guiding their direction by the north star. At the end of two hours that to Geraldine seemed almost aimless, they came to a steep slope so covered with chunks of stone that it might have been the remnants of an avalanche.

Cranston drew a satisfied breath. He helped Geraldine up the slope; but before they reached the top, he was telling her to stop and remain low.

From somewhere came a vague rumbling that faded, rose again, each time with greater fervor. The sound took on a gaspy tone; from an angle, half a mile away, a giant searchlight split the night. The roar became the thunder of a locomotive.

They were on the side of a railroad embankment that The Shadow had noted from the map. The train was a freight, a long one, pounding its way upgrade.

OUT of sight below the backside, The Shadow and Geraldine almost felt the big Mogul champ by, the glare from the open firebox lighting the roadbed. There was a maddening clatter of passing cars, that dwindled only when flats were rattling past.

A clattery finish signified the caboos when the self-made fugitives poked their heads over the embankment, they could see its tail-lights twinkling the rails.

The Shadow hurried Geraldine along the track in the direction taken by the freight. It seemed a fruitless chase, although the going was easy along the comparatively level roadbed. At the end of two miles, however, the reward came. They sighted the caboos standing beyond a curve.

The freight had taken to a siding, and would probably remain there quite a while, since there was no sound of an approaching train along the one-track line. The present task was to avoid any members of the train crew, and The Shadow managed that by picking a course above the track. That could be done, for at this spot the track ran through an open cut.

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He and his companion were above the level of the caboose roof when they passed it. A hundred feet ahead, they slid down beside the train and moved farther forward in its shelter. It was when they could hear the panting of the big ten-wheeler up ahead, that The Shadow used the flashlight in guarded fashion, until he found the door of an empty box car.

"This is better than the Himalayas," remarked Geraldine, as they rested in the box car's gloomy depths. "At least, we've found a way of getting somewhere without walking all the way."

"Exactly!" came Cranston's agreement. "As soon as the other train passes us, we'll start rattling for Denver. It will be difficult to talk then, so we'd better make our plans."

"Regarding Silver Skull?"

"Yes. It is obvious that he must have a base somewhere near the spot where he shot down the Traveler. Within a hundred and fifty miles, at most."

Geraldine agreed. She knew the Federated route. All the lost planes had come to grief within a range of a few hundred miles. Previously, however, no one had recognized the significance of that fact.

"Wherever the base is," continued Cranston, "a good airman could locate it without attracting too much notice, if he pretended that he was looking for the Traveler."

Again, Geraldine agreed. She was wondering, though, how the right pilot could be found, when Cranston asked:

"Did you ever hear of Kent Allard?"

"Have I?" laughed Geraldine. "Who hasn't! Do you know him, Mr. Cranston?"

"Quite well! I believe that when he hears from me, he will come to Denver immediately. You can join him when he arrives, and give him all the details that he needs."

Geraldine was surprised that Cranston did not expect to aid in the search for Silver Skull. Then came his reminder that Sled was still at large in New York; that, if heated, the fake doctor could probably disgorge much-needed facts. The hunt for Sled seemed a logical task for Cranston.

Those arrangements had all been made when a passenger train came clattering by on the main track. Its lighted windows had scarcely flashed from view, before there was a jolt along the freight train's length. There were chugs from the Mogul, rapid as the spins of its ten big wheels.

Then the freight was on its way, battering, swaying down the grade, clanking and clattering. But that tumult was music to the tired ears of Geraldine Murton. It meant the end of a long, hard trail, with a promise for the future.

The girl was asleep, her blond head resting comfortably on Cranston's shoulder, while his arm, encircling her snuggled body, protected her from the lurch and swing of the jolting car.

Then the lips of The Shadow phrased their strange, sinister laugh; a tone that was lost amid the roar and rumble of the onrushing train.

That laugh was another promise; the culmination of all that The Shadow had made.

Its mirth predicted ill for Silver Skull!

CHAPTER XIII. THE DESERT LAIR

FROM the tiny cabin of a trim biplane, Geraldine Murton was watching the landscape a mile below, viewing a scene that seemed as monotonous as the droning of the plane's motor.

This was the second day of the search for some trace of Silver Skull, and with that tedious hunt, Geraldine found her thoughts reverting constantly to past events.

She remembered her arrival at Denver; how she had disguised her uniform well enough to register at an obscure hotel. There, Lamont Cranston had left her; but he had handled everything in an amazing style.

How he had managed to keep his identity undisclosed, Geraldine couldn't guess; but she knew that, somehow, he had wired New York and had promptly received funds by telegraph. Clothes had been delivered at Geraldine's room, to replace the stewardess uniform that she wore. Money, too, had arrived there, to defray her expenses.

Then Kent Allard had called. The famous aviator had heard her story; together, they had mapped out their search. Here they were, together in this plane, engaged in that painstaking quest. Quite a contrast to that long hike and train ride with Cranston.

It was interesting to contrast the two, Allard and Cranston. Each man seemed the other's opposite. Looking at Allard as he handled the controls, Geraldine saw a firm thin-featured face, with gaunt lines that might have been hewn from solid stone. He seemed possessed with an energy which he was careful to reserve for tests that were to come later.

Contrarily, Cranston had shown no such indications. His manner had been a leisurely one, but behind that pose had lain tremendous endurance. His face, fuller than Allard's, had masked his expressions as capably as his manner had concealed his strength.

Of the two, Geraldine could not decide which she liked the better. She wished that she could see them together, and thereby make her choice. It never occurred to her that she was asking the impossible.

Of all the skillful tactics adopted by The Shadow, none was more subtle than his method of keeping his two personalities entirely distinct. No one could ever have mistaken Kent Allard for Lamont Cranston, or vice versa.

Geraldine heard Allard speak. His tone was steady, rather than calm; blunt, in contrast to Cranston's half-drawl. He was asking Geraldine to check the airport guide, to identify a town that he saw below.

The girl thumbed through the thick book, found the page that Allard wanted. While the plane was changing course, she glanced idly at other pages, noting the insignia of private aircraft that were interspersed through the information section.

She had noted various emblems on other private ships that they had seen searching for the lost Traveler. She remembered the symbol on this plane of Allard's a black hawk against a golden circle.

There were colored plates in the front of the book, that illustrated all such insignia. Geraldine was turning to those pages, when Allard reached over and politely took the book away from her.

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"Look below," he said, coolly, "and tell me what you see."

"It looks like desert," declared Geraldine. "Very rough, with no more chance for landing than in the mountains."

Allard nodded agreement.

"It's the last stretch," he declared. "We have flown everywhere else within the estimated range. Simple elimination tells us that the base must be somewhere near."

STARING below, Geraldine felt that Allard was mistaken. The light of the setting sun showed hopeless tracts of cactus-studded soil, where bare rocks poked above the alkali surface. They were miles from the last town, and the book didn't list another landing field anywhere in this vast area.

In fact, the ground was becoming worse as it billowed toward the chunky foothills. Rocks were everywhere, and one cluster in particular seemed a warning landmark, that to any aviator would symbolize the futility of bringing a plane to earth on this terrain.

A gleam had come to Allard's eyes. Geraldine noticed it because she was looking at him, wondering why he was heading straight for that mass of boulders, the last place where a search might logically prove worth while. Then, as they neared the spread of rocks, she saw his finger point.

Curiously, those boulders weren't banked as closely as Geraldine had thought. They seemed in tiers, because some were larger than the others, and between lay steps of level ground. Noting one space in particular, Geraldine gave an excited gasp.

The stretch formed a rough oval, its smoothed surface free of the cactus clusters that were so frequent elsewhere. This isolated spot, shunned by passing airmen, had all the makings of a landing field off in the lost reaches of the desert.

The very rocks that most aviators would pass by with a glance, were a perfect beacon for anyone who knew this secret airport. Moreover, those boulders could serve as ideal lookout spots for anyone scanning the sky in search of prying planes.

Cannily, Allard was skirting the hidden base, making his visit appear an accidental one. He didn't shy off suddenly, for that would have been a giveaway to observers. Instead, he merely took a natural swing in the direction of the distant mountains, as though they were his objective.

To all intents, he was a searcher for the missing Traveler, picking another hunting ground among the mountains. Not having flown across the space amid the rocks, he would not be credited with having noticed it.

During the next quarter hour, Allard kept constant watch upon the dials. Then, as dusk was closing about the biplane, he veered and took a direct course back toward the rock-bound air base.

Geraldine knew they couldn't land there openly, and she was totally at loss regarding any alternative. Allard, however, had a plan; as he undertook it, Geraldine was gripped by awe and admiration. A few miles short of the hidden airport, Allard was dipping for the desert soil!

There were rocks here, many of them; but there were spaces, too, if Allard could find them. Yet Geraldine almost preferred the rocks. She could foresee devastating results when the wheels hit the rough dust-strewn

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ground. Vaguely, she remembered that Allard had once landed safely in a jungle, and she could only hope that he would equal that miraculous feat.

The landing came. To Geraldine, it seemed a cross between a perfect three-point and a pancake, if such could be possible. The plane shivered as it plowed the heavy soil, mowing through sagebrush and cactus.

Then Allard was helping Geraldine to the ground, reflected silver against the darkening sky. The amazed breath that Geraldine took caused her to choke from the dust that she inhaled. Allard steered her from the murky cloud around the plane, and they began their march toward the rocks, a few miles away.

They were a stout pair: Allard, in his aviator's costume; Geraldine, her slacks tucked into high boots, helmet and goggles above her jacketed shoulders. Both were armed with automatics that Allard had brought along. The next hour offered them real opportunity, for the full moon had not yet risen in the desert sky.

Allard did not slow their pace until they reached the fringe of rocks. Then, with a low whisper for Geraldine to copy him, he used tactics that he must have learned in the Central American jungles. He became a gliding shape among the rocks; slow, cautious, but so elusive that Geraldine could scarcely follow him.

Fortunately, the tall, slim blonde was built for this sort of work; a fact upon which The Shadow depended. She was almost his own shadow, as they stole among the forbidding boulders, seeking some trace of a human lair. When the test came, however, it was only Allard who was quick enough to meet it.

He stopped with silent suddenness, flung out an arm to hold back Geraldine. The girl stumbled; she failed to repress a startled exclamation. A sharp snarl answered; from between two rocks, a long-limbed human figure flung itself straight for them.

THE guard didn't betray himself by a light. Instead, he swung hard in the darkness, using a rifle as a club. Simultaneously, The Shadow's hand made a cross slash; there was a hard clang as the full weight of his automatic met the rifle barrel.

Then came a quick struggle in the darkness, where Geraldine heard thrashing figures that she couldn't see. A flashlight blinked; in its glow, Geraldine saw a rangy man stumbling toward her, his rifle gone, his hands flapping like his wobbly lower jaw.

She heard Allard's voice, a brisk, low-tone command:

"Take him!"

Geraldine thrust an automatic's muzzle against the guard's ribs. He gave a groan and sank against a rock. Holding him at gun point, Geraldine saw beyond the fellow's shoulder and thereby witnessed the next event.

Allard had swung the flashlight about, to disclose a rough flight of steep stone steps beneath a looming boulder. Below, a man was stepping through an iron door, aiming a rifle upward. He had heard the cry from the outside guard and was stepping out to learn the trouble.

The Shadow's bold use of the flashlight proved the best move possible. Blinking into the gleam, the man with the rifle couldn't see the figure behind it. He thought, for a second, that the person with the light must be the other guard turning to summon him.

That second was enough. In it, Geraldine saw Allard take a reckless plunge that matched his daring landing in the desert. It looked like a breakneck dive, down those stone steps, but The Shadow counted on something

that would break his fall and found it: the figure of the man below.

Landing full upon the guard, he flattened the fellow, rifle and all. Finger jarred from the trigger, the foeman dropped the rifle and tried to grapple as The Shadow snapped off the flashlight. Again, Geraldine was hearing a thrashing struggle; amid it, gargly efforts toward a shout that was never given.

Getting a throat hold on the guard, The Shadow was using his elbows to ward off the man's gripping hands. Tenaciously, The Shadow's clutching fingers were doing more than hold back the alarm that his foeman tried to shout. They were choking the fellow into final submission, which came with the very suddenness that The Shadow expected.

The figure sank limp beside the rifle. Up the steps came Allard's low voice, telling Geraldine to march her prisoner down. She did so, by the greeting glow of the flashlight. Still groggy, her charge didn't try to make trouble. He could feel the nudge of the automatic that Geraldine kept pressed against his ribs.

While Geraldine covered with gun and flashlight, The Shadow put her prisoner to work helping bind and gag the man who lay senseless. After that, Geraldine found herself assisting Allard in the binding of the first prisoner. She saw Allard open the metal door; beyond, the flashlight showed a vaulted passage that led beneath the rocks.

There was a small room to one side, filled with boxes of canned goods. That was where The Shadow stowed the prisoners, with Geraldine's aid. Then, in the steady manner of Kent Allard, he beckoned for the girl to follow him into the deeper passage.

Guiding their course with cautious blinks of the flashlight, The Shadow was setting out to explore the depths of Silver Skull's desert domain!

CHAPTER XIV. THE SHADOW'S CALL

THE route that the invaders had used was not the only entrance to this lair. The Shadow learned that from two things that he observed as they went deeper; first, the absence of any guards; second, the fact that there were other passages leading upward, obviously to outlets where watchers were on duty.

Though the situation presented opportunities to deal with scattered guards in little groups, it was better to learn more about the lair before beginning that campaign. Therefore, The Shadow and his blond companion kept to the deeper course.

They reached a dimly lighted hollowed room that had been hewn from crevices among deep-buried rocks. The chamber was a large one, totally deserted, and for the first time, The Shadow was interested in a passage that led upward from it. It was a broad, low-ceilinged slope, with track marks among the rocks.

Exploring it, The Shadow and Geraldine came into another chamber, where a mammoth shape was spread like a silent, moody creature from some prehistoric age. The flashlight's puny glitter reflected from the thing's broad wings, to reveal it as an old transport plane.

The room was an underground hangar. In front of the plane was a huge stretch of canvas supported by metal struts. Unquestionably, the outer surface of that canvas was painted to resemble a rocky layer of the desert.

Leading straight to the landing field, the opening would allow the plane's crew to get the ship rapidly into the air. It happened, however, that none of the crew was about. The hangar, like the hollowed-out underground meeting room, was completely deserted.

SILVER SKULL

The big transport was not the ship that Silver Skull had used to sink the Traveler; but there was space here for his pursuit plane and a few others, should he require it.

Geraldine saw Allard produce a flat box that he had brought from his own plane. Telling her to keep watch, he stepped into the transport. When he returned, Geraldine asked, hopefully, if he had put the big ship out of commission. Allard shook his head.

"It may prove best," he said, "to let that plane leave. The box that I hid aboard gives out automatic radio impulses. It will be better in the plane, as it will enable us to trace the ship's course with a direction finder, if she leaves."

They returned to the hollow center room. There, Allard found new interest in a single passage that led deeper into the ground. He decided that it deserved inspection before they took other steps. Descending, they left the dim light of the center chamber, only to meet a new glow from below.

Past a turn, The Shadow viewed a narrow corridor, with doors in it that looked like cell openings. A guard was strolling in the opposite direction; finishing his round, he went to a room beyond. The Shadow could hear muffled voices.

"There's a reserve crew here," he told Geraldine, grimly. "But maybe I'll have a chance to look into some of those cells."

Reaching the first cell, The Shadow looked through the bars, to see a girl stretched on a cot staring at the ceiling. She was wearing slacks, like Geraldine's; a flannel shirt that was open at the neck. Above a smooth, white throat, The Shadow could see a determined chin that he remembered; particularly when he noted the distinct brown of the girl's rumpled hair.

The prisoner was Mildred Wilbin!

THE cell door had a bolt, out of reach from inside, but easily manipulated in the corridor. The Shadow slid it silently, but instead of opening the door, he took a quick glance down the corridor, then rejoined Geraldine.

He told the blonde who the prisoner was; then made a steady-toned suggestion that left the choice absolutely to Geraldine.

"Suppose you change places with her," he said. "She may be able to tell me a great deal about Silver Skull. You have a gun and if a pinch comes, you can help. Especially, since they won't expect an attack from your quarter."

Geraldine promptly agreed to the plan. She sidled into the corridor, opened the door of the unlocked-cell. The Shadow heard low whispers, as the girls talked; then Mildred came out and bolted the door behind her.

She had scarcely joined The Shadow before the guard returned. In his patrol, he glanced into the cell; but The Shadow and Mildred saw him go his way without suspecting what had occurred.

Having recognized Kent Allard, Mildred was eager to tell of her adventures; but she kept silent, at her rescuer's warning, until they had reached the central cavern. There, she waited again, to let Allard look around the place.

He saw a door, opened it cautiously and found a tiny wireless room, quite deserted. They entered the room and Mildred began her story.

SILVER SKULL

She told how she had found the telephone number on Fortner's slip and had called it; but she had difficulty in describing the vague voice that had mentioned John Lenville, then Dr. Slead, as coming victims.

Then she explained that she had visited Slead to warn him, only to find herself feeling very ill. She told how Slead had turned her over to the nurse, Miss Royce, who had seemed very sympathetic and had promptly helped her to undress for bed.

Very suddenly, as Mildred remembered it, she had been entirely unclothed, waiting for Miss Royce to unfold a nightgown for her. But she hadn't come to her senses until she had been tucked into bed. Then she had aroused, too late.

"The room was locked," recounted Mildred, "and I could hear gas entering it. Miss Royce was gone, and she had taken my clothes along. I wonder" – Mildred's frown was a perplexed one – "why she bothered to take them, since I was helpless."

The Shadow explained how Thelma had changed her own attire, so she could pose as Mildred and drive away in the yellow roadster. Mildred's eyes flashed indignation; along with it, The Shadow could see determination. Like Geraldine, Mildred was a girl upon whom he could depend in any clash with crooks.

Meanwhile, other matters needed prompt discussion. First, that ill-chosen telephone call that had been the cause of Mildred's later embarrassment.

"After the voice had named Lenville," quizzed The Shadow, "did it say anything that you didn't quite understand?"

"Yes," returned Mildred. "It said something about 'silver'; but that was all."

"You should have replied 'skull,' to complete the countersign. Since you failed to do so, the voice recognized that you were not Thelma Royce and promptly tricked you."

"Skull?" questioned Mildred. "Silver Skull? It sounds like a name."

"It is a name. Of the crook we must seek. So tell me what happened to you after you were gassed."

Mildred sensed urgency in Allard's tone, and rapidly supplied the details.

"It must have been hours later," she related, "when I found myself lying on a cot, wrapped like a mummy in a lot of blankets. Men were in the room, removing a big square box that was padded on the inside. They carried it out and closed the door.

"I squirmed out of the blankets and rested a short while. All I had on was the nightie that Miss Royce had given me. But these clothes" – she gestured to the flannel shirt and slacks – "were on a chair, so I dressed myself in them.

"I am sure that the place was in the East, because, later, I was put aboard a plane and brought here. It was a night flight and I saw the sunrise. It was behind us."

News that Silver Skull had an Eastern base was important to The Shadow. He asked for its description and Mildred told him what little she could. The place had reminded her of a cabin, a very large one. She was sure that other prisoners were being kept there.

SILVER SKULL

"Perhaps my uncle is still alive," declared the girl. "He and others – like John Lenville."

THE girl saw Allard ponder. The Shadow agreed with Mildred's theory, but he was trying to deduce why she had been brought to the desert base. The only plausible reason was that Silver Skull was on his way here, and intended to quiz the girl.

That offered complications. Under present circumstances, it would be best to forestall Silver Skull. The thugs who guarded this hidden air base were numerous, but of comparatively poor caliber. They could be handled easily, a few at a time.

Some of those crooks would talk. From them, The Shadow could learn the location of the Eastern base and fly there. He would be on his way while Silver Skull was arriving at a scene of chaos, here in the desert.

Then, his gaze upon the wireless set,

The Shadow formed a plan that offered better prospects.

He calculated the potential results that would come if he sent out an SOS from here – a call to the law, bringing a score of planes to the hidden landing field.

News of a secret base illegally maintained, would bring results without mention of Silver Skull. Soon after sending the call, The Shadow could be on his way, flying the big transport plane upon which the crooks here depended.

They couldn't hear the wireless call go out. The transport would be taking off before they could stop it. As guides and crew members, The Shadow could bring along the two guards who lay helpless; and in addition, he would have Mildred and Geraldine.

Silver Skull, even if he intercepted the message, would not guess that the sender was heading East with informants telling him how to reach the other base. Only one person, in Silver Skull's estimate, would be capable of such strategy: The Shadow.

And Silver Skull believed The Shadow dead!

Mildred, watching Allard, saw his fingers come to life. As if imbued with an impulse of their own, they began to send the message. Three times, The Shadow repeated the message giving the location of the desert base.

Next, he was dismantling the set. Crooks, when they found it, wouldn't be able to flash news to Silver Skull. Their ship gone, they would be stranded here. Surrounded by the desert, they would find it useless to flee. The law could conquer them while The Shadow was soaring to another mission.

With Mildred, The Shadow hurried through the passage by which he and Geraldine had reached the central cavern. The prisoners were lying as The Shadow had left them, in the storeroom near the metal door. Unbinding them, he was explaining exactly what they were to do, when he became conscious of a faint, muffled thrum.

The Shadow told Mildred to go up the steps and report what sounds she heard. Once she had opened the metal door, the thrumming noise became very loud. It was Mildred who saw the rest.

SILVER SKULL

Against the risen moon, a swift plane sped overhead. It dropped an object that burst in midair, emitting a lurid, crimson flare. In that spurt of vivid light, the plane was outlined like a hellish bird.

Upon the plane, Mildred saw the leering symbol of a silver skull, stained scarlet by the glow. She knew the flare to be a warning, meant for the guards that Allard had intended to leave at their various posts.

Silver Skull had been the first to catch The Shadow's call. Close to his own domain, the master crook had come to flash the word, then make for other parts.

No longer did the odds lie with The Shadow. The balance favored the fighters who served Silver Skull!

CHAPTER XV. CRIME'S RALLY

BY the time Mildred was down the steps, blurring the news of Silver Skull's passage overhead, she saw that Allard was already on the move. He had turned the prisoners around, to start them down the passage at the point of a gun.

He motioned toward the little storeroom, telling Mildred to pick up the rifles and bring them along. Then Allard was on his way, driving the prisoners ahead of him.

The rifles made a heavy, cumbersome load, but Mildred lugged them gamely as she stumbled toward the moving gleam of The Shadow's flashlight. She was hoping that they could still release Geraldine, and get aboard the plane in the underground hangar. That plan, however, was doomed.

Suddenly, the flashlight stopped its forward movement. Catching a blink that seemed like a beckon, Mildred hurried ahead. In the dim glow at the entrance to the central cavern, she found Allard waiting, with the prisoners cowed against a passage wall.

The Shadow put away his flash. Then, with one sweep of his left arm, he gathered the rifles from her. With his right hand, he planked an automatic in Mildred's hand. In clipped words, he told the girl to keep the prisoners covered; to stay here. Strapping one rifle across his back, he started forward with the other.

Mildred suddenly saw the reason for The Shadow's move. Men had ready come from the guardroom below, and from the noise they were making, were in the hangar, preparing for a quick flight. They weren't wasting time in raising the reinforced canvas. They were slashing it with axes, when The Shadow, running up the broad passage, ordered them to stop their work.

It was evident that Allard meant business. The startled crooks stopped abruptly, proving that The Shadow needed neither black cloak nor sinister tone to make such foemen yield. There was a mutinous air, however, among those thugs, as they stood with uplifted arms. Instead of cowering, they muttered. The situation needed only some chance change to set it awry.

The break came before The Shadow had time to properly subdue his new prisoners. There was a slashing clatter from a door that flung suddenly open. Two crooks sprang, fuming, from the wireless room, where they had found the wrecked equipment. They ran partially up the hangar passage, saw the figure of Allard clad in aviator's costume and took him to be the sort of foe that they could handle.

Guns out, the pair were firing quick shots as The Shadow swung to meet them. They expected him to dive away, to become a helpless target when they found their aim. Instead, he gave them bullets with a precision that promptly ended their thrust.

SILVER SKULL

With each crack of The Shadow's rifle, a thug floundered in the air, came down a writhing chunk of sprawled humanity, thinking no longer of battle. Neither of those doubled fighters tried to pick up the revolver that he had dropped.

The men in the hangar heard the rifle shots but could not see what happened. They were yanking revolvers of their own, raising a wild shout as they headed for The Shadow. He was up the passage again, firing the rifle as they came; but this time, his shots clipped only one adversary. The rest were scattering quickly, to find cover about the big plane.

As he completed his hurried fire, The Shadow made a fast retreat. His rifle was empty; he needed cover of his own. One gunman, scenting the dilemma, came loping through the passage. The Shadow side-stepped before the fellow's revolver sputtered, then met the crook with a clubbed stroke of the rifle just as the man began to shoot.

Staggered, that foeman reeled away. Flinging the rifle aside, The Shadow reached the central room. Picking a strategic corner, he unlimbered the reserve rifle, ready for the next attack. He was baiting the crooks from the hangar, hoping that they would try to ferret him out.

Yet, all the while, The Shadow had his eye on the passage that led below. He would have to reach it later, to release Geraldine. He was depending upon the stewardess to take care of matters herself, by way of start, for she had a gun of her own. One shot, however, from that gun would have brought The Shadow straight to her aid.

THEY were here, the mob from the hangar, howling as they sought their prey, swinging their guns in every direction. The Shadow met them with a sudden fire that sent the whole crew to scattered cover, so rapidly that he could scarcely tell which of the scramblers had been wounded.

Amid the puny bursts of answering revolvers, The Shadow tossed away the second rifle. From now on, it would be a close-quarters fight, quick sallies with his automatic – a reserve weapon he pulled from his aviator's jumper – as the prevailing weapon. He wouldn't have to worry about reloading. There would be plenty of unfired revolvers to be picked up as he went along.

With one quick sideward dive, The Shadow met a rising foeman pointblank, beat the crook to the shot. Hurling the sagging foeman, he used the fellow as a bulwark, while he aimed for another. Coolly, he was scooping up the dropped revolver with his free hand, when, amid the scattered fire of bewildered enemies, he heard the rise of a new tumult.

Men were coming from everywhere except the lone passage where Mildred stood guard over two sullen prisoners. They were the distant outpost guard, heading in from the various corridors. At the same moment, a cluster of men piled up from the lower passage. With them was Geraldine, her arms pinned behind her. The blonde was struggling furiously to get at the gun that she carried.

Crooks didn't know that she had a weapon; they simply thought that she was trying to break away. Geraldine had waited until they dragged her from the cell, and then had found it was too late. The hands that pinned her, to prevent her escape, were so many that she couldn't even draw the gun.

At least, Geraldine was keeping her captors fully occupied. The Shadow let that group rush across toward the hangar. He saw Geraldine stumble, come up half stunned. No longer struggling, she was dragged along limply. Her captors weren't stopping to fight. The only way to overtake them and rescue her, would be to blast a path through the other crooks who had flooded the big meeting place.

SILVER SKULL

The Shadow proceeded to that herculean task. In appearance, he still was Allard; but in action, he was The Shadow. A combination that worked surprisingly to his advantage, in this dim-lit battleground. Gunmen didn't expect the shifts from Allard that they would have from The Shadow.

When the lone fighter stopped, he looked like a fixed statue, the sort of target that any marksman could pick off with a slow aim. Then, with a whirl, he would be gone, while surprised crooks were firing too late. Out of each twist, he would abruptly halt again. Invariably, his shots would drop the one marksman who had the best chance of getting him.

Sometimes he swooped, to come up with a fresh revolver. It was startling, the way he plucked those weapons in haphazard fashion; juggled them squarely to his trigger finger, and fired straight to a living target while his hand was still on the move.

Wounded crooks weren't heeding the howls of their pals to stick around and help. They were crawling, staggering in the direction of the hangar, anxious to join the men who were hacking away the remnants of the canvas and preparing to board the plane.

AGAINST overwhelming odds, The Shadow had paved the way to conquest. Victory seemed in his grasp, despite the fact that he had been forced to meet criminals in united combat. It had been skill, not luck, that had served him in the struggle. When the first fluke came, it worked against The Shadow, not for him.

He had snatched a fresh revolver from the floor beside a wall; probably the last of those captured weapons that he should have required. His hand had made its flip; the muzzle was swung toward a wild-eyed foeman who was taking hasty aim. Then, almost with his trigger tug, The Shadow went into a sudden dive.

The revolver was empty; he seemed to feel it as the hammer hit. Instead of a shot from The Shadow's gun, one came from the foeman's weapon. Something stung The Shadow's gun arm, jolted it high up. The revolver spun flashing in the dim light, as his dive became a sprawl.

There were gleeful howls from crooks, but they were very few. All but a mere three or four had been silenced, or had fled. The remaining thugs fired ardently, but their shots were as few in number as themselves, for they had almost emptied their guns.

In fact, the man who had clipped The Shadow had done it with a final bullet, and he was the only one close enough to add more damage. Rolling across the floor, regardless of his burning shoulder, The Shadow was followed – not overtaken – by the pinging slugs that ricocheted from the rocky ground.

With a long lunge, he clamped his good hand on a revolver that lay in his path; came suddenly up on his elbow and began to pull the gun trigger. Luck balanced; the revolver was a loaded one. Attackers, their own guns exhausted, took to frantic flight.

Half groggy, The Shadow didn't clip them as they ran; but his shots were close enough to spur the fight. The battlefield was his; he was still determined to overtake the fugitives and prevent their getaway in the plane. But a new situation intervened to delay him.

During The Shadow's flounder, Mildred's prisoners had decided to jump her gun. The girl had been startled by their sudden rush, but had proven equal to it. With a backward step, Mildred fired; then stopped in blank amazement at the thing that happened.

One of the huskies sank without a gulp. From a snarling, threatening human beast, he had been transformed into an inert mass. The other crook dropped back against the wall; he, too, was changed. His hands were no

SILVER SKULL

longer reaching claws; they were flabby. His raucous voice had softened to a pitiful plea; he was begging Mildred not to shoot.

Her eyes upon the crumpled form in front of her, Mildred scarcely heard the other man's whine. Her hand sank, carried downward by the weight of the automatic. Though the silent man before her would willingly have killed her, Mildred was stunned by her deed of self-defense.

Her head whirled; the world seemed blank, except for that sprawled shape upon the passage floor. She didn't realize her own bewilderment; but there was someone who suddenly recognized it – the other crook.

His whine chopped short. With a howl of ugly joy, he sprang upon Mildred and flung her across the passage. The gun bounced from her hand, landed in darkness. The noise it made was the clue to its location. Diving for the gun, the crook grabbed it, swung about to shove the weapon directly between Mildred's dazed eyes.

HE must have relished the thought of murder, that crook, for he was deliberate, in a tantalizing way, when he fingered the gun trigger. Perhaps he wanted Mildred to realize what was due; to have the girl beg for mercy that he would never give.

Whatever his thoughts, they were so intent that he had forgotten the battle in the cavern; had taken it for granted that the rolling figure of Kent Allard had stilled after a final writhe.

The Shadow had heard Mildred's shot. One arm dangling, he was approaching the passage, sacrificing speed for stealth. He was banking wholly upon the killer's deliberation, until he came within reaching distance of the would-be murderer.

Then, his good hand thrust before him, The Shadow drove. His fingers clamped a gun wrist, his weight sent the crook across the passage. The gun spoke, but not in Mildred's direction. The bullet was lost against the passage wall.

Roused by the shot, Mildred saw two flaying figures. She realized that though the advantage was Allard's, he was wounded; striving with one hand to out-wrench his foeman's two. The gun disappeared suddenly between the grapplers; Mildred heard it speak a muffled blast and added a scream that was a horrified echo.

She saw the two figures coil to the floor, like the man that she had dropped. Then, after a moment that seemed interminable, Allard's shoulders moved. Coming weakly to his knees, he shook aside dead arms that clutched him. The crook's form flopped heavily, to settle as still as the stones that formed its resting place.

Weakly, The Shadow pointed with the gun he had wrested, and Mildred understood. He was still intent upon pursuit through the passage to the hangar. But he could scarcely rise when Mildred tried to help him. When he finally stood, wavering from her supporting grasp, they both heard sounds that told them chase was useless.

From the hangar came an echoing roar, that faded as the transport plane taxied out to the landing field. Then came the more distant rumble of the take-off; finally, the purr that trailed to nothingness, signifying that the plane had taken the air.

Manned by a skeleton crew, carrying a quota of crippled crooks, with Geraldine along as a lone prisoner, the ship was off on the long flight to its unknown eastern base.

Though he had outbattled the horde that served Silver Skull, The Shadow had found his efforts nullified. He had rescued Mildred, but Geraldine had been captured. Among the crooks who strewed the underground lair,

none were alive to blab the trail.

Still, the campaign was not ruined. There would be future ways to meet and frustrate Silver Skull and the mobsmen who served him

The Shadow knew!

CHAPTER XVI. THE SECRET SEARCH

THOUGH The Shadow's battle had not brought him the desired result, he had certainly banished all opposition from the desert air base. That fact was a fortunate one, for during the next few hours, the intrepid fighter could not have rallied to another fray.

His wound, though not a serious one, had brought considerable loss of blood before Mildred stanching it. The Shadow found himself far weaker than he expected.

It was Mildred who kept vigil while they waited for new arrivals, hoping that the newcomers would be friends responding to the wireless call.

The little wireless room served as the temporary refuge. There, Allard lay stretched upon a rickety army cot, while Mildred kept guard at the door. Most of the wait was spent in silence, but at intervals, the girl heard Allard's tired tone advising her on certain important matters.

Mildred was to say nothing of their previous acquaintance; nor was she to remember that Geraldine had accompanied Allard here. Her own story, too, was to be a hazy one. She could mention Sled and Thelma; give brief recollections of another base somewhere in the East.

But she was to know nothing whatever concerning Silver Skull and the plane which had flown over to give the warning. As for the supposition that such men as her uncle and John Lenville were still alive, no one was to know that it had even occurred to Mildred Wilbin and Kent Allard.

The safety of those supposed victims might depend upon such pretended ignorance. Mildred understood that from Allard's tone, and reasoned the rest for herself. Who Silver Skull might be, she couldn't guess; but it was obvious that he would try to reconstruct his schemes, if he saw the opportunity.

Vital to those schemes was the fact that dead men lived. If chance for further plotting should be ended, Silver Skull would no longer have need for those prisoners. He would snuff out their lives, and turn to other fields of crime.

Aloud, Mildred repeated the story that she intended to tell, until she had it perfect. She was still repeating it to herself when she saw the bobbing of lights entering the central cavern, heard the shouts of approaching voices. Fearful for the moment, Mildred looked to Allard for encouragement and saw him give a tired nod.

The Shadow had recognized that these must be rescuers; and he was right. With an answering cry of her own, Mildred went out to meet them. Soon, she was telling her well-rehearsed story to a group of eager listeners.

AMONG the rescuers was Norwood Partridge. Searching for the lost Traveler, he had picked up Allard's SOS and had headed here from the mountains. That call had carried no signature; when Partridge learned that Allard had sent it, he hurried to the side of his wounded friend. Propped on the cot, The Shadow weakly gave his version of what had happened.

SILVER SKULL

Flying alone, so he said, he had chanced to observe the desert landing field. He had finished his solo flight on the sands a few miles away, and had come here to investigate. Finding Mildred unwatched, he had released her; had sent the wireless call. Then came the battle – for which The Shadow, as Allard, took but modest credit.

Some of the crooks, he claimed, had mistakenly supposed that he led a band of invaders. Hoping to square themselves with the law, they had turned against the rest. Outnumbered, the mutineers had been eliminated; but the victors, their own ranks considerably thinned had taken to flight in a plane.

As always, The Shadow was covering his real identity of Kent Allard; and he knew that his tale would have weight, even with Silver Skull. The crooks who had fled would themselves believe the version of the fight that Allard was making public. In the gloom of the hazy cavern, they had taken bullets from so many directions that they must have found the one-foe theory incredible, when they discussed it.

Allard's lips were holding back a weary smile, as they spoke that blunt story. Deep in The Shadow's brain was the important realization that Silver Skull believed him to be dead, which put the 'certifying mark' upon the yarn. For only The Shadow could have put up the single-handed battle that Allard so carefully disclaimed.

It was Parridge who insisted upon taking his friend Allard back to civilization. Mildred was anxious to go along in the same plane, but Allard's eyes told her no. They had a few moments when they spoke alone, when Allard gave her brief instructions. The substance was that Mildred should find her chance and disappear again, this time to join certain persons who would keep her safe from Silver Skull.

DURING the long night, Parridge's plane winged eastward. Upon reaching New York City, Kent Allard was taken to a hospital. Later, at his own insistence, he was removed to the quiet hotel suite where the Xınca servants waited like a pair of faithful watchdogs. Once in that seclusion, Kent Allard defied all orders that the hospital physicians had given.

He became The Shadow.

Not that he garbed himself in cloak of black, to set out upon immediate foray. He was still too weak, and such a venture was unnecessary, for the present. Also, his arm must heal. But he busied himself with many tasks; calls to Burbank; experiments with radio apparatus; long study of newspaper accounts; the tracing of lines upon large-scale maps.

A wide search was under way for the missing plane that had carried the gunmen from the desert. Though nearly nothing was known of Silver Skull, with even his real name undisclosed, it was taken for granted that some mastermind had created the desert air base, to prey upon passing skyliners.

Who was the master crook? Why had he dealt in murder? Where was his Eastern base, which a thousand planes were trying to locate without success?

These were questions to which only The Shadow knew the answer and the last-named had become the most important.

At the desk where The Shadow sat with one arm bundled in a sling, was a compact apparatus with a tiny light that changed as he adjusted it. Through this direction finder, he had picked up, here in New York, automatic radio impulses from the apparatus he had put in the crooks' transport plane – a piece of luck upon which he had not reckoned.

SILVER SKULL

Luck, however, which was unnecessary. For by this time, The Shadow's agents were posted at several spots outside of New York City, seeking that same beam. Only two findings were needed, and The Shadow already had three others reported through Burbank. He was using his own, however, to make the final check.

His elbow steadying a long metal ruler, The Shadow drew lines upon a map. Converging from the various points where the beam had been picked up, the lines arrived at a focal-spot. Shifting to a large-scale map, The Shadow changed that dot into a circle.

Somewhere in that area, limited to a few miles in radius, lay the Eastern base used by Silver Skull. It was well north of New York City, not far off the main air route to Montreal, a fact significant in itself; for it meant that Silver Skull could intercept planes bound to Canada, as well as those that flew to the Pacific coast.

Contrasted to that fact was one that presented a real riddle.

From reports that lay upon Allard's desk, it appeared that many planes had scoured that very terrain, while going from one area to another. They had eliminated the very district where the base must lie, because it showed no possible landing fields. In that circle, and miles around it, were stretches of unbroken woodland, partly the result of reforestation projects.

Reaching for the telephone, The Shadow made a call to Burbank. His instructions were for certain agents to cover that area again, by air. Since planes had frequently flown over it, they would excite no suspicion, particularly because The Shadow's plan called only for passing visits.

WORK ended for that day, The Shadow rested. It was very late the next afternoon when a package was delivered at his hotel. The flat bundle contained a sheaf of aerial photographs, all recently developed. Their backs were marked with cryptic numbers that enabled The Shadow to place them in a definite order.

His injured arm no longer numb, The Shadow used both hands to arrange the pictures, until they completely covered the table. His keen eye promptly detected differences remarkably conspicuous. From the straight lips of Kent Allard came a tone of satisfied mirth: the whispered laugh of The Shadow.

Again, The Shadow made a telephone call; but it was not to Burbank. Instead, he called the apartment where Norwood Parridge lived when in New York. Using Allard's tone, The Shadow asked for the millionaire aviator and learned that Parridge had just arrived. Soon, the millionaire was on the wire, but his voice lacked enthusiasm.

"Hello, Allard," said Parridge. "It's good to hear from you. I've just come back from another hunt, and it's the same story: No luck!"

"Perhaps you've been looking in the wrong place," remarked The Shadow. "Or you may not have noticed the right place often enough."

"Do you mean" – Parridge had caught new interest from Allard's tone – "that somebody has found something?"

"Precisely that," replied The Shadow. "I'll be around in half an hour, to show you the evidence."

The call concluded, The Shadow placed photographs and maps in a large envelope. From a desk drawer, he produced an automatic and tucked it beneath his coat. Then, in the imperturbable style of Allard, he strolled to the door, which a prompt Xınca servant opened as soon as he approached.

Darkness was settling as Allard appeared upon the street, bound upon this visit that was known only to himself and Parridge. Yet, with all the secrecy that he had preserved, The Shadow was prepared to meet the unexpected. For his mission, in itself, had an importance that made it dangerous.

During his coming conference with Parridge, The Shadow intended to decide the fate of Silver Skull!

CHAPTER XVII. THE MAN WHO HEARD

PARRIDGE'S apartment was a small one, but lavishly furnished. Though already familiar with the place, The Shadow gave it a careful scrutiny as soon as he was admitted by Parridge's stocky, well-groomed manservant, whose name was Jeffrey.

Informed by his master that Allard was to arrive, Jeffrey promptly led the visitor through a short hallway, past the bedrooms, to a little living room at the rear of the apartment. Though originally planned as a bedroom, Parridge used the rear room for a living room because it afforded an outlook toward Central Park.

Attired in a dressing gown, Parridge received Allard with a handshake that seemed to lack its usual strength. He looked tired, his face more haggard than ever, and his shoulders showed a marked forward sag. He had been at the controls all day, he explained, and for once, his interest in aviation had waned.

"Whoever this master mind is," declared Parridge, "he's no hare. He's a fox; and we've been hopping plenty of hurdles trying to find him! But he's got a hole in the ground, better even than the place you uncovered out on the desert."

Instead of a reply, Parridge saw Allard's lips smile confidence. Noting the envelope that his visitor carried, Parridge became intently curious. Then he caught a motion for silence.

"Everything is all right," assured Parridge. "Jeffrey can be trusted. He has been with me for years."

The Shadow opened the envelope. First, he brought out maps. He indicated one that bore a penciled cross.

"Whoever the fox is," began The Shadow, in Allard's short-clipped style, "is something that does not matter. What we need to know is where to find him. This cross shows the place."

While Parridge was staring at the map, The Shadow called his attention to another one, of larger scale. It showed a circle in which were tiny dots that indicated buildings.

"This place," Parridge heard Allard say, "appears to be a hunting lodge surrounded by large grounds. Probably a private game preserve, fenced off so no one can enter."

Parridge looked perplexed.

"It's all woods," he objected. "There's no landing place anywhere near it."

"The ground is level," was Allard's reminder. "And from this older map" – he pointed to another sheet – "the place was once a small race track."

As proof, The Shadow produced a photograph. Parridge saw exactly what he meant. The ground did have a level look; but that did not cover Parridge's objection. Young trees were frequent all through the clearing that Allard traced with his pencil.

SILVER SKULL

"You're wrong, Allard," declared Parridge. "No one could possibly make a landing there. Not even you could _"

"Agreed," came the interruption. "No landing could have been made at the time this photograph was taken, which" – The Shadow turned the picture over – "was at three thirty yesterday afternoon. But things were a trifle better, Parridge, just before sunset."

He showed a picture taken after six o'clock. Parridge saw his finger point from one photo to the other. The haggard man hesitated, his lips moving as he stared. Then:

"Some of the trees have moved!" he exclaimed. "They are back toward the fringes of the larger woods!"

"And after dark," added The Shadow, "they must have moved back entirely. Look at these other photographs, Parridge. They show how the trees crept out again."

THE first of the present day's photographs had been taken just after dawn. The space was half cleared; the trees, as The Shadow said, could have been coming outward. Other photos, taken at later hours, showed them farther advanced. The final one, snapped at noon, showed a tree-filled area.

The Shadow came to his conclusion:

"Those trees are obviously mounted on tractor treads, or broad rollers. At night, they can be drawn back to make a landing field. Probably the task was such a long one that the workers started early, yesterday. Similarly, they waited until too near dawn to push the trees back in place, this morning.

"Of course, they stopped when planes flew over. They had enough trees in place to make a landing look impossible. But they did not reckon with the aerial camera. Since I couldn't make a hunt myself, I had photographers do it for me."

"That was smart work, Allard," declared Parridge. Then, staring at the photographs: "But how did you happen to pick this place?"

"I had cameramen everywhere," returned The Shadow, quietly. "These were but a few of the many thousand photographs that I examined."

Parridge accepted the explanation, which was well, as The Shadow did not care to mention the matter of the direction finders that he had used. That would have indicated too much previous planning on the part of Kent Allard.

It befitted Allard to be stolid, of single purpose, rather than versatile in method. His boldness, too, should be a stubborn sort. He should base his plans upon the proposition that what had once been accomplished could be done again. Therefore, the next suggestion was the very sort that Parridge expected.

"The landing field will be clear again tonight," decided The Shadow, bluntly. "If I take off at midnight, I can be there by three o'clock."

"To make a landing?" exclaimed Parridge. "In that nest of crooks?"

"Like I did before. With excellent results! If I can depend upon you to follow, bringing reinforcements –"

"You can. How soon will you need them?"

SILVER SKULL

The Shadow pondered, then set half past three as the proper time. Parridge inquired why he was delaying the start until midnight, which was some few hours away.

"Because of the moon," explained The Shadow. "It doesn't set until nearly three o'clock. I don't want to be seen from the ground. Besides, you will need time to collect the right people to accompany you. I'm leaving that to you, Parridge."

The compliment pleased Parridge. He expressed concern, however, regarding Allard's landing. With the ground dark, Allard would not be able to tell if the trees had been drawn back. It was a big risk, Parridge thought; but it brought a smile from The Shadow.

"I'll know how the ground lies when I get near to it," he predicted, confidently. "I'll fly across the clearing first, and come back into the wind. I've shaken my landing gear right out of treetops before. Don't worry about that, Parridge."

NO more assurance was needed. Parridge straightened his shoulders, his weariness gone. His face had brightened with a look of anticipation toward the part that he was to play in the coming venture. Then came a sudden twitch of his features, ending in a painful tightness of his lips, a narrowing of his eyelids.

Parridge, on one side of the table, was looking straight across it over Allard's shoulder, to a mirror on the far wall. The glass reflected a doorway that led to the front bedroom. That door was a trifle open; from it gleamed the object that had turned Parridge rigid.

The Shadow's eyes took a side glance. They also saw the revolver muzzle. The hand that held it was out of sight; but it was steady. For, although the gun moved, it did not waver. An invisible marksman was merely deciding upon which target he should choose first: Allard or Parridge.

Through The Shadow's brain flashed instant thoughts, as he tried to fit this new crisis into the well-patterned schemes of Silver Skull. He had the answer, a singular one, almost before he had finished his mental question. He knew why that gun was there; exactly what it intended.

To meet the dilemma, he would have to drop the stolid way of Allard, to show the quickness of The Shadow. This would be different from the gloomy cavern in the desert. In full light, Allard's transformation would be recognized. Silver Skull would learn that The Shadow had not died while posing as Lamont Cranston. Disclosed, coming plans would never carry.

All that momentarily restrained The Shadow was the motion of the gun. He wanted the hidden killer to concentrate upon one person. That act would mark the instant for The Shadow's counterthrust. It was well that The Shadow waited as he did, for during that tense time space, matters took a curious twist. One that suddenly made it unnecessary for The Shadow to reveal himself.

The gun swung finally toward Parridge. Noting the motion in the mirror, Parridge mistook the reversed reflection and thought that it had moved the other way. Thinking that he was not covered, Parridge acted on his own before The Shadow's zero moment arrived.

Lunging his shoulders forward, Parridge grabbed a desk lamp. With a wide fling of his arm, he hurled it toward the connecting door. His heave was so earnest that he followed with it, sprawling half across the floor.

The gun was talking as the lamp crashed; but with the lamp's impact against the doorway, its lights were extinguished, plunging the room into blackness, except against the windows. No figures could be seen against that background; for, with darkness, The Shadow had copied Parridge's dive to the floor.

SILVER SKULL

Parridge was unhurt. The glare of the flying lamp had made the marksman shift. From the floor, Parridge was opening fire with a gun of his own, while The Shadow – still as Kent Allard – chimed in with his automatic. Between shots, they could hear a scramble through the other room.

As Parridge sprang in pursuit, The Shadow doubled out through the hallway, where he could intercept the fleeing man. As he reached the lighted hall, he was met by a driving figure coming toward him. Seeing Allard, the other fired; but his shots were wide. With one quick side step back into the living room, The Shadow inserted the shot that counted.

The man came stumbling into a grapple; for a moment, he and The Shadow were locked. Then The Shadow had flung the man aside and was back into the living room, as shots burst from the front hall. It was the wounded man who received those bullets. A few moments later, Parridge arrived, a smoking gun in his hand.

Panting, he stooped to look at the man that he had finished with those final shots. Gazing up toward Allard, Parridge showed an expression of dismayed amazement.

"It's Jeffrey!" he exclaimed. "It was he who overheard us! Faithful old Jeffrey –"

From somewhere, The Shadow caught a sound that Parridge did not hear the soft scrape of a lowering window. Someone was making a stealthy exit from the apartment. It wasn't Jeffrey who had made the murder threat, though the servant had certainly shown a killer's instinct later.

Shakily, Parridge poured himself a drink from a handy decanter.

"We both fired in self-defense," he was saying. "We can explain that, Allard. But we can't drop our plans for tonight. We've got to go through with them, to justify ourselves."

THE SHADOW was stooping beside Jeffrey's body. He had noted a bulge in the man's vest pocket. The Shadow's fingers dipped in quick probe; his hand gave a slight juggle, and formed a loose fist. Joining Parridge, he considered what the millionaire had said, and finally gave agreement.

Together, they left the apartment and took their separate ways. With a few hours remaining until midnight, The Shadow first rode back to his hotel. In the cab he opened his fist, saw the object that had come from Jeffrey's pocket. It was a tiny silver skull.

That satisfied The Shadow regarding Jeffrey's actions. Parridge's servants, like many other persons who posed as honest people, was a crook in the service of Silver Skull. Perhaps if Parridge hadn't been so hasty with his gun, shooting recklessly along the hall, Jeffrey would still be alive, and therefore of some use.

As it stood, Jeffrey had taken what was due him. He didn't matter any longer. What did concern The Shadow was the identity of the man who had managed to duck out while Parridge was getting his trails mixed.

The Shadow settled that with a low-toned laugh. He had already formed an opinion regarding the fellow's identity, and decided to keep it.

What mattered most was The Shadow's coming expedition. It was a venture that could still work as he had planned it. For The Shadow, thanks to Parridge's intervention, had managed to keep his own identity hidden.

He was still Kent Allard; and that was vitally important. Because The Shadow was certain that by this time, Silver Skull had learned what Kent Allard intended to do tonight. Oddly, The Shadow's plans called for exactly that.

For Silver Skull, in planning a reception for Kent Allard, would not reckon with the measures that The Shadow had designed for Silver Skull!

CHAPTER XVIII. THE NIGHT FLIGHT

IT was three o'clock. Darkness lay thick and hushed about the hidden landing field that The Shadow had traced, despite the wiles of Silver Skull. Sham trees had been rolled back into the woods, where vaulted spaces sheltered them beneath huge overhanging boughs.

Men were crouched in the blackened clearing, beside a plane that waited like a grounded bird of prey. Those hours allowed by The Shadow had proven useful to Silver Skull. This was his plane, ready for another deed of piracy; the men about the silent ship were his ground crew.

The moon was gone, but the sky showed twinkling starlight. Barely visible, the tops of the higher trees were bending in a wind, pointing northward like a wavering compass needle. Those treetops served as a wind indicator, telling that Allard's plane would be coming from the south.

For Silver Skull had learned the plan in its entirety – how Allard first intended to cross the landing field, then head back into the wind. All that the master crook and his crew awaited was the drone of an approaching plane.

It came, a slow hum that rode ahead of the wavering wind. Eyes strained skyward, hoping to spot the approaching ship. It was difficult against the blackness, until the twinkle of lights appeared like little colored stars shifting from the firmament.

There were surprised mutters among the ground crew; then grunts of understanding mingled with satisfied oaths.

The lights, of course, were Allard's most sensible measure. He was taking it for granted that there might be watchers in the clearing. Such watchers would be suspicious of any ship that soared without lights. He was hoping that he would be mistaken for an ordinary pilot, passing across this forest region.

Once beyond the field, he would extinguish those lights and glide back to a landing. The slowness of his plane was proof that it was suited to such a feat. But there was a danger, other than that of landing, to anyone who flew a lazy crate in vicinities where Silver Skull lurked.

Kent Allard would have no worries regarding a proper landing, once Silver Skull was in the air. The air pirate had a way of picking landing spots for all planes that he tackled.

The lights were almost overhead. No chance of Allard hearing other sounds, with the drone of his own motor in his ears. Silver Skull gave the order for contact; before those lights had passed the landing field, his trim pursuit plane was spurting to its take-off.

The scattering ground crew glimpsed the craft as it met the breeze above the treetops. Then it was gone into the blackness of the higher air, twisting like a skillful bird, to take up the trail of Allard's lights.

WITHOUT a glimmer of its own, the speedy plane knifed upward. Silver Skull was anxious to down Allard's plane as far as possible from the landing field, for it wouldn't do to have wreckage found too close to the hidden headquarters. That was why he didn't push his speedy ship until he saw the lights begin to turn.

SILVER SKULL

Five miles had been covered. Enough to satisfy the murderous pilot who wore the silver headgear. He veered to bring himself in Allard's path; then, as he saw the lights climbing upward and toward him, he gave his plane the gun.

That wasn't all. Silver Skull focused a searchlight alongside his machine gun, pressed the switch, to send a brilliant path ahead. That flood of light outlined the climbing plane, gave Silver Skull a slanted glimpse of Allard's black hawk emblem painted on the side.

The machine gun began its drill. In the vivid path that Silver Skull was following, the other plane bulked like a big unwieldy box kite. It seemed that a crash was coming, when those two planes met; but Silver Skull knew there wouldn't be one. He was riddling Allard's craft to shreds.

Lights vanished from the crippled ship. There was a puff of flame from the fuselage. A wing drooped; the plane did a topple in midair. It was wallowing downward, spinning like a lopsided top, trailing smoke behind it, when Silver Skull rode through the space where it had been.

Banking sharply, Silver Skull kept his searchlight glued on the fluttering wreckage, as it strewed itself among the trees. He played the searchlight wider, as he circled the spot where the crash had come. He was looking to see if Allard had bailed out. If so, Silver Skull would have another target, and an easy one: a helpless man dangling from a sinking parachute.

No sign of Allard near the treetops. Silver Skull circled the searchlight higher, slower, finally adjusting it to the exact speed of the banking plane. Swinging ahead of him, the cleaving path cut high above the horizon. Then came the sight that riveted Silver Skull.

It wasn't a parachute. It was something that seemed unbelievable: an object that might have dropped from one of the distant stars. The thing was a giant propeller, as Silver Skull first viewed it; nothing else.

It seemed to be coming straight toward him, as though it had a mammoth plane behind it. As Silver Skull grabbed for the machine gun, the whirling thing tilted, to take a horizontal position. Then, beneath it, the searchlight showed the sleek shape of a streamlined jet-black body.

The ship was a wingless autogiro! Its only support were those mammoth revolving blades that Silver Skull had first supposed to be a gigantic propeller!

With that discovery, Silver Skull guessed everything. He knew why Allard's crate had flown so slowly over the landing field. It hadn't been a plane at all, that hulk with the telltale lights. It had been nothing but a flimsy oversized glider, painted with Allard's insignia. A glider towed by the invisible giro up ahead!

The motor of the autogiro had provided the sound effects for the decoy. Silver Skull had taken the bait. He had gone after the glider and had riddled it; a small tank of gasoline stowed in the glider had provided the explosion. When the decoy had dropped, it had carried its towline with it.

Meanwhile, high above, unseen by Silver Skull, the autogiro had completed a long, lazy loop. In its turn, it had become the thing of prey, using Silver Skull's searchlight as its objective. Its own course timed by a skilled pilot, the autogiro had intercepted the pursuit plane, to give real battle.

Its pilot was The Shadow.

THAT fact drilled home to Silver Skull, as he tried to straighten his plane. The thought gripped him that he should have disposed of Kent Allard, not Lamont Cranston. But that regret did not help his present situation.

SILVER SKULL

From below the giro's spinning blades, straight through its actual propeller, Silver Skull could see the spurting jabs of a machine gun outside a small cabin.

There was no time for new maneuvers. Viciously, Silver Skull answered the attack. Chattering guns outroared the motors, as the air duel reached its height. Bullets smashed the searchlight close by Silver Skull. From then on, the only targets were the spurting guns themselves.

Whatever the advantage of the pursuit plane over large craft, it had none in this battle. Its speed, could Silver Skull have used it, would have enabled him to flee; but that was all.

The thing that he was trying to bring to earth had no vulnerable wings. Its whirling blades never quivered as bullets tore through them. The tiny body of the autogiro was a target that he might eventually have found; but, meanwhile, his own plane was a better mark for The Shadow's fire.

One machine gun ended its rattle with a cough. That gun belonged to Silver Skull. His plane took a steeper bank, slid sideward, downward, toward those same trees where a fake plane had landed a dozen minutes before.

From the autogiro, The Shadow saw a quiver of the trees as a dull-gray mass encountered them. Then came a spurt of short-lived flame, that faded beneath the blanketing blackness. The flash was caused by the small supply of fuel that remained in the pursuit plane's well-drilled tank.

The crash had marked the end of Silver Skull – a deed that The Shadow had postponed until this timely hour. For the death of Silver Skull meant more than the deserved vengeance due a murderer.

That death was to be The Shadow's passport to the dead crook's own headquarters!

Well did The Shadow know that the men at the landing field were ready for surprise attacks, either by air or land. They had been, at least, until Silver Skull had taken off, intent upon finishing Kent Allard, the troublemaker who had come back for more.

Right now, however, the ground crew would be expecting Silver Skull. If they heard a plane, they would suppose it to be his. But The Shadow doubted that they would even hear the next ship that arrived!

He lifted the autogiro into a steep climb, and guided it back toward the landing field. A mile up in the air, The Shadow cut off the motor. The ship went into a steep-pitched drop, rapid at first, then slower, steadier. Big spinning blades were working with the silence of a parachute, while The Shadow studied the darkness below.

Sharp eyes detected a thinness in that inky ground: a rounded space free from thick-boughed trees. That vacancy became The Shadow's goal. Unseen against the silent sky, the autogiro continued its sure descent.

Servers of Silver Skull were waiting there to greet their master's return. But they would receive the greeting, not Silver Skull.

A greeting from The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIX. STRANGE ALLIES

THE autogiro settled with a silent plop, close to the center of the landing field. A full minute passed while The Shadow waited, in case any sounds came from the ground crew. That minute produced nothing but silence.

SILVER SKULL

As The Shadow had expected, the crew was waiting in the woods, on the path that led to the tree-shrouded headquarters. They were watching for Silver Skull to flash a signal that would denote his return.

Carefully, The Shadow descended from his ship. He was cloaked in black, the attire that suited his return to life. Tonight, the followers of Silver Skull would know that they faced The Shadow. But that discovery, according to The Shadow's plans, would not come until he had reached the heart of their headquarters.

There, The Shadow was sure that he would find the prisoners whose lives Silver Skull had so carefully preserved. If opportunity afforded, The Shadow would first release the captives, then spring his surprise upon the crooks who guarded them.

That much depended upon The Shadow alone. But he was counting upon others, once battle began. He had sent instructions to his agents, giving them three o'clock as the zero hour. At this minute, they were closing in upon the fence that surrounded the game preserve. Given a signal, they would rally to The Shadow's aid.

Once on the ground, The Shadow used his flashlight; but its blinks were the sort that distant observers could not see. He held the torch cupped in his hand, close against his cloak; its rays were directed squarely upon the ground. The light flickered, while The Shadow advanced a dozen paces; then it suddenly went off.

In the darkness, The Shadow had caught a stir: the approach of stealthy figures. While his left hand pocketed the light, his right was whipping out an automatic. The move was quick but The Shadow cut it short. It was better, for the moment, to stand stock-still.

From out of the darkness, two guns had poked into The Shadow's ribs, one from each side.

The sensation was not new to The Shadow. He had felt gun muzzles before, and knew what they meant. Persons who were quick on the trigger didn't bother to announce themselves by gun thrusts. Whoever these challengers were, they would not fire without provocation. They had something to say, and The Shadow was willing to hear it.

"Hello, Silver Skull!" came a whisper, close to The Shadow's ear. "So you had a happy landing, didn't you? Found the joint in the middle of the dark. Pretty classy, I'll say!"

"It sure was!" The voice was a woman's, speaking in The Shadow's other ear. "But maybe you wouldn't have been so smart, if you'd known we were waiting for you!"

There wasn't any question about those voices. One belonged to Dr. George Sled, the other to Thelma Royce.

"You ducked me once tonight," growled Sled, "but I'm just as glad you did. I was out to get you for a double-crosser, and I missed. But I heard enough to figure what came next; and when I spilled the dope to Thelma, she had a better idea."

"That's right," voiced Thelma. "I talked sense into doc, I told him maybe you thought he was dead, but the rest of the mob didn't. That silver skull he carries for a watch fob was just as good as gold! It got him past the guys that are watching at the gate; and I came through with him."

THE SHADOW kept his silence. His only response, if it could be called one, was a nervous squirm that pleased his captors. They pressed their guns tighter; and Sled growled a threat that they would shoot.

That stopped The Shadow's squirming. But it didn't give away what he had done. In his uneasy shift, he had nudged his elbows backward, working them in between his ribs and the gun muzzles.

SILVER SKULL

"What we want is dough," announced Sled, "and plenty of it! All you've got to do is climb into that crate of yours and take us along with you. Yell for your ground crew and tell them you're going back to town. Brag about what you did to Allard, if you want; only, remember that we'll be nudging you with these rods –"

Sled was interrupted by a fling of The Shadow's elbow. The guns weren't nudging any longer. They were wide, and The Shadow was bounding forward in the darkness, invisible to the pair who had held him trapped a moment before.

One long leap, then a drop to one hand. Spinning about, The Shadow made a quick dive in the reverse direction. His balked captors almost brushed him as they dashed past, shooting as they took up the imaginary chase.

Flashlights blinked from the woods. Their glow caught Sled and Thelma. Forgetting Silver Skull, the pair opened fire on the ground crew – with remarkable results. Flashlights began to drop like ducks on the rack of a shooting gallery.

Another gun had joined in the fire: the .45 in The Shadow's steady fist. He was clipping off those lights; clearing the path for the pair who had held him covered only a few second before. Since stealth was no longer possible, The Shadow was opening the way for the two crooks who had mistaken him for Silver Skull!

He could have chosen no better allies in that situation. Neither Sled nor Thelma knew that Silver Skull was dead; and they had a score to settle with the master crook. Thinking that Silver Skull had headed for the hunting lodge, they wouldn't stop until they reached there.

A block of light showed suddenly at the end of the wooded pathway. It was the door of the hunting lodge, flung open by startled guards inside. Sled and Thelma thought that Silver Skull had gained that refuge, and began to fire at men who bobbed into the light.

Guns answered. For the first time, the invading pair lost courage. Then they were spurred ahead by shots that came from behind them; shots that they thought were supplied by rallied members of the ground crew.

Actually, those shots were The Shadow's. He was aiming for the door, to clear it. Seeing men sprawl, Sled and Thelma thought that their own puny fire had accomplished it. They drove into the hunting lodge, to find one huge room where men were scattering for cover.

Most of them were taking to smaller rooms that served as living quarters for the mob; but one man, coming down a stairway that overhung from a wall, decided to return above. He had a gun; he aimed as he retreated. Sled saw him and beat the fellow to the shot.

Sight of a figure rolling down the stairway made the other crooks dive deeper into cover, while Sled and Thelma began to poke their heads through doorways looking for Silver Skull. How long they would survive such heedless tactics was a question that did not concern The Shadow when he arrived. Once inside the lodge, he saw something that interested him more.

Above the side stairway was a passage that led to bunk rooms. The Shadow could see the glint of steel in the gloomy lights. Those bunk-room doors were barred, they were the cells where Silver Skull had placed his prisoners.

The man that Sled had shot was a guard who watched the upper corridor. This was The Shadow's chance to reach the captives and protect them until reserves arrived. Aid would come soon, for The Shadow had planned a gunshot as a signal; and by this time, his agents had heard that token oft repeated.

HALFWAY up the stairs, The Shadow heard a cry behind him. It came from the guard that Sled had dropped. The crippled crook had come to life; forgetful of other feuds, he was raising a hoarse shout as he tried to aim his gun.

Sled scarcely heard the cry; but Thelma did. She turned, sprang back into a little room; voicing the startling news:

"The Shadow!"

Criminals needed no other battle cry. They were united on that instant. They sprang from the rooms, to see Sled shooting for the balcony above the stairs, where a cloaked shape was weaving toward the corridor. Along with Sled's wild shots came fierce tongues of flame stabbing down from that balcony. Those quick-knifed jabs proved the truth of Thelma's shout.

Sled crumpled; the suddenness of his fall showed the power of The Shadow's gunfire. Crooks opened a barrage against the fading shape in black, to be answered by shots that wilted them. Seeing some sprawl, the rest would have given up the battle, if Thelma had not rallied them. She had noted the sudden finish of The Shadow's quick fire.

"Rush him!" bawled Thelma. "He's out of slugs! Get him, before he loads those gats again!"

A hall dozen mobbies reached the stairs, shooting as they drove upward. Wheeling back into the passage, The Shadow made ready for a surge. His only chance was to club his way through the arriving thugs, using his big automatics as bludgeons.

A chance that he had taken in other battles, but one that might prove suicide on this occasion. The only outlet was that stairway; and if he reached it, The Shadow would be a point-blank target for Thelma, waiting below. She was as skillful with the trigger as any member of the driving mob; something that The Shadow knew from previous experience.

Then, almost on the verge of the thrust that seemed sure death, The Shadow was gripped by a staying hand that seemed to come from blackness beside him. He turned, and with that motion, flung his empty guns aside.

Beside that plucking hand was its mate – a welcome hand that held a fresh automatic, offering the loaded gun to the fighter who so badly needed it!

With one swoop, The Shadow took the weapon and wheeled toward the head of the stairway. His laugh rang out in sinister, taunting challenge to the crooks who sought his doom!

CHAPTER XX. CRIME REVEALED

THOSE hands from the dark were Geraldine's; the gun was the one that she had received from Allard at the beginning of their expedition on the desert. After her capture, the blond stewardess had realized the futility of battle, and had concentrated upon smuggling the weapon wherever she was taken.

Her hope had been to find a future use for it; and she could not have picked a better moment. Realizing that The Shadow was battling off crooks, she had supplied him with the needed weapon.

Continuing the sweep with which he took the gun, The Shadow drove straight for the stairway. Through the bars of the cell door, Geraldine saw him meet the arriving crooks, who halted perceptibly when they heard The Shadow's startling laugh.

SILVER SKULL

His gun hand thrust ahead of him, The Shadow slanted into the throng, providing the opening fire as he struck. Those shots put his foemen into utter rout. Revolvers popped, but they were gripped by staggering crooks who had received the unexpected fire before they could take aim.

Reeling backward, two gunmen trapped a pair of pals against the balcony rail. The weight of four bodies splintered the wooden posts. As the rail went, two crooks pitched from sight to the floor below, leaving their wounded comrades on the balcony edge.

There were two others still to be considered. They were on the steps, only a few below the top. They fired as they saw the cluster break; but they shot at blankness, not at The Shadow. He had dropped low, along with the slumping crooks. His gun jabbed twice again, almost from the level of the topmost step.

Independently, the gunmen on the stairway wavered; each took a backward topple. They were bounding crazily to the foot of the stairs, where Thelma was waiting with her gun. Sight of the pitching bodies made the nurse spring away before she started to aim up the stairway.

Thelma was too late. Her eyes saw the balcony before her gun could point. She met The Shadow's burning gaze, a looming muzzle just below. The smoke that curled from the automatic's mouth denoted its hunger for more prey; and Thelma knew that she was eligible.

Her lips twitched in a ruddy writhe, but the snarl that came from them was almost soundless. Numbly opening her hand, Thelma let her revolver drop.

The Shadow greeted that submission with a mocking laugh; one that made Thelma realize her folly, The Shadow could not have kept her covered, for there were others that he had to meet. The two men who had fallen from the balcony were on their hands and knees, trying to regain their dropped guns.

WITH Thelma no longer armed, The Shadow stopped their efforts with a warning hiss. They squatted, with their arms lifted, to gaze sourly toward the balcony. From the top step, The Shadow kept his .45 wangling back and forth between the crooks and Thelma, so that none had a chance to make a move.

Each moment, though, was reviving the squatting thugs. Their sidelong glances told that they were itching for a chance to grab their guns and dive beneath the balcony. Their opportunity seemed at hand, when The Shadow let his eyes roam beyond Thelma, toward the open door of the lodge.

Crooks dived. In a flash, The Shadow was half across the balcony edge, to cover them before they had their guns. Thelma, no longer covered, made a scramble for her own revolver. A hand clamped her arm, flung her half about, to the bottom of the stairs. Shouts stopped the crooks below the balcony before The Shadow had to use his gun.

A trio of picked fighters, agents of The Shadow, had arrived through the open door. It was Harry Vincent who had whipped Thelma away from the gun she wanted. The other two agents were upon the crooks below the balcony, taking over for The Shadow.

Then Harry was gone, to aid in the easy roundup; and Thelma was looking into a gun muzzle held by another hand. She saw brown eyes beneath a flurry of brown hair. She heard the icy tone that came from lips above a determined chin.

"You look very pale, Miss Royce," giped Mildred Wilbin. "Just relax, and follow my advice. If you don't, I may have to give you a few pills. Ones that you wouldn't like!"

SILVER SKULL

Thelma wasn't anxious to test the effects of Mildred's bullets. Quivering, she arose to her feet and let Mildred march her past the stairway, to be huddled with the other prisoners. Once there, Thelma gave a fearful gaze up toward the balcony. The Shadow was out of sight; but the fact didn't solace Thelma, for Mildred and The Shadow's agents were in complete control.

There was a muffled gunshot from the corridor above. With that one bullet, The Shadow smashed the lock of Geraldine's cell. He brought the blonde to the stairs, pointed her to the outer door. The Shadow gave a signal to his agents, then followed Geraldine outdoors.

They reached the autogiro, and listened there to distant sounds. Men were blundering through the woods, and The Shadow recognized who they must be. The time had come for his own departure. Helping Geraldine into the autogiro, The Shadow started the motor.

With a sudden roar, the big blades whirled; the ship jerked forward, taking off with a sharpness that left Geraldine breathless. Climbing straight for the darkness high above the trees, the autogiro had begun another of its mystery flights.

BACK in the lodge, Harry and Mildred were smashing locks of cell doors. Among the prisoners that they released was Herbert Wilbin, hugely joyful to find his niece awaiting him. The others, grateful for their release, were introducing themselves as Carter Curry, Roy Breck and John Lenville.

Filing down the stairway, the rescued prisoners were met by arrivals from outside. A man with a sheriff's badge stared goggle-eyed at the sprawled thugs who strewed the place. Sternness showed on his beefy face, as he demanded explanations.

Facts came, leaving the sheriff and his deputies bewildered. They'd heard all about the recent air disasters, and the murderer's airport in the Western desert. They knew that a hunt had been going on, its purpose to uncover a similar Eastern base.

Mildred Wilbin told them who she was, then introduced The Shadow's agents as friends who had helped her seek her uncle. No further details were necessary; for the fact that Herbert Wilbin and other supposed victims were alive, was something that dwarfed everything else.

At last, the sheriff found voice to quiz the prisoners. They received his questions in sullen silence, which did not seem to annoy him.

"We'll find out who the big-shot was," he predicted. "There was a crack-up about five miles from here, and people reported it. Some fellow with a searchlight, who couldn't land his plane. We were looking for the wreck, when we heard the shooting here.

"I'll bet it was the fellow behind the racket, trying to find his way here. Come along" – he gestured to Wilbin and the other rescued men – "and we'll see if they've found that plane. And bring her, too" – he pointed to Thelma – "because maybe she'll talk when we've got her alone."

Soon, cars were rolling along wheel ruts through the woods, to a spot where searchers had located the crashed plane. On foot, the group reached the wreckage. In the glare of flashlights lay a shattered human form; beside it, an aviator's helmet that glinted with a silvery hue.

Herbert Wilbin nodded solemnly, as he scanned the haggard, deep-lined face of Norwood Parridge.

SILVER SKULL

"He was the man who visited me," said Wilbin, "the night when Fortner turned traitor. Only Parridge could have left the token that served as order for my capture."

Gurry and Breck knew Parridge, too. So did John Lenville. He provided another comment.

"Parridge sold me his shares in Federated Airways," declared Lenville. "I had them with me when I was trapped at Zurman's office. So Parridge got them back again, along with my half million, leaving no one the wiser."

The sheriff turned to Thelma. This time, he did not have to question her.

"Yeah, Parridge was the big-shot," said Thelma. "The guy that called himself Silver Skull. Take a look" – she pointed to the ruined plane – "and you'll see the skull right there. It was the picture that Parridge put on every plane he flew.

"Nervy, wasn't it? But he got away with it easy enough. Because the only people who called him Silver Skull were those that worked with him. We never talked about Silver Skull to anybody that wasn't in the know."

ELSEWHERE, far from that lighted circle, another voice was reviewing the deeds of Silver Skull. It was the calm tone of Lamont Cranston, a guise to which The Shadow had returned. The Shadow was talking to Geraldine in the tiny cabin of the autogiro.

"Then Parridge trapped me," he explained, "thanks to a letter that he forced Lenville to sign. I suspected the trap; still, I fell into it. Once there, I knew definitely that Norwood Parridge was the brain behind the crimes.

"He openly revealed the fact, by talking from a life-sized silver skull. I was familiar with the insignia of many private pilots, Parridge's among them. I knew, too, that Parridge felt certain that I would never leave that trap; otherwise, he would not have revealed himself.

"Also, Parridge's plane was so fast that he could follow a transport West, shoot it down, and get back East the next day."

Geraldine nodded. She was understanding facts that The Shadow had revealed only in part, during their former journey together. She understood, at last, why he had preferred to play a waiting game. Knowing the true identity of Silver Skull, The Shadow had spun a web of his own, to trap the master murderer.

"I had Allard visit Parridge tonight," continued The Shadow, "to spring the final move. While Allard was there, someone tried to kill Parridge. Curiously, Parridge thought it was his own servant, Jeffrey, a crook like himself.

"Actually, Jeffrey was trying to help Parridge; for Jeffrey, too, was mistaken. Hearing shots, he thought that Allard had fired them. So he attacked Allard, only to be shot down by Parridge. That is the way with crooks: they trust no one, when they are in a hurry."

"But, who" – Geraldine halted, puzzled – "who was it that did try to murder Parridge?"

"My old friend Slead," was Cranston's reply. "He missed fire, and managed to escape. That's why he showed up, later, at the hunting lodge. He had heard enough to learn where it was."

"Odd, that Parridge didn't suspect that it was Slead."

SILVER SKULL

"Not at all! Because Parridge thought that Sled was dead. Don't forget that Sled had been told to take my place as a passenger on the Traveler."

It was all clear to Geraldine, at last. There were other questions, though, that intrigued her as much as the fate that had overtaken Silver Skull.

"What about Kent Allard?" she asked. "Does he know all these facts?"

"Kent Allard" – Cranston's tone carried a chuckle – "is an aviator, and a very daring one. A man, too, who will undertake any difficult task. But if you told Allard that I was The Shadow, I am certain that he would never believe you."

That settled the Allard question once and for all, so far as Geraldine was concerned. She didn't catch the subtle touch behind the statement that Kent Allard was The Shadow, and Lamont Cranston as well!

Moreover, Geraldine had shifted to another question – one that she regarded as more important than any that she had put before.

"Will you tell me, Mr. Cranston," she asked, "just where this present flight of ours is going to end?"

"Somewhere near the Rockies," replied The Shadow, "where we can take another freight train."

"Back to where we were?"

"Or near there. So we can stumble, weary and ragged, into some mountain cabin, to tell how we survived the crash."

Geraldine smiled. She'd forgotten that she and Cranston would have to explain their return to life. But she hadn't forgotten that day when they had trekked across the mountain slopes; a day, that to her present recollection, had been much too short

She didn't have to tell The Shadow that she was glad they were returning to the Rockies.

The Shadow knew.

THE END