

THE STAR OF DELHI

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. THE SECRET SIX

"The Star of Delhi!"

The man who spoke the words pronounced them with a tone of awe, as well he might. Resting in the white plush of the opened jewel casket was a magnificent sapphire, the largest that he had ever seen.

It wasn't surprising that he recognized the gem, for it was Raymond Walder's business, as head of Walder Co, noted New York jewelers, to identify precious stones.

But he hadn't expected to find the Star of Delhi in the possession of Armand Lenfell. Though a financier, wealthy enough to buy the Star of Delhi many times over, Lenfell had never rated as a jewel fancier in Walder's opinion.

Hence Walder's thin features, usually drab and expressionless, were registering amazement. He looked toward Lenfell, saw a smile on the financier's broad, heavy-jowled face. Then Walder's eyes returned to the Star of Delhi, as though drawn by a magnet.

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It was certainly a remarkable gem. Dome-shaped, its curved surface smooth, the Star of Delhi was large enough to fill the space between Walder's thumb and forefinger, had he placed them tip to tip. But color and size were not the features that gave the sapphire its fame.

Deep within the gem, Walder saw straight lines, streaks of light that radiated like the spokes of a wheel. Those scintillating shafts were the marks of the true star sapphire, a much-prized type of gem.

His breath returning, Walder began to express congratulations. Lenfell cut him short with booming tone.

"Convince yourself, Walder!" he said. "Make sure that this is actually the Star of Delhi."

Walder lifted the sapphire from its plush nest and calculated its weight. He produced a jeweler's glass and studied the gem through the magnifying lens. He held the Star to the light for a time, and finally returned it to the jewel case with a satisfied nod.

Then, quite suddenly, Walder became nervous. He glanced at the windows of Lenfell's study as though wondering if the shades were fully drawn. He stared over his shoulder toward the door, which was closed. He even gave a doubtful glance at Lenfell's modern safe, which stood behind the desk.

Lenfell inserted an indulgent laugh.

"I know what worries you, Walder," he said. "There have been many jewel robberies lately. But that is no cause for alarm. No criminals know that I have the Star of Delhi; hence they will not come here to find it."

Walder's eyes were still on the door. His face looked strained, for he was sure that he heard creeping footsteps in the hallway outside. He remembered his surprise when he arrived at the house a short while before, to find only one servant on the premises where usually there were many. Moreover, Walder recalled that Lenfell had promptly told the lone servant to take the evening off.

Yet the creeps from the hall were real! They had increased too noticeably, to be the product of Walder's imagination. Hoarsely, the jeweler began:

"Someone has entered the house, Lenfell –"

"I know it," interrupted Lenfell. "They are friends of mine. I want you to meet them, Walder. But first, you must prepare yourself for another surprise."

Lenfell stepped to a corner of the room. From a closet, he brought out a long dark coat, which he put on. Then, from a shelf, he produced a black hood that had two eye slits cut in it. Lenfell slid the hood over his head and peered through the slits.

Instead of the broad-faced financier, he had become an ominous figure from which Walder instinctively shrank. Then, feeling Lenfell's friendly clutch upon his arm, hearing the familiar voice from within the hood, Walder regained some of his composure.

"Come, Walder," said Lenfell, his tone reduced to mildness. "There is nothing to fear, I assure you."

The jeweler gave a pinch-faced smile. He wasn't going to be frightened by a mere masquerade. Lenfell was his friend, and was merely taking Walder to meet others who wanted to see the Star of Delhi, for Lenfell had closed the jewel casket and was bringing it along. The friends were obviously in Lenfell's library, for the hooded financier was taking Walder in that direction.

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Then, on the very threshold of the library, Walder gasped with horror and would have sagged to the floor if Lenfell's strong hand had not stayed him. Within the dimly lighted book-lined room, Walter saw Lenfell's friends. To a man, they were hooded like their host, and there were five of them!

With Lenfell, the group formed a secret six, as forbidding as a semicircle of inquisitors. Eyes glistening from hood slits, were fastened upon the slumping jeweler, as though accusing him, judging him, and condemning him, all on sight!

AIDING Walder to a chair, Lenfell placed the jewel casket on a table and opened it. Walder saw the gleam of the Star of Delhi, like a great blue eye, shining up to greet the strange band of hooded men.

Lenfell's voice, modulated to a kindly tone, gave Walder a vestige of relief, enough for him to glance upward. Then his courage returned. One man of the throng had unmasked: Lenfell. Sight of the financier's smiling face steeled Walder against the terror that his view of the rest produced.

"Be tranquil, Walder," said Lenfell. "I tried to ease the shock, by letting you see me in full regalia before meeting the rest. These men are friends, but of the group, I am the only who can unmask. I shall explain why."

Walder listened. He was getting used to the eyes about him. No longer did he imagine that they glared. They were becoming milder each time he studied them. All the while Lenfell's voice, easy but emphatic, was disclosing facts that Walder could comprehend.

"We are a syndicate of six," Lenfell explained, "who have contributed our wealth to buy gems from foreign refugees. Our purpose is to convert those jewels into cash, through private sales, giving unfortunate persons a fair return on the possessions that they are forced to sell.

"Of the six, I alone am known to the other five. Since they meet here in my house, I can unmask when occasion demands."

Walder was nodding, actually smiling at the members of Lenfell's secret six.

"We have met with an obstacle," proceeded Lenfell. "There have been so many jewel robberies of late, that wealthy customers are doubtful of our bona fide gems when approached, confidentially, by my associates. Buyers fear that the refugee story is false; that we are trying to unload stolen gems.

"Since we must do something to prove our status, we have decided to cut the Star of Delhi, one of our most important purchases, into six parts. Each of us will wear a ring containing a star sapphire from the famous Star of Delhi. That fact, alone, will mark us men of integrity. However, we do not care to take such a step without proper advice. We are asking yours, Walder."

Drawing himself together, Walder looked about the group; then stared at the Star of Delhi. He shuddered, not through a return of terror, but at the thought of cutting such a rare gem into smaller ones. Then, slowly, a canny look spread over Walder's features. His business sense outmatched his love of gems.

"The Star of Delhi is unique," conceded Walder. "It might be worth half a million dollars, to the proper buyer. But I doubt that you could find anyone nowadays who would pay more than a mere fraction of that sum.

"Cut into smaller stones" – he eyed the great gem appraisingly – "each a perfect star sapphire in its own right, the Star of Delhi would be more salable. Each of the six rings would be worth at least fifty thousand dollars

to its owner. There is merit in your plan, Lenfell."

Buzzes came from five hooded men; all those buzzes were approving. Lenfell heard them and took the murmurs as a vote in the affirmative. He simply said:

"We shall have the stone cut."

Still staring at the great Star, Walder was thinking of another factor. Quite accustomed to the hooded men by this time, he expressed his theme.

"You must find some way," he said, "to let people know that the Star of Delhi is in America, and that it has actually been cut into smaller gems –"

Lenfell was interrupting with a smile that Walder noted.

"We are counting upon you to help us," said Lenfell. "You have seen the Star of Delhi, Walder. Your word is beyond reproach. We have hoped that you would see fit to exhibit the six ring's, stating their origin, without naming the man who placed them in your custody: that is, myself."

THE idea startled Walder for the moment. As he looked about, he fancied again that eyes were glaring at him from the hoods. But Walder's business acumen came to the fore. He visualized the publicity that such an exhibit would bring to Walder Co. Gradually, he nodded his willingness.

There was a wave of Lenfell's hand. One by one, the members of the hooded group departed, until all were gone save Lenfell. Walder could hear their creeping progress down the stairs – some by the front, others by the back, one by a side stairway that was little used. Then, back in Lenfell's study, Walder gave a smile of real relief to find himself alone again with Lenfell, the Star of Delhi lying on the desk between them.

While Lenfell was putting away his coat and hood, Walder made a suggestion.

"You may entrust the cutting of the stone to the proper man," he said. "I would say that there is only one such man in New York."

Lenfell paused while opening the safe, where he intended to replace the Star of Delhi.

"You mean Roger Sherbrock?"

"I mean Sherbrock," replied Walder. "Of course, there are foreign experts here – better men, perhaps, than Sherbrock. But they are men who have lost fortunes and might prove bitter. They would be dangerous. You can rely on Sherbrock. I repeat, he is the only man."

"I shall see Sherbrock" decided Lenfell. The safe was open; he put the jewel casket in it. "You will hear from me later, Walder. Meanwhile, accept my thanks for your kind co-operation. It is hardly necessary" – he was extending his hand – "for me to add that I sent the servants out tonight so they would not happen to see any of my hooded visitors."

Lenfell personally conducted Walder to the front door. Outside, the jeweler looked back at the large old-fashioned mansion and gave another shudder at sight of its gloom and bulk. Into that shiver, Walder put memories of the creeping sounds that he had heard, those weird indications of the advent of Lenfell's hooded friends.

Then, briskly, Walder walked to the next corner to find a cab.

There were creeping sounds again in the old mansion. Armand Lenfell was making them himself as he returned to his study. He didn't mind them; indeed, he rather enjoyed the weird sound, for Lenfell was smiling, more noticeably than before. His smile had become a leer of an insidious sort, as he stooped at the safe to reopen it.

Then, with the Star of Delhi again on his desk, Armand Lenfell sat back and waited, his leer taking on a satanic touch as he gazed at the blue gleam from the great Star of Delhi. His head was tilted, for Armand Lenfell was listening for new creeps in the hallway.

Creeps that would announce another visitor, less fearsome in appearance than the members of the secret six, but one who would understand Lenfell better. Lenfell had spoken truly, in stating that his hooded associates were banded together in a cause of good. His one lie had been his inclusion of himself in such a worthy purpose.

Alone, unobserved by either Walder or the secret throng, Armand Lenfell could relax and reveal himself for what he really was – a man with crime at heart. He was waiting for another of that same ilk, that together they might plot an underhanded scheme involving the much-valued Star of Delhi!

CHAPTER II. BAIT FOR CRIME

THE exhibit of the six star sapphires, when announced a week later, was promptly heralded as the event of the New York jewelry season. Raymond Walder, true to his word, surrounded it with integrity and mystery.

Walder's statement that he had seen the Star of Delhi, was something unimpeachable. His declaration that he could not name its owner, provided the mystery. He added, of course, the news that the Star of Delhi had been cut into six parts, and other jewelers agreed that the process would render the gem, or segments of it, more salable.

But Walder did not state who had cut the sapphire. He simply invited the public to view the sextuple result.

Few persons in New York were more interested in Walder's coming display than was Lamont Cranston. A millionaire collector of rarities, including jewels, Cranston seemed disappointed only because the Star of Delhi had been reduced to a sectional form. He tried to treat the matter lightly, but he did not deceive Margo Lane.

She could tell Lamont's mood, when they lunched together on the day of Walder's exhibit, and from remarks he dropped, she was quite sure that he would have prized the Star of Delhi for his own collection. It was too bad, Margo thought, that Cranston had not learned that the great Star was for sale before it was hacked to chunks. Calm-mannered, his hawkish face often masklike, Lamont Cranston seldom revealed his inner thoughts, even to an attractive and sympathetic brunette like Margo Lane. But it was plain, on this occasion, that Cranston should normally have stayed away from the exhibit at Walder's.

Mere sight of six lovely star sapphires, in place of one unblemished marvel, would certainly pain him. Margo knew that Cranston was going to the exhibit purely from sense of duty.

That was because Margo also knew that this man who posed as Lamont Cranston was actually The Shadow, master fighter who battled crime. As The Shadow, he couldn't afford to miss the Walder exhibit, because it was the greatest bait for men of crime that had been offered in months.

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The newspapers were full of jewel robberies. A few had occurred in New York, despite the vigilance of The Shadow, but the rest had happened in other cities. Though the mob, like the master mind who handled the game, was probably in New York, no leads were yet available. Stolen stuff, if peddled, had been artfully fenced without being traced; all the more reason why The Shadow should be on the job.

Therefore, Margo was quite sure that Cranston wanted to visit Walder's to look over the customers as much as the sapphires. He knew that crooks couldn't resist the lure that the exhibit offered.

It was fairly late in the afternoon when Cranston and Margo finally arrived at Walder's. The exclusive jewelry store was under heavy guard. Armed guards stood outside, and others were posted at strategic spots inside the store itself.

All other jewelry, the usual Walder stock, had been put away for safekeeping, except for cheaper items that would interest the general public. Emphasis was upon the six sapphires.

The stones that represented the famous Star of Delhi were in a special burglarproof case in the exact center of the store. The box, bolted into a stone pedestal, had a top surface of bulletproof glass, protected by photoelectric devices connected with burglar alarms.

Sometimes, such cases had lights inside them. This one did not. The sapphires scintillated under the beam of a spotlight focused from a ceiling dome.

Even in sixes, the sapphires were marvelous to view. They were the size of large peas, and quite as much alike. Each had its identifying touch – the star formation – and all were set in rings of the same type: heavy, plain gold.

People, passed along the rail that fronted the display and gave gasps of appreciation, so that the vaulted space of Walder's jewelry store echoed constantly with one repeated simper.

MARGO was pleased to observe a flicker of passing interest on Cranston's immobile features. The perfect match of the six sapphires intrigued him, as did the provisions taken for their custody.

But when he had finished looking at the gems and drawn away to the outskirts of the throng, his mind went back to the persons present. Close beside him, Margo caught Cranston's undertone.

"Look for others who are staying around. People who seem too sure of themselves."

Margo looked. If her opinion had counted, The Shadow would have had about fifty suspects. Knowing there couldn't be that many, Margo gave it up.

"I'm no good, Lamont," she confessed. "If you can pick any goats from these sheep –"

"I see one goat," interposed Cranston. "Look over by that notion counter, Margo. You'll recognize him."

Margo's eyes almost popped as she studied a young man whose face, though somewhat hardened, looked to be the result of dissipation, rather than crime. She caught herself just in time to keep from exclaiming his name too loud:

"Dwig Brencott!"

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Handsome in his way, black-haired, with a complexion that would be defined as dark, rather than sallow, Dwig was the pride of the night clubs. A member of cafe society, he never appeared in public until afternoon, and from then on, could be seen in what some columnists considered the "best places" in town.

Dwig was in and out, from one spot to another, until the closing hour, which was usually five in the morning. It hadn't occurred to Margo, until Cranston mentioned it, that such a practice might be Dwig's alibi. Dwig had a way of being somewhere else, very often. There were many times when he might even have been out of town.

It could be that Dwig was the mainspring of the jewel mob, so far as actual robberies were concerned. If so, he was falling for the blue bait. Whether or not he intended to go after the six sapphires, Dwig hadn't been able to resist the temptation of looking over the situation. The Shadow's theory was right; not only that, it was proven.

Of all people, Dwig Brencott wouldn't be hanging around the cheap jewelry counter, striking up an acquaintance with a melancholy-looking clerk, unless he had some purpose in mind. He would be more likely to chat with Raymond Walder, who was standing behind the sapphire exhibit, except that Walder was getting attention from socially prominent visitors, who might remember Dwig if he made himself too noticeable.

"At seven o'clock," Margo heard Cranston say, in an even undertone, "the sapphires will be removed in an armored truck. It will be dark at seven, and the truck will be the natural target for an attack. It might be well for someone to follow the truck."

Margo nodded. She could think of someone perfectly qualified: namely, The Shadow. Hence, Cranston's next words rather surprised her.

"Tacking an armored truck would be too difficult," he said indifferently. "There will be no trouble outside. It would be interesting, though, to know where the sapphires go. Suppose you stay around, Margo. Then you can follow the truck, and find out."

STILL wondering if her ears were hearing right, Margo forgot to use her eyes. She was looking at Cranston, not at Dwig. But, in his turn, The Shadow was watching Dwig Brencott. He saw the sleek man turning away from the counter, about to leave Walder's store.

Outside, accumulating dusk promised Dwig an easy departure. It also offered The Shadow an excellent chance to follow him; hence The Shadow's casual instructions to Margo.

Before Margo could argue that trailing trucks was not her idea of a pleasant evening, Cranston strolled away as if the whole matter had been settled. It was then that Margo discovered the coincidental departure of Dwig Brencott, and understood.

In giving her one trail, Lamont was taking up an earlier, and more difficult, one. He was following Dwig Brencott, on the chance that he might learn enough to stifle coming crime before it even began.

In either event, whether crooks planned to move tonight or not, Margo's task of trailing the truck would be reduced to a matter of routine. Should any threat of actual danger arrive, The Shadow would be the one to accept it.

Of course, Cranston had neither stated nor implied that fact. He had a way of treating The Shadow as a different personality than himself, even though Margo had long identified them as the same. It was just

another proof of The Shadow's perfect tact.

Considering how crooks were always gunning for the black-clad avenger who so often crossed their paths, it was wise policy for The Shadow to deny the Cranston link, even among friends.

Proof of his sagacity was being evidenced outside of Walder's store, where Dwig Brencott, turning to walk along the avenue, was taking a shrewd backward glance into the jewelry house. Had Dwig even suspected that Cranston could be The Shadow, he might have noticed Margo's hawk-faced friend strolling out with others who were leaving the exhibit.

As it was, Dwig simply classed them all as curiosity seekers who had seen enough of the sapphire display. The sleek man was on lookout for persons who might be detectives, and he was quite sure that none such had followed him from the store.

In the back of his mind, perhaps, Dwig might have been looking for a stealthy figure clad in black, but the lighted doorway of the jewelry store could have offered no concealment, even for The Shadow.

When such a figure did appear, he came from across the avenue, where Cranston had gone, unnoticed. Stepping into one door of a taxicab, Cranston had entered as himself, and come out the other side as The Shadow, all in a matter of mere seconds.

He was on the west side of the avenue, where the buildings cut off the last rays of sunset. Under the shroud of dusk, The Shadow was gliding, unseen, from doorway to doorway, keeping pace with his quarry, Dwig Brencott.

Cloaked in black, a slouch hat drawn down across his eyes, The Shadow wore the famous garb that enabled him to stalk an unsuspecting prey. With darkness on the increase, every minute was improving the conditions that the cloaked investigator needed in his present expedition.

With nearly an hour until seven o'clock, The Shadow was confident that he could learn the essential details of any crime with which Dwig Brencott, might be concerned.

That was why a whispered laugh came from The Shadow's hidden lips. It was a tone that presaged trouble for men of evil, the sort of trouble that The Shadow could provide. As bait for thieves, the six sapphires had come up to The Shadow's expectations. The rest would lie in his hands.

Perhaps The Shadow's tone would have lacked the prophetic touch had he known the full story of the Star of Delhi and the six blue gems that Raymond Walder was exhibiting as the carved components of the famous sapphire.

That story could have given The Shadow an index to the startling and unexpected turn that crime was to produce at seven o'clock; events that even The Shadow would not quite fathom when they came!

CHAPTER III. CRIME IN REVERSE

"AT seven o'clock, in front of Walder's."

It was the fourth time that Dwig Brencott had given those simple instructions from the telephone booth near the cloakroom in the Club Cadiz, which was one of the night spots that Dwig frequented.

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Just past the cloakroom was a stairway, and under its shelter The Shadow was listening to Dwig's smooth-purred tone, hoping that he would specify further details; but Dwig didn't. Furthermore, The Shadow had encountered another handicap.

From his listening post, he could hear Dwig's voice, but the clicks of the phone dial were not audible enough to be translated into numbers, a favorite trick of The Shadow's. Hence, when Dwig left the phone booth and went to the bar to get a drink, The Shadow had gained a rather frugal net result.

He knew only that Dwig had called four men, all obviously tools of crime, instructing them to be outside Walder's at the time when the six sapphires were to be taken away. Perhaps those four would bring others; in any event, the thing fitted with The Shadow's previous calculation that Dwig intended to trail the truck that came for the sapphires, either to take a crack at its contents, or to learn the truck's destination.

At the bar, Dwig was chatting with cronies and building up something of an alibi. He was telling them other places where he intended to go, even suggesting that some come along with him and make the round of the hot-spots. They were all promising to meet Dwig later, the very point for which he had been playing.

Seven o'clock was drawing close. By then, Dwig would be gone from the Club Cadiz, for the build-up that he was giving indicated, to The Shadow, that the sleek man intended to be at Walder's, too.

But Dwig was making it very easy for himself to drop out of the night-club picture for the half-hour between seven and seven-thirty, and yet have friends believe that he had been at one place or another all during that period.

Gliding out through a little-used rear exit from the Club Cadiz, The Shadow paused near a darkened corner and blinked a tiny flashlight. Its rays were green, and the flashes caused a parked coupe to come in The Shadow's direction.

The man at the wheel was Harry Vincent, one of The Shadow's capable secret agents. Sliding in beside him, The Shadow instructed Harry to drive over to the avenue and park near the corner beyond Walder's.

The Shadow had a purpose in choosing that corner. He was certain that the truck would stop at the side door of the jewelry store, on a one-way street, where traffic headed toward the avenue.

Since Dwig had ordered his men to be in front of Walder's, they wouldn't be in a position to attempt a robbery until after the truck was under way. Then, they would logically come from the avenue and swing in back of the truck, to follow it.

As for making an attack before the jewels left the store, that would be sheer folly. Dwig had looked over the lay; certainly he knew how strongly Walder's was guarded.

Crooks wouldn't get past the front door, if they tried to rush the guards and reach the sapphire display before anyone came for it. Besides, Dwig had specified seven o'clock, which wouldn't give him time to organize such a foolhardy attempt.

SEVEN o'clock.

The hour had arrived. From his vantage point, The Shadow looked back along the avenue and saw a car sliding into a parking space. Evidently, some of Dwig's men had come by car, while others were to join them on foot.

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Glancing down the side street The Shadow saw a small armored truck stopping at the delivery entrance. Men in uniform, coming from the truck were meeting others from the store.

At the front door of Walder Co, guards were moving the last patrons out. The last of the lot was Margo Lane, and a taxicab wheeled in to take her as a passenger. The driver of that cab was Moe Shrevnitz, another of The Shadow's secret agents. Margo wasn't surprised to see Moe's cab arrive. It usually showed up whenever Lamont Cranston delegated Margo to special missions.

About to enter the cab, Margo paused, as though she had forgotten something. She had a chance to look back into the jewelry store. The place had cleared, and she saw Raymond Walder superintending the removal of the burglarproof display case that contained the rare star sapphires.

With Walder were a few other jewelers, taking a last look at the much-prized gems. Though those privileged visitors had not handled the sapphires, they were quite convinced that the six stones had been cut from the famous Star of Delhi. To them, the word of Raymond Walder – that he had seen and examined the great sapphire itself – was as good as the gold which formed the rings in which the six gems were mounted.

Margo stalled until she saw the case go out through the side door. From his observation point, The Shadow watched the rapid loading of the truck. Immediately, the armored vehicle moved forward and kept straight across the avenue, along the side street. By then, Moe's cab was under way. It took the corner and followed the truck.

Harry was sliding the coupe into gear. The Shadow's gloved hand restrained the start that the agent was about to make.

Next in order was to be the crook-manned car, and after it passed, The Shadow would follow it. Meanwhile, Moe would be dropping from the trail, for The Shadow had given him a red blink from the little flashlight when the cab swung past the coupe.

With crooks on the truck's trail, as The Shadow expected them to be, Margo wouldn't be needed. That was why The Shadow had ordered Moe to come with the cab. Moe, or Shrevvy, as they often called him, would explain to Margo that The Shadow was taking over.

Like all The Shadow's plans, this one was well laid, but it was destined to go astray. Dwig's car was starting and the Shadow gave Harry the word to go, but to let the other vehicle swing past him. Then, abruptly, thugs made a stop directly in front of Walder's.

Before The Shadow could do more than reach for the door of the coupe, mobsters were out of their car and across the sidewalk, dashing into the jewelry store. There were six of them, all masked, and their leader was about the build of Dwig Brencott. The Shadow had time only to glimpse the masked crew before they disappeared inside the store.

The whole thing was crazy. Dwig must certainly have seen the armored truck pull away; he surely knew that the sapphires were inside it. This was the unexpected point that The Shadow had in no wise anticipated. Dwig's thrust was an attack upon an empty nest, from which the wanted prizes had been removed!

At least, Dwig had accomplished one thing. Without knowing that The Shadow was on hand, he had beaten the black-cloaked fighter to his goal – which happened to be Walder's store, not the armored truck. Dwig had gained a margin of only a few dozen seconds, considering that he and his masked companions were at the store itself, whereas The Shadow was up at the corner ahead. But the time was enough for crooks to get in deadly work.

Guards were gone from the front door, for, with the truck's departure, their duty was ended. Walder held the center of the floor, where he was shaking hands with the visiting jewelers. While there were still some guards in the place, they had gone beyond the counters to change from uniforms to other clothes.

It was Raymond Walder who first saw the invasion and gave a frantic yell to his helpless friends. The other jewelers went ducking for the counters, easy targets for the guns that masked men brandished, had Dwig and his murderous pals wanted to shoot them down.

But they were choosing one victim only, Raymond Walder, and he was even easier than the rest. For Walder, brave when confronted by the grueling test, was holding his ground, shouting for the guards to return and aid him against the attacking tribe.

Six guns spoke almost as one. Walder took the bullets from that firing squad. Riddled by the close-range shots, the drab jeweler was dead before he struck the floor. Inspired by that show of courage, guards were springing across the counters, some still in uniform, others not, but all with guns that they had hurriedly snatched.

Mobsters were ready for them too. The masked leader gave a snarl, that no one could have identified with the smooth, affable tone of Dwig Brencott. Wheeling like a well-trained team, the killers were taking point-blank aim, each at a different human target. They intended to blast the guards as they had finished Walder: to leave no one to hamper their retreat to safety.

It was a moment made for murder, a triumph for these killers who had arrived ahead of The Shadow. But their very surety was to be the factor that would end their delivery of further doom. They had wasted a few vital seconds; those seconds were enough to ruin them.

From the avenue door came a fierce, defiant challenge – the mockery that crimedom feared and hated; the tone that made deep-dyed crooks forget all other purposes and seek only to meet the taunter in a duel of death.

The laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER IV. HALF AN ANSWER

DWIG BRENCOTT and his masked companions had staged crime in reverse, by attempting what seemed a robbery in a place where booty could no longer be obtained. To that reverse, The Shadow was adding another twist. Announcing himself with strident, mocking challenge he was inviting enemies to treat him as they had done Raymond Walder.

The trouble was, they couldn't. Though they outnumbered The Shadow six to one, he held advantages which, taken separately, were slim, but added together made a total that Dwig and his pals failed to calculate.

Foremost of those advantages were The Shadow's guns, a brace of automatics, already drawn, that began a pointed tattoo while crooks were on the whirl. Two of the masked men ended their spins in sprawls before they could pull their gun triggers.

Others, too, were at a loss. In Walder, they had found a close-range target who hadn't tried to dive away from their guns. The Shadow was more distant, and crooks expected him to dive. They fired for the doorway, to get him when he tried to fade. But The Shadow's momentary twist was only a feint that came with the recoil of his automatics.

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Instead of whipping back through the doorway, he took a long lunge forward, striking almost flat, but catching himself on his elbows as he slid along the tiled floor of the jewelry store. Bullets whizzed above The Shadow's head, high by feet rather than inches, while from the floor level he used each .45 to blaze answers at his adversaries.

The Shadow's shots were quick ones, calculated to make crooks dive, rather than to drop them; but he succeeded both ways. Dwig and two others managed to do a frantic duck, but The Shadow clipped the fourth man. Coming up from elbows to knees, he was ready for more target practice with the remaining three; but, by then, it was unneeded. The final factor had come into the game.

The final factor: namely, the guards who only a few seconds earlier had been facing cold-blooded death. Not only had they rallied, they were right in the paths that Dwig and his two unwounded pals were taking to get away from The Shadow's fire. Two to one, the guards were pouncing on the hapless crooks, intending to suppress them.

Unfortunately, the guards were too ardent, as the crooks had been with The Shadow. While Dwig and the other two were trying to wrest away in among the counters, and losing their guns in the attempt, the guards heard shots.

Wounded men were supplying them from the floor, and the guards didn't wait for The Shadow to suppress those cripples. Instead, they turned to blaze away at the incapable marksmen.

The Shadow cleared a counter in one long leap, his only way to escape the misguided fire that the vengeful guards supplied. Dwig and his two unscathed companions dashed for the front door, hoping only for a getaway, since they were gunless.

Coming up from the counter, The Shadow aimed to stop them, but by then the guards were in the way, closing in upon the wounded men that they had already riddled.

One guard saw the three escaping crooks and yelled. The rest flooded toward the door, firing as they started, thereby ending The Shadow's last chance of inserting timely shots. Once hurried, the guards were even worse marksmen than the crooks.

Two masked men went safely through the door while bullets were cracking show windows on each side. The third of the fleeing tribe – the nervy Dwig – actually made a pause in flight, to pick up a gun that a guard had kicked from the hand of a wounded thug.

Speeding to the side door, The Shadow looked along the street, saw Dwig's car make a two-wheeled turn from the avenue. The guards, by then, were shooting from the front door of Walder's, and a single gun was answering from Dwig's car.

Coolly, The Shadow aimed at the spurting weapon, intending to put Dwig out of action and therewith demoralize the escaping pair who accompanied him. Again, The Shadow was forced to stay a timely shot.

Another car whipped around the corner. It was Harry's coupe, taking up the pursuit, and it cut right into The Shadow's path of aim. The two cars sped along the street, and The Shadow watched them dwindle to a distant corner while the noise of guns trailed back from both.

The chase was far beyond The Shadow's range of fire when he saw Dwig's car swerve around another corner. There were flashes of tiny guns and Dwig's car was gone, while Harry's coupe kept ahead and climbed a curb. Still watching, The Shadow saw his agent come from the coupe and stoop beside it.

Dwig's shot hadn't clipped Harry; it had taken a front tire instead. But it meant that Dwig was off in the clear, free to make his round of night clubs, while the two thugs with him could return to hide-aways.

Sirens were sounding in front of Walder's, telling that police cars had arrived. With a gloomy departing laugh, The Shadow took his way into paths of darkness.

JUST as Dwig Brencott moved in a fancier sphere than the ratty crooks who had helped him in a scheme of murder guised as robbery, so did The Shadow frequent places much more exclusive than the night spots that Dwig patronized.

As Lamont Cranston, The Shadow was a member of the Cobalt Club, which numbered many millionaires among its patrons.

It happened that Police Commissioner Ralph Weston belonged to the Cobalt Club, and esteemed Cranston as a bosom friend. Chances were that Cranston would be hearing from the commissioner as he always did when crime reached up from the underworld and bothered high society. So The Shadow went to the Cobalt Club, arriving there as Cranston.

He hadn't long to wait. Notified of a telephone call, the leisurely Mr. Cranston answered it and heard the brusque voice of Commissioner Weston, telling him about the tragedy at Walder's and asking him to come over. Indulgently, The Shadow drawled that he would. A while later, he arrived there in the guise of Cranston.

Instead of six sapphires, there were four bodies on display. One was Walder's; the other three were the crooks that The Shadow had crippled and the guards had slaughtered. All three had been identified as low characters from the badlands, which didn't surprise The Shadow. He was quite sure that Dwig Brencott, crook deluxe, would choose the lowest of companions for criminal forays, just to distract all thoughts from himself.

The man who had identified the three hoodlums was present. He was a swarthy, stocky, police inspector; by name, Joe Cardona. He rated as Weston's ace inspector, despite the fact that Joe and the commissioner were wont to argue.

Usually they had conflicting theories as the cause of their dispute, and they were running true to form now. Both were irked because the three thugs had died too soon to be questioned, but except for that point, the commissioner and the inspector were at loggerheads.

"The case is obvious," growled Weston. "These men belong to the band of jewel thieves who have been operating so extensively. They are of a low type, and their leader was undoubtedly the roughest of the lot. They weren't the sort who could show their faces in a store like this, even before they made their attempt at robbery.

"So they simply waited outside until they saw that the door was clear of guards. Not knowing that the sapphires had been removed, they made the thrust, hoping to grab the gems that they had heard about. Walder tried to block them, so they killed him."

The Shadow knew that Weston's theory was even wider than the shots that the excited guards had fired after Dwig when the crook deluxe departed. Even before they pulled up in front of Walder's, Dwig and his company had been close enough to see the removal of the sapphires by the side door.

They had even waited until the armored truck went across the avenue before making their thrust at the store itself. Therefore, The Shadow was interested to learn if Cardona had a different theory.

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Joe did have. It was as far from the mark as Weston's.

"I figure it different, commissioner," gruffed Cardona. "These gunzels weren't after the sapphires. They'd have been dumb to snatch a load of matched gems like those six blue stars. What they were figuring on was a robbery of Walder's regular stock.

"They doped it that the guards would unlace as soon as the truck pulled away, which is just what did happen. It was a crazy time to stage a robbery, with the big swag gone. Only, like I said, this outfit would have laid off of gems that couldn't be easily fenced. They were pulling a routine job at a time no body figured it would come. That's all."

Recalling Dwig's presence in the jewelry shop earlier, The Shadow could easily have refuted Cardona's theory. Dwig, had seen for himself that Walder, expecting an influx of curiosity seekers, had locked up all of his worth—while stock and left nothing but showcases of cheap trinkets and notions for visitors to look at, after getting an eyeful of the six star sapphires.

LEAVING Weston and Cardona to argue the merits of their erroneous opinions, The Shadow expressed his regret over Walder's death, and gave a leisurely good night in typical Cranston style. Still retaining his lackadaisical pose, he left the store, entered a waiting limousine outside and rode to his favorite restaurant.

Sight of Moe's cab, parked outside, told The Shadow that he would find Margo inside, which he did.

As they dined, Margo kept watching the immobile face of Cranston hoping for some expression that would answer the questions that she had in mind. None came, but as the finished dinner, The Shadow spoke in Cranston's steady tone.

"It's too bad, Margo," he said, "that you didn't follow the truck, as I suggested."

"But I did!" began Margo. "Only, I was in Shrevvy's cab, and he dropped the trail. He said that The Shadow —"

She stopped abruptly. There was no use in telling The Shadow something that he already knew. Margo realized that his remark had merely been a statement in keeping with the Cranston pose. It wasn't policy with Cranston to know what The Shadow had planned until someone else told him.

"A peculiar chap, The Shadow," observed Cranston quietly. "He usually succeeds; but tonight he bungled things. He is partly to blame for Walder's death, but I suppose we cannot criticize him. Crime certainly took an unexplainable twist."

Margo arched her eyebrows. So far, she agreed that the attempted robbery at Walder's was unexplainable, but she was gaining the impression that Cranston had an answer to the riddle. The way to get an answer was to ask for one.

"Very well, Lamont," said Margo. "Just why did Dwig and his masked crew head the wrong way? We thought that they would go after the truck; instead, they went into the jewelry store. What was their reason?"

Cranston spoke three words:

"To murder Walder!"

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The fact was so simple that it took Margo's breath away. She had racked her brain for the answer, and Cranston had provided it in a style that left no room for dispute. The explanation brought a flood of ideas, all in keeping with the theme itself.

Margo realized that the surge of masked men into Walder's couldn't have been a robbery attempt, at all, for she knew the flaws in the theories held by Weston and Cardona.

Not being a robbery, it had been a cover-up for something else. Dwig and his ugly band wouldn't have wasted time at getting to their objective. One use of cover-ups was to make a success look like a failure. Dwig Brencott had accomplished that very purpose.

The one thing that the law did not suspect was the fact that unknown men had sought to slay Raymond Walder, rather than to rob his store or to seize the six sapphires that some wealthy, unnamed patron had asked him to display.

The riddle of seven-o'clock crime was half answered by The Shadow. But in giving half an answer, the investigator who posed as Cranston, was making it plain that the rest had not been learned. The Shadow's regret – that Margo hadn't followed the armored truck – was real, even though he, himself, had taken her off the trail. Until the owner of the former Star of Delhi was discovered, the reason for Walder's death would remain unanswered. Watching the gaze of Cranston's eyes, Margo could tell that they were visualizing the six sapphires that he had viewed that afternoon.

No longer bait for criminals, those missing gems had become the object of The Shadow's next quest!

CHAPTER V. CREEPS IN THE DARK

SEATED in his study, Armand Lenfell was resting his folded arms upon the desk, listening intently for sounds from outside the room. Beside him lay a stack of newspapers, the accumulation of three days. They showed glaring headlines that concerned the attempted robbery which had resulted in the sudden death of Raymond Walder.

A wince showed on Lenfell's lips, as his eyes drifted to the newspapers. When alone, Lenfell always let his real opinions register themselves upon his face. It was plain that he not only regretted Walder's death, but felt anxious regarding its possible consequences to himself. Lenfell's expression lost none of its troubled air while he was noting the most recent headlines.

A sound brought Lenfell from his reverie. It was the one that he expected, a creeping through the hallway. Not merely a cautious tread like those that had roused Walder's imagination on the night of the jeweler's visit to Lenfell's house, but a creak that was actually ominous. The creeping carried its echoes along the hall, making it impossible for Lenfell to estimate the exact distance of the approaching visitor.

Indeed, Lenfell's eyes were still half closed, his full attention concentrated upon listening to the crawling footsteps, when the door of the room opened as if at its own accord.

Popping upright in his chair, Lenfell stared at the gaping door as though expecting it to devour him. In the dimness of the hall he saw a whitish face that seemed floating there, until Lenfell recognized it. It was his familiarity with the smiling countenance that brought the financier to his senses, making him realize that the face in the doorway had a body attached.

Lenfell sank back in his chair, tugged a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead.

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The man from the hallway entered. He came with a pace that was a cross between a shuffle and tip-toe. His face, as it neared the desk, underwent a variety of changes, due largely to the angles from which the light struck it, for the man, himself, did not outwardly alter his demeanor.

From a white blur, with a slitted smile, the face became a withery, lipless visage spread in a fangish leer. Still nearer the desk, it caught a more flattering light, and lost its venom.

Lenfell's visitor was dryish-faced, rather than withery. He had lips, when one was close enough to observe them. As for teeth, they were prominent, but not ugly when studied in proper proportion to the rest of his face. Indeed, his smile was friendly, though with a cunning touch that Lenfell, no longer perturbed, could appreciate as belonging to a man of his own likes and ambitions.

The visitor's odd gait accounted, of course, for the echoing creeps that had so deceived Lenfell, even in his own preserves. But it only certified the man as one worthy of Lenfell's confidence. Furthermore, the visitor's thin white hair marked him as elderly, and therefore lacking any physical superiority over Lenfell.

Keenly, the white-haired man's shrewd gaze went from Lenfell to the newspapers and back again. The visitor spoke with slight traces of a rattly wheeze; otherwise, his tone was mild and kindly.

"Still brooding over Walder?" he queried. "Come, come, my friend! You can in no wise be held to blame for his death."

"Why not?" returned Lenfell. "I gave him the sapphires –"

The old man interposed a laugh. He tilted his head as he did, and his merriment was genuine, though its rattly wheeze carried too much of the macabre for Lenfell to join in it. Then, lowering his eyes, the old man let them glisten steadily upon Lenfell.

"You gave him what he thought were sapphires," the visitor corrected. "The synthetic gems which I, Jan Garmath, manufactured in my crucible. Not imitations of existing gems" – Garmath smiled proudly – "but conceptions of what the Star of Delhi would look like if divided into sixes."

Lenfell nodded. Then:

"At any rate," he said, "I gave Walder gems that passed as the sapphires and made him the target for crime and death."

"Through no blame of yours," argued Garmath. "According to those newspapers" – he waved a long hand toward the desk – "the murderers were after Walder's own jewels, not your sapphires. The police have not even pushed the case far enough to seek the owner of the former Star of Delhi."

GARMATH'S reassurance restored Lenfell's composure. Catching the contagion of the old man's grin, Lenfell rose from his desk and turned to the safe. It was already unlocked; he opened the door and brought out two jewel cases – a long one, and a square one. He placed them on the desk and opened them.

Set in a row within the long case were the six sapphires that had been exhibited at Walder's. From the square box gleamed the famous Star of Delhi, as large and as radiant as when Walder had first viewed it. So like the great gem were the smaller ones, that the eye could almost identify them as one and the same.

"A marvelous job, Garmath," commended Lenfell. "I doubt that any cutter, even Sherbrock, could have produced as fine a resemblance as you have with these synthetics. They will please my friends when they

arrive."

Sounds from somewhere in the hall below caused Lenfell to remember that his friends were almost due. Hurriedly, he closed the case that contained the great Star and replaced it in the safe, spinning the combination dial.

Then, taking the longer case with its six rings, he stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind him. He was going to the library, to meet the first of his hooded associates.

Immediately, Jan Garmath rose from his chair and approached the door. Opening it a crack, he listened, caught the sound of voices. Then, with his creepy stride, Garmath moved toward the library, but no longer were his footfalls audible. Silent in his creep, Garmath had become a most insidious figure.

Peering between the edge of the library doorway and a curtain, Garmath observed Lenfell and a hooded arrival. Not having considered it necessary to mask on this occasion, Lenfell expected his lone friend to raise his hood, which the other man did.

The two were talking as man to man, Lenfell expressing regrets over Walder's death and bolstering them with the very arguments that Garmath had provided. Garmath saw the unhooded visitor nod his sympathetic understanding; then, when Lenfell opened the jewel case, the man took one of the rings.

That visitor was hooded and on the way out, as other footsteps came up the stairs. Squeezing his frail form deep in the doorway, Garmath waited. He saw another of the hoods enter and unmask to chat with Lenfell. New footsteps were approaching, when the second man took his sapphire ring and departed.

The same process took place with the third; and after a brief wait, Lenfell received a fourth of the hooded group. Having seen all their faces and observed the transfer of the rings, Garmath waited patiently for the fifth man to arrive.

After several minutes, Lenfell became restless. Sensing that the financier might return to the study, Garmath sidled in that direction himself, again making his creak noiseless.

Garmath was seated in his chair, apparently half asleep, when Lenfell arrived bearing the jewel case with two rings left in it. He removed one and slipped it on a finger of his left hand, grinning toward Garmath, who chuckled. Then, surveying the last ring with a frown, Lenfell remarked:

"I wonder why he hasn't come. I know that he was out of town, but he promised to return this evening. I suppose that it can wait —"

Pausing, Lenfell decided otherwise. He took an envelope from his desk, wrote an address on it, and placed the ring inside. Then the thought of sending even a false sapphire by messenger troubled Lenfell. He was shaking his head, when the doorbell rang. Pocketing the envelope, Lenfell gestured for Garmath to remain where he was.

Garmath did. But as soon as Lenfell went downstairs, the white-haired man stretched a long hand to the desk and picked up the blotter that Lenfell had applied to the envelope. The address was plainly legible in reverse, and Garmath read it without the aid of a mirror. The blotter was back on the table when Lenfell returned.

"It was his servant," he said, referring to the last man of the hooded six. "He said his master will not arrive home until midnight, so he called by long distance, telling the servant to come here. I gave the envelope to the servant."

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TURNING to the safe, Lenfell unlocked it; from a cash box, he brought out a sheaf of crisp bills and counted off a stack of large denominations, to the total of six thousand dollars.

"Your fee, Garmath," said Lenfell. "Ten times the value of the rings you made for me, but well worth it. Those imitation sapphires had to stand the test of expert scrutiny, though I saw to it that they could not be handled, thanks to the sealed case in which I delivered them to Walder."

Showing Garmath to the stairs, Lenfell was conscious of the creaky stride that old Jan no longer sought to keep unheard. He was still listening for those creeps as he returned to the study, and Lenfell was at last satisfied that they had dwindled clear to the front door. After a few moments of silence, Lenfell stepped into the study.

He thumbed the remaining bills in the cash box, counting out a batch which he had promised Garmath as a bonus after a certain transaction was completed. Then, as he replaced the cash box in the safe, Lenfell stared mistrustfully at the square case which contained the Star of Delhi.

He opened the case hastily, saw that it still held the great sapphire. Closing the safe and locking it, Lenfell picked up the telephone.

Outside Lenfell's door, a man was listening at the crack. The man was Garmath; he had returned, in his silent fashion, by another stairway. Garmath caught Lenfell's tone:

"Yes, yes. I still have the sapphire, the original Star of Delhi... The exhibit at Walder's? That was merely for our mutual protection... Yes, poor Walder supplied imitations himself, to help create the impression that the Star of Delhi no longer exists –

"Yes, it was wise, considering those recent robberies... Yes, the fact that crooks sought the smaller gems proves how they would have coveted the Star... Next Monday? Certainly, I can see you then, Crome –"

As Lenfell's receiver clicked upon the hook, Garmath moved away. By overhearing that telephone call, he had learned what he wanted. Descending the front stairs again, this time in absolute silence, Garmath crept out through the big door and went away from the gloomy mansion.

Quickening his creep into a lengthy stride, Garmath covered a few blocks before stopping in a drugstore to make a telephone call of his own. Even in a phone booth, Garmath was cautious, something that Dwig Brencott hadn't been at the Club Cadiz the night The Shadow overheard him.

Oddly enough, the voice that Garmath heard from the receiver was Dwig's. Placing his thin lips close to the mouthpiece, Garmath spoke in a voice much firmer than the rattly wheeze that he had used before.

Garmath's words were terse. He said:

"Take care of Sherbrock."

CHAPTER VI. THE WRONG FOEMEN

OUT of a rather tiresome evening at the Cobalt Club, Lamont Cranston had at least gleaned one point of information through his friendship with Commissioner Weston. In sifting the Walder murder anew, Weston had called in various jewelers, and the question of the six sapphires had been raised.

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None knew who the owner of the gems could be, nor did they consider the matter relative to Walder's death since the exhibited gems were gone when robbery began. They felt that the owner of the sapphires might find himself in a spot like Walder, should his name be learned and made public.

Inasmuch as the police had traced none of the remaining killers, Commissioner Weston was not anxious to add fuel to new crime. He decided to let the subject pass, for the present.

Mention of the six sapphires, however, had turned the conversation to the Star of Delhi. Before they realized it, the jewelers were talking shop. It didn't take them long to agree on the very thing that Walder had said privately to Lenfell – that there was only one expert in New York to whom the cutting of the great stone could be entrusted: Roger Sherbrock.

Whether Sherbrock could have found time for the task was another question. According to the jewelers, the expert cutter was working night and day on orders of long standing.

The technical talk bored Weston, and his friend Cranston walked out in the middle of it. Inasmuch as The Shadow was interested in tracing the past history of the Star of Delhi, a prompt visit to Sherbrock's had become a logical step. Before leaving the club, The Shadow telephoned Margo and asked her to meet him near Sherbrock's place of business.

At present, The Shadow's agents, Moe Shrevnitz included, were busily seeking traces of Dwig Brencott, who had conveniently left town not long after the Walder affair. Upon meeting Margo, who came in her own car, The Shadow explained the new situation in Cranston's style.

He wanted Margo to drive him to Sherbrock's and wait outside, while he interviewed the gem cutter. Margo observed that Cranston was carrying a briefcase. He opened it, to take out a small bag containing some uncut diamonds which he intended to show Sherbrock.

Margo suspected that the briefcase also contained a slouch hat and a black cloak; but if it did, the garments were packed so deeply that she could not see them.

Sherbrock's place was on the second floor of a rather old and dilapidated building in a fairly disreputable neighborhood. It looked like an ideal place for crime, except that the windows were barred. Lights from the second floor indicated that Sherbrock and other cutters were at work.

Alighting from Margo's car, Cranston strolled into the building, and just as he passed through the doorway the girl noticed that he had taken the briefcase with him.

A blunt-faced husky was in charge of the second-floor portal. He looked like a janitor, but acted as if he were Sherbrock's confidential secretary. Impressed by the visitor in evening clothes, he accepted Cranston's card and took it through an inner door that looked like the entrance to a strong room.

While waiting, The Shadow observed several other small rooms with heavy doors, evidently the work-shops assigned to the gem cutters.

There were large safes around the floor, at least a dozen of them, and when The Shadow was ushered into Sherbrock's own workroom, he saw three more in different corners of the room.

It was an office, also, for Sherbrock was seated behind a desk, going over stacks of correspondence. He looked up, studied Cranston briefly, then dismissed the husky watchman.

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ROGER SHERBROCK had a strong, deep-lined face that marked him as a businessman, rather than an artificer; but exacting work had taken its toll of him. Any man who followed the profession of the lapidary invariably acquired a careful eye, and Sherbrock was no exception to the rule of gem cutters.

Nevertheless, he seemed able to take time out from his professional work to talk terms with customers, particularly those who looked as prosperous as Cranston.

Sherbrock was all business when The Shadow mentioned diamonds; but when the gems came from the briefcase, the lapidary promptly reached for a magnifying lens, pressed it to his eye and forgot that he had a customer, in order to examine the uncuts. Meanwhile, The Shadow made a further appraisal of the strong room.

Behind Sherbrock's desk was a huge door that dwarfed the heavy safes. It was the front of a large vault that measured at least six feet in every direction, something which could readily be estimated, since the door of the vault was partly open.

Since the vault was empty, The Shadow assumed that Sherbrock placed the more valuable gems into some of the smaller safes, and wheeled them into the vault when he closed up shop. A very logical process, since movable safes could be rolled from one workroom to another, whenever required. Such a practice was the perfect way to keep rare jewels under lock, except when Sherbrock's assistants were actually working on them.

The uncut diamonds interested Sherbrock, but he was loath to discuss their merits at so late an hour.

"If you would come back tomorrow, Mr. Cranston," he suggested, in a brisk tone, "I should be glad to examine these diamonds in detail. If you care to leave them, I can give you a receipt for them. You doubtless know that some of the most famous gems in existence have been entrusted to our custody."

There was a keen look in Sherbrock's right eye, the result, perhaps, of its recent association with the magnifying lens. Yet his statement could have been a probing one, an effort to find out if Cranston supposed that Sherbrock had recently handled the cutting of the celebrated Star of Delhi. Certainly, the words offered The Shadow a chance to question Sherbrock on the subject.

But The Shadow ignored the opportunity. He preferred to have a longer chat with Sherbrock before discussing sapphires instead of diamonds. Reaching for the chamois bag that contained the diamonds, he quietly decided to take the uncut gems along with him.

That action, more than a blunt question, produced results with Sherbrock. Following his visitor to the door, the lapidary apologized for having been so abrupt.

"Some gems are coming in shortly," explained Sherbrock, a trifle nervously. "A very special assortment, from Baldwin Associates, one of the most reliable wholesale houses in the city. They always insist upon a detailed receipt for all the gems they send us."

"Therefore, I shall be very busy for the next hour, at least. Frankly, I do not like to receive shipments so late at night. There have been too many robberies lately, and the Walder affair was so shocking that I have felt uneasy ever since."

Again, Sherbrock was laying a lead that might bring mention of the Star of Delhi. But his tone was such that anyone, even The Shadow, could have accepted it either of two ways.

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It might be that Sherbrock knew much about the great sapphire, and was feeling Cranston out; on the contrary, Sherbrock gave something of an impression that he knew nothing of the gem's history and hoped that perhaps his visitor did.

The Shadow's only response was a disinterested nod. He strolled out through the main door, which the blunt-faced watchman held open for him.

As he descended the stairs, The Shadow saw an armored truck pull up in front of the building. It bore the name: "Baldwin Associates."

It wasn't sight of the truck that interested The Shadow, mostly. The other thing he noticed was a low-built car that cruised past, for no good reason, and swung into an alleyway that led to the rear of Sherbrock's building.

Observing a rear door on the ground-floor passage, The Shadow stepped toward it, only to find it heavily locked. At that moment, two uniformed men came in from the armored truck and started upstairs, carrying a heavy box between them. The Shadow drew back beneath the stairs and heard their footsteps pass overhead.

A third man was overtaking the other two, for The Shadow could hear his quicker, lighter footsteps. Apparently, the burden carriers waited for him, for The Shadow heard voices; then the procession continued.

Meanwhile, The Shadow was sweeping hat and cloak from his briefcase, intending to obliterate the guise of Cranston and make a foray to the rear alley. New footsteps caused him to delay; they were very light and hesitating, as they came in from the front and moved a short way up the steps.

Dropping hat and cloak, The Shadow stepped into sight, as Cranston, just as he heard a girl's low, anxious voice:

"Lamont!"

It was Margo. The Shadow gave a quiet response as he stepped into sight. Margo clutched his arm across the banister. She didn't ask why he had gone from sight when the men from the truck entered. Margo had something more to tell.

"Those men who came in –"

"I saw them, Margo," The Shadow interposed. "The two in uniform."

"But did you see the third?"

The Shadow shook his head.

"I did!" blurted Margo. "He was Dwig Brencott!"

In a style that was rapid for Cranston, The Shadow took a look out to the street. The truck was a short distance ahead, and no one in it appeared to be keeping lookout. Drawing Margo from the doorway, The Shadow pointed her to her car.

"Have the motor running," he said calmly. "Others may be along. If they come too close, get started. Circle the block, and should they follow you, blow the horn. I'll recognize it."

Margo smiled despite her tensely. Her car had a musical chime that played "East Side – West Side," and very probably crooks like Dwig Brencott wouldn't be running around with horns of that type, hence Lamont wouldn't have much trouble identifying the right note.

With Margo gone, The Shadow picked up his cloak and hat in rapid time. He was donning them as he hurried up the stairs. Though speedy, he was quiet, for he wanted to see where the husky guard was. The fellow had gone from the door, leaving the way clear.

Sliding into the large room, The Shadow neared the door of Sherbrock's workshop office and was flat against the wall when the husky guardian came out, leaving the door ajar.

Peering through, The Shadow saw that Margo was right. The third man from the truck was Dwig. He was wearing street clothes, and he was leaning over Sherbrock's shoulder while the lapidary sorted a large array of jewelry that strewn the desk. On either side stood the two guards, watching the process.

A gun half drawn, The Shadow was waiting for a timely moment to move in on the conference, when he heard a hoarse shout from the guard at the outer door. As The Shadow turned, a surge of men came straight for Sherbrock's office, hurling the human watchdog ahead of them. So impetuous was their dash, that they flanked in upon The Shadow before he could wheel away.

Twisting back across the doorway, The Shadow tried to trick the sudden attackers by a reverse dive in the opposite direction – a move that would have succeeded, had not one stalwart supplied a lucky flying tackle that carried himself and The Shadow right through the doorway, into the light of Sherbrock's office, where they rolled aside, just clear of the trample from incoming feet.

It was then that The Shadow gave his tackler a further fling and came up, gun in hand, to meet a somewhat dazed opponent who had a revolver, but who was slow in bringing it to aim.

Finger on trigger, The Shadow could have fired, but didn't. He recognized the face of the fellow who had tackled him and come out worse in the sprawl. It was the swarthy countenance that belonged to Inspector Joe Cardona!

These men weren't more of Dwig's mob, coming to aid him in some fell work. The Shadow had encountered the wrong foemen – the police!

CHAPTER VII. PROOF OF CRIME

"Lookout, Sherbrock!"

It was Dwig Brencott who shouted the warning, and his cry took the attention of the invading detectives.

They knew that Cardona had tackled an opponent they had scarcely seen, but supposed that their leader had come out winner. For some reason, Sherbrock was the man they had come after, so they surged straight for him.

But Dwig and his men were quicker. It was Dwig who grabbed Sherbrock and fairly hurled him into the open door, while the two men with him, mobbies in guard uniform, seized the desk and hoisted it at the invading police.

Detectives ducked amid a shower of scattering jewels. They fired as they dived aside, but their shots were wide, for the desk was heavy and they had to avoid it.

THE STAR OF DELHI

By the time Cardona's men had a chance to take real aim, Dwig's uniformed pals were into the vault, too, hauling the big door shut behind them. It had hardly closed, before bullets from police specials began to bash the steel front.

Finding that they couldn't drill the heavy metal, the detectives sprang to the door and tried to get it open. It was locked, automatically, from the inside.

In their futile effort to overtake four fugitives, the detectives left the door of the room quite clear. On his feet, The Shadow whisked out through that convenient exit, seen only by Cardona, who lost sight of the cloaked fighter between blinks.

Then, seeing what the detectives were about, Cardona found his own feet and started to join them, only to stop short and listen.

Cardona heard a sound which his excited men did not – the rumble of an elevator, coming from the wall that held the vault door. Joe shouted for his men to stop attacking the steel barrier.

"They've taken a way out!" Cardona bawled. "That's no vault. It's an elevator! They're getting to the rear alley. Come on – we're going down to head them off!"

Getting to the alley wasn't so simple as Cardona supposed, considering that all the windows in Sherbrock's place were barred, while the rear passage, downstairs, ended in a heavily locked door.

Bellowing orders as he reached the top of the stairs, Cardona heard responses from officers below: men that he had left down there. They were trying to get through to the alley, and couldn't.

The only thing was to go around by the front, and Cardona beckoned them toward the stairs. Joe was in too great a hurry to think of something that would ordinarily have puzzled him: namely, what had become of The Shadow. Somewhere between Sherbrock's offices and the floor below, the cloaked intruder had mysteriously vanished!

It happened that The Shadow had found what Cardona wanted, a short route to the rear alley.

SHERBROCK'S windows were barred, but others on the second floor were not. Cutting out from Sherbrock's. The Shadow had swung in back of the stairway leading up to the third floor, on chance of finding a suitable window – which he did.

It was narrow, barely large enough for The Shadow to slide his lithe form through. Once the squeeze was accomplished, he dropped to the ground below, the only token of his arrival being the swish of his cloak.

That sound wasn't heard. Others were making a loud clatter in the alley. Out of a rear door that slid suddenly open came Sherbrock, impelled to rapid gait by pressure of Dwig Brencott and the two thugs who wore the uniforms of armored-truck drivers.

There was a car in the alley, the low-built sedan that The Shadow had seen earlier. The fugitives dived into it, scooping up Sherbrock as he stumbled on the step.

The car was in motion when The Shadow turned and aimed low, swift shots at a rear tire. The answer was a clang, repeated with each bullet. The Shadow's fire had found an intervening fire plug, invisible against the fenders of the moving car. It was a squatty fire plug, wide enough to stop two shots, though The Shadow sliced them at slightly different angles.

THE STAR OF DELHI

Those blasts brought a jolt from the car, as though it had been hit. The driver veered across the street and zigzagged back again, putting all his weight on the accelerator. Off at a wild speed, taking a crazy course, the car was roaring away in a fashion calculated to offset the efforts of any marksman.

The Shadow held his next shots until the car swung the corner. There, the zigzag couldn't help. He ripped a rear tire broadside, and saw the car take a real jounce under the impetus of the bursting rubber. The car disappeared around the corner, but it wasn't going far. The Shadow started on the run to overtake it.

From the sharp crack of the first shots, Cardona recognized that he had heard them through an open window. Still on the second floor, Joe dived beyond the stairs and thrust his head and shoulders out in time to see the effect of The Shadow's second fusillade.

Unable to wedge his stocky form through the narrow opening, Cardona decided to go out by the front way – a wise choice, considering that the fugitive car was no longer in the rear street.

Downstairs, Cardona found police cars and sprang into one, ordering a rapid chase.

Meanwhile, The Shadow had reached the rear corner, where he paused only to pick a darkened course across the side street to the wrecked car, which was tilted high upon the curb. Resuming his dash, he arrived at the sedan and found it empty.

A passageway between two buildings explained where Sherbrock and the crooks had gone. It was very short, and led to a wide street that cut through this neighborhood at an angle. Looking for a car, The Shadow saw one swing hesitatingly toward him. It was Margo's.

With a long leap, The Shadow hooked the door of the coupe, opened it, and dropped in beside the girl, so suddenly that she could only give a breathless gasp. Margo had been looking for Cranston, but by the time the door had slammed, she wasn't surprised to see The Shadow, instead.

In sharp, whispered tone, he was questioning if she had seen the fugitives. She hadn't, but she had spotted something else.

"The armored truck!" Margo exclaimed. "It started away before I did. It was gone when the police arrived. But I saw it again, just now, going around the next corner!"

THE SHADOW ordered a chase. As Margo put speed into the coupe, she realized that the armored truck must have picked up the fugitives that The Shadow was after. A few turns and she saw the truck once more, as did The Shadow. It was taking a corner and guns spouted from its loopholes. Wide shots, that didn't damage Margo's coupe.

Leaning from his window, The Shadow responded, aiming for the tires. His aim was accurate, but the truck's tires were bulletproof, as The Shadow expected, though he considered it worth-while to test them. Then The Shadow's free hand, lunging to the left, shoved the wheel from Margo's control and sent the coupe skewing around a nearer corner.

Margo caught the idea as The Shadow let her resume control. He wanted to pursue the truck along a parallel street.

Across their path flashed a police car. Rapidly, The Shadow yanked the wheel again, thus informing Margo to follow the prowler.

THE STAR OF DELHI

The police car was speeding for a corner where the armored truck was due, but The Shadow didn't wait for the fugitive vehicle to arrive. He blasted shots at the rear tires of the police car, and, fortunately, they didn't stand the gaff. The police car hit the curb at the corner just as the armored truck zoomed across.

If The Shadow hadn't halted them, Cardona and his companions would have been juggernauted by the heavier, more powerful vehicle.

It was The Shadow who resumed the chase alone, telling Margo to keep a respectful distance behind the armored truck, since it was impregnable, whereas her coupe was not. Gaining a big lead, the truck went through a swirl of traffic on an avenue.

Had Moe been at the wheel, and this car his specially geared cab, he might have followed through; but Margo and her coupe were not equal to the job. Halted by the traffic, Margo turned to The Shadow and began words of apology, that she did not complete.

The Shadow was gone.

At Sherbrock's, half an hour later, The Shadow arrived as Cranston, to find Weston in charge. He had called the Cobalt Club and learned that his friend, the commissioner, had left a message for him.

Order was restored in Sherbrock's office, and Cranston showed some surprise to find Weston sorting batches of jewels which lay on Sherbrock's desk. They happened to be the same lot that Sherbrock had been pawing over with Dwig.

"It was a tip-off, Cranston," informed the commissioner. "Someone called the club and told me that Sherbrock was fencing stolen gems. I have an idea that the person who called me might have been one of the jewelers who were at the club earlier. They left soon after you did!"

The Shadow didn't comment on that point; in fact, he rather doubted it. But the gems couldn't be overlooked. Weston had already checked them as loot that unknown crooks had acquired in the recent robbery of a Midwestern jewelry store.

"Very clever, Sherbrock was," continued Weston. "He had deliveries made in regular jeweler's trucks. The one that came tonight, bringing mobsters as its crew, bore the name of Baldwin Associates. We've called them, and learned that both of their trucks are stored for the night. The one that came here was a fake."

"A fake, all right," put in Cardona, who was standing by. "It ducked away before we got here. We ran into it later, after it picked up Sherbrock and the other crooks."

Weston eyed Cardona, somewhat sharply.

"What about The Shadow, inspector?"

"He was here," replied Cardona, laconically. "We ran into him at the office door. He slid out, and later he popped the tires on our car, just when he saw the truck."

"Rather odd," observed Weston, "for The Shadow to act in such fashion."

"Not at all," returned Cardona. "He was probably after Sherbrock, too. We met up with him by mistake. I figure he shot our tires so we wouldn't get into trouble with the truck."

THE STAR OF DELHI

THE explanation suited the commissioner. He reverted to the subject of Sherbrock.

"Here is full proof of crime," asserted Weston. "Stolen jewels in Sherbrock's possession; his flight through a secret rear exit; use of a fake truck that offered battle when it fled. Roger Sherbrock is unquestionably the head man behind the mob of jewel robbers. As an expert gem cutter, he was equipped to unload stolen goods by changing the appearance of the gems."

It was a strong indictment, one that The Shadow considered in detail when he was riding back to the Cobalt Club with Weston. But through that chain ran one important thread: every whit of evidence against Sherbrock was purely circumstantial.

Dwig Brencott could have brought the truck on his own. On such short inspection, Sherbrock couldn't have known that the jewels were stolen ones. The elevator in the big vault might well be a device that Sherbrock had installed as a way out if crooks invaded his premises, more logically than something that he had planned as an aid to crime.

As for his flight, Sherbrock hadn't any choice. He'd been rushed by Dwig and the uniformed mobbies, men that he might have supposed were actually from Baldwin Associates. They hadn't given Sherbrock time to identify Cardona and his squad of detectives as men from police headquarters.

The Shadow could readily take that view, inasmuch as he had built up a circumstantial case against himself by first blocking Cardona's squad, and later wrecking a police car. Weston had dismissed those facts, because he regarded The Shadow as a foe to crime. Had it been anyone else, the commissioner would not have been so lenient.

Maybe Sherbrock's case deserved the same consideration that The Shadow's had received. The Shadow, deeply involved in the matter and a witness to occurrences at Sherbrock's, was definitely of that opinion. He wasn't willing to concede that Roger Sherbrock was the real head of the jewel-robbing outfit.

The Shadow's trail remained the same as before: to find Dwig Brencott and seek facts concerning six matched sapphires that had formerly been one great gem, the Star of Delhi!

CHAPTER VIII. REIGN OF MURDER

ALL during the next day, The Shadow kept in touch with Commissioner Weston. It didn't surprise the commissioner that his friend, Lamont Cranston, should drop into the office in the morning, suggest that they lunch together and, later, ride back to the office again in Weston's car. Contrarily, it rather pleased the commissioner.

Weston was a social climber and regarded Cranston as a good friend to have. Since Cranston was indifferent toward furthering acquaintances, it was usually Weston who insisted that the two go places together. Thus, on those rare occasions when Cranston cultivated Weston's company, the commissioner took it that his much-prized friend was coming around to Weston's own views.

Never did Weston guess that these periods really indicated Cranston's deep interest in some criminal investigation that the police were conducting; yet such was invariably the case. As Cranston, The Shadow had the habit of appearing quite bored at too much mention of current crime.

It was to Margo Lane that the quiet Mr. Cranston expressed the purpose of his frequent meetings with Weston during this important day. Cranston met Margo in a cafe lounge during the cocktail hour, and smiled approvingly when she ordered a Mirage, a pinkish drink that looked quite powerful, but did not have a drop

of liquor in it.

"Good judgment, Margo," said Cranston, quietly. "I may be needing you later."

"After you've seen the commissioner again?" bantered Margo.

"Exactly!" Cranston glanced at his watch. "He will be at the Cobalt Club at half-past five. I want to be there when he arrives."

Margo took a sip of the Mirage, then queried:

"Why all this sudden interest?"

"Because of Sherbrock," replied Cranston. "I think that he may be innocent. If such is the case, crooks are holding him. Therefore it is important to check anything that the police learn about Sherbrock."

"So that you may get a trail to the guilty men – for instance, Dwig Brencott? Is that it, Lamont?"

For reply, Margo received a headshake.

"I can leave the guilty to The Shadow," was Cranston's laconic reply. "I merely felt that I, in my feeble way, might aid an innocent man."

Margo was still thinking that one over, when she saw Cranston stroll out to keep his appointment with the police commissioner. She approved Lamont's policy of discussing The Shadow as a distinct personality, but it did not deceive her. Margo had learned enough to understand the full extent of the present case.

With agents still on the hunt for Dwig Brencott, who had ducked away again without being recognized by Cardona and the detectives, The Shadow was personally keeping tabs with developments from the Sherbrock angle.

It was true that Cranston wanted to aid Sherbrock; equally certain that The Shadow could uncover mobsters if Sherbrock happened to be found. Hence, Margo could find no flaw in Lamont's statement.

Cranston would search for the innocent, and The Shadow would find the guilty. One and one made two – which happened to be one and the same.

Another point occurred to Margo. If Sherbrock happened to be the real head of the jewel mob, as the police believed, The Shadow – through his Cranston guise – would get to the guilty, anyway. But Margo accepted Lamont's opinion of Sherbrock at its face value. She only wished that she had asked him something else: his present views regarding the six sapphires, formerly the Star of Delhi.

Margo had come to the adamant conclusion that those gems, when located, would provide the complete answer to crime's riddle.

MATTERS promised well, as soon as The Shadow reached the Cobalt Club. He found Joe Cardona there, and the inspector was glad to see Weston's affable friend, Cranston, who was one man who often sided with Joe's opinions when they conflicted with the commissioner's.

Soon after, Weston arrived in a hurry, steered both men to a corner and spoke brusquely to Cardona:

"Well, inspector, let me see the message!"

Inferring that Weston wasn't keeping secrets from Cranston, Cardona produced the message, explaining it as he did.

"It's a letter," said the inspector. "It came into Sherbrock's office today, in the last mail. Sent last night, according to the postmark, before Sherbrock's mob knew we got a tip-off."

"A letter?" demanded Weston bluntly. "Then why did you call it a message?"

"Because it looks like one, commissioner."

It did look like a message. It was a half sheet of paper, folded twice, and its brief statement was typed in capitals that bore no signature. Weston read it, then showed it to Cranston. The message stated:

H. J. COMING INTO NEW YORK TOMORROW. DON'T WORRY. EVERYTHING
IS FIXED. JAKE WILL TAKE CARE OF HIM AT FIFTY-FIVE.

The commissioner grunted, then queried:

"What do you make of it?"

He put the question to Cranston, but it was Cardona who answered. Joe already had a theory.

"I'd say it meant five minutes to the hour," declared the inspector. "But which hour – that's the question. Unless the guy that wrote it was smart and tried some double talk. He might mean five-fifty. That would be ten minutes of six."

"Ridiculous!" snapped Weston. "Fifty-five is an address. Probably a number on some street right here in New York."

"There's more streets than there are hours, reminded Cardona. "With only twelve hours to pick from –"

"Twenty-four," corrected Weston. "Two sets of twelve."

"That's right," agreed Cardona. Then: "But there's two sets of streets, too – east and west. It doubles up on you, too, commissioner."

The Shadow smiled at the final quip, but his face was turned away. He was going to a phone booth; he called Margo and suggested that she meet him promptly, outside the Cobalt Club in her coupe. Of course, his tone was Cranston's.

He was still Cranston as he stepped from the booth to find Weston and Cardona beckoning to him. From Weston's manner, The Shadow guessed that the commissioner had won out despite Cardona's neat dig.

"We're going on a tour," declared Weston. "We're going to zigzag across Fifth Avenue looking at all places that have the address of No. 55. Would you like to come along, Cranston?"

After brief consideration, The Shadow shook his head.

THE STAR OF DELHI

"It would take too long a time," he said, as he strolled with the others toward the door. "Besides, I'm expecting Miss Lane. We're going to have dinner at a night club. I don't know just which one –"

They had reached the street when Cranston's tone took its pause. His companions stared, wondering what had struck him. Slowly, he said:

"I wonder –"

Another pause, during which Margo's car swept into sight around the corner. Then Cranston added:

"I wonder if fifty–five could mean a street, rather than a building number?"

Weston shook his head; then, observing Cranston's fixed expression, the commissioner demanded why his friend had put the query.

"Because fifty–five would then mean Fifty–fifth Street," was The Shadow's reply. "As I recall it, there is a night club up there that took its name from the number of the street. It is called Club Fifty–five."

That was enough for Weston. He exclaimed the name, "Fifty–five!" and Cardona echoed it. Both were anxious to get started, but since Margo had by then arrived, Cranston decided to go in her car, saying that Club Fifty–five would be a good place to dine in case the lead proved worthless.

BOTH cars reached Club Fifty–five at the same time. By then, Cranston had explained matters to Margo; while Cardona, in his turn, had been expressing ideas to Weston.

Joe was so enthused that he started into the night club ahead of the others, flashed a badge at a startled head waiter and demanded:

"Who's Jake?"

"Why... why everything's jake!" the head waiter began. Then, properly comprehending the query, he added: "I guess you mean Jake, the barkeeper – over there."

There was just one barkeep on duty, a beefy man who was serving a drink to a rather drowsy customer perched on a stool, with head tilted against his arm. Cardona was about to start toward the bar, when Cranston's hand restrained him.

"Perhaps it would be better," suggested The Shadow quietly, "if one of us stopped there first. Myself, for example – or Miss Lane."

With Weston nodding, Cardona agreed, realizing that it would give him a chance to cover Jake without the barkeeper knowing it. The Shadow turned toward Margo in Cranston's polite manner. With a smile, the girl said:

"Very well, Lamont."

Reaching the bar while the others watched, Margo took a stool and ordered a drink. She was trying not to stare at Jake, hence her eyes went to the tipsy–looking customer who was slouched upon the bar.

She saw the drink that Jake had served the fellow, just beyond the reach of the man's outstretched hand. Before making Margo's drink, Jake tapped the lounging customer on the shoulder.

Rather fascinated, Margo watched the man's hand move automatically toward the waiting glass, as though he saw it without lifting his eyes. The horror of the thing didn't grip her, until that moving hand had slid past the drink without touching it. By then, his shoulders were on the move, slumping downward. His head turned as he started a contorted sprawl from the bar stool.

Margo shrieked even before the toppling body hit the floor, for on the way, she saw the tumbling man's face as it tilted away from his arm.

The face was bloated, its lips spread in a frozen grin. Eyes were glazed and glaring, like objects of stone. Mere sight of them gave Margo the terrifying truth.

The man was dead!

Cranston, Weston and Cardona were springing toward the bar, when Margo loosed the scream. But they were arriving on the scene too late. A reign of murder had begun!

CHAPTER IX. DEATH FINDS DEATH

"YOU'LL talk, Jake!"

Cardona had been repeating the same words for nearly half an hour, but without result. Jake, the barkeeper, had done all the talking that he could. Jake had tried to bolt when the dead man hit the floor, but he claimed he didn't know that the customer had died.

It was the sight of others coming to grab him that worried Jake. He had something of a criminal past – he admitted it – but he had been going straight for the past few years.

Cardona wasn't convinced, which was why he kept on quizzing Jake; but The Shadow, silent as he posed as Cranston, was quite sure that the barkeeper told the truth.

The dead man had been poisoned, which made it look bad for Jake, though the beefy bartender swore that he hadn't slipped anything lethal into any of the three drinks that the man had taken.

"This is a reliable place," Jake insisted. "We wouldn't even hand a tough guy a Mickey Finn. What would I gain sticking around, if I'd croaked the guy?"

That was just it. What would Jake have gained? Nothing, in The Shadow's silent opinion. He saw what lay behind the message that had come to Sherbrock's.

It was a fake tip-off, like the one that the police received the night before. Real murderers had known that a victim would die at Club Fifty-five, and were trying to plant the job on Jake because of the bartender's questionable past.

The dead man's name was Howard Jorton, which fitted the initials "H. J." mentioned in the note. He was well-dressed, had plenty of money in his pocket, and was fairly well-known at Club Fifty-five, where he often came to spend the late afternoon.

Jorton was in the rug business, as evidenced by cards found on his person, but his office was closed when Weston tried to reach it by telephone. Apparently, Jorton had lived at some hotel, because there was a big key in his pocket with the number 331 on it; but it didn't bear the name of the hotel.

THE STAR OF DELHI

Having called headquarters to make a general check-up on hotels, Weston began an examination of Jorton's effects. Money, cards, and other items were spread along the bar, when Cranston called attention to a ring that Jorton wore on a finger of his left hand.

It was a gold ring, with a fair-sized stone that had no color. Weston drew it from the man's finger, which was rather difficult, since Jorton's hands were swollen. The police surgeon, recently arrived, attributed the swelling to the effect of the poison, which had not yet been identified.

"A cheap stone," declared Weston, as he held the ring to the light. "Too sparkling to be glass, but not good enough for a genuine diamond."

"A variety of quartz," identified The Shadow. "Such stones are often sold under the name of Brazilian diamonds. You are right, commissioner – they are very cheap, though persons are sometimes deceived by them."

A telephone bell was ringing. Taking it to be a call from headquarters, Weston answered. His voice immediately became both brisk and eager.

"Yes, yes!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Jorton is here... He's to call Mr. Bayle? Which Mr. Bayle?... I see, Moreland Bayle. May I ask who you are?... You're Bayle's butler –"

A second later, Weston was hammering at the receiver hook. The speaker at the other end had hung up very suddenly. Pouncing for the phone book, Weston was trying to find the name of Bayle, when Cranston reached across his shoulder and pointed it out for him.

"Moreland Bayle –"

After the name, Weston repeated the number from the directory. But when he called Bayle's number, he received no reply, not even from the mysterious butler, a point which troubled The Shadow. The call had all the earmarks of another so-called tip-off, designed by crooks. It produced the sinister picture of further crime to come.

THERE was nothing to do but go to Bayle's, so Weston started, taking Cranston and Margo along in his official car, while Cardona remained at Club Fifty-five to clear up what little he could in the Jorton case.

Bayle's address turned out to be a small apartment house, a converted dwelling, and Weston was pressing at the button which bore Bayle's name, when a taxicab pulled up in front.

It was The Shadow who stepped out to meet it, when he saw the driver give a puzzled stare into the rear seat. Before the driver could object, Cranston was opening the rear door of the cab.

The act brought another shriek from Margo, who was standing by, though she managed to stifle the cry somewhat. However, it was enough to bring Weston full about in time to see the reason.

A body was rolling from the cab, to hit the curb and stretch flat before The Shadow could stop the force of its dead weight. Arriving at Cranston's side, the police commissioner stared down at a horrible, grinning face, quite as bloated as Jorton's.

Then came Cranston's calm-toned statement of identity:

"Moreland Bayle."

THE STAR OF DELHI

The Shadow was correct. Examination of the victim's pockets proved him to be Moreland Bayle, traveling representative of a large paper company. The gulping cab driver declared that he had picked up his fare at the Pennsylvania Station, from an incoming train.

It was plain to The Shadow that murderers had not cared just where Bayle died, though they would probably have preferred him to fall from a cab, the way he had. The pressing question was whether or not Bayle's death would produce another planted lead, as Jorton's had.

No other name was indicated among Bayle's effects, but the man was wearing something which, to The Shadow, was a menacing token.

The object was a cheap ring, but its stone was Spanish quartz, rather than Brazilian. Almost colorless, the so-called gem had a faint tint of amber, which might have led a person of credulity and imagination to accept it as a topaz. It wasn't in keeping for Bayle to be wearing such a ring, any more than Jorton.

Accepting Cranston's suggestion that they go up to Bayle's apartment, Weston was going through the door of the house, when his friend stopped him. In the slit of Bayle's mailbox The Shadow observed the mere corner of a sheet of paper, and drew it out.

The paper had a calling card attached to it by a paper clip. It bore the printed name: "Arthur Halden." Down in a lower corner was the name of a hotel, the Marwood.

It wasn't far to Halden's hotel. Having hailed a patrol car and putting the officers in charge of Bayle's body, Weston suggested a quick trip to the Marwood. The place turned out to be a small one, and an affable clerk nodded as soon as Halden's name was mentioned.

"Mr. Halden is in," the clerk said. "He called me a while ago. At least, he started to, and then hung up. I'll ring him."

"We'd better go up," decided Weston. "Give me a passkey."

THEY reached Halden's room. While Weston was unlocking the door, Margo stepped forward, only to be pressed back by Cranston's arm. That left it to Weston to utter the gasp of horror, when he pressed the door wide.

The commissioner voiced Cranston's name, and his friend stepped calmly past him, to view a sight which he fully expected.

Flat on the floor lay a tall man, his face turned toward the doorway, his features skewed in a one-sided smile that was very far from pleasant. But it wasn't the glimmer of bulging eyes that attracted The Shadow's chief attention.

He had expected to find Arthur Halden dead. More important was the gleam that came from the finger of the man's stiffened hand, the one that clamped the telephone, which Halden hadn't quite been able to put in use for a frantic call.

The gleam was of a slightly pinkish hue, produced by a stone which The Shadow classed as rose quartz, quite as cheap as the settings in the finger rings worn by the two previous victims, Jorton and Bayle.

Again, death had arrived ahead of both The Shadow and the law.

Murder still reigned, how many more victims it would take was a matter for conjecture, even by The Shadow. He, the inspector who had so often run down crime, could only hope that the toll of dead men would stop before it reached the total of six!

CHAPTER X. THE STOLEN LINK

THE clerk at the Hotel Marwood was a better informant than either the bartender who had seen Jorton die, or the cab driver who had brought Bayle's body home. The clerk knew quite a lot about Arthur Halden. The dead man, he said, was a former stock broker who had retired during a flush period of more than ten years before.

Halden was quite wealthy and still had dabbled in the market, advising friends, as well. However, he was living on his investments, which weren't paying the old-time dividends, hence he preferred a reasonably priced hotel like the Marwood.

In trying to recall the names of Halden's friends, the clerk promptly remembered one. The man in question was Kirk Raft, who had a real-estate office on upper Broadway, not far from the Marwood. The clerk remembered Raft, especially, because there had been a phone call from the realtor's office while Weston and his friend, Cranston, were coming down from Halden's apartment.

Since Raft's office was near, Weston suggested an immediate trip there. On the way, he confided:

"This is horrible business, Cranston, but we're getting to the heart of it. I wouldn't be surprised if this man Raft is the murderer!"

The Shadow deemed quite otherwise, but did not express his real opinion. As they were alighting from the commissioner's car, he helped Margo out and remarked that she was looking pale.

"You'd better stay outside," said The Shadow, "and get some fresh air."

"A good idea," returned Margo. "I'll walk to the corner, Lamont, and get some cigarettes."

A gesture of The Shadow's hand had given her the cue. As Margo stepped away, she heard Cranston's undertone:

"Try to get Shrevvy here."

Margo knew how that could be accomplished. It meant a call to a man named Burbank, who always seemed to be on duty. He was a contact with Harry Vincent, Moe Shrevnitz, and other agents. If they were available, Burbank would summon them. But Margo really felt sick as she walked toward the store.

She'd received her first indication that Cranston did not consider the chain of death ended. She realized that he was hoping for another link from Raft's, further on, and that this time he would seek some pretext to get away from Weston and speed ahead of the commissioner, in an effort to forestall some other tragedy. That was why Shrevvy would be required. His cab would help.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Weston was striding into Raft's real-estate office with an air of self-satisfied importance. He saw a girl seated at a desk and introduced himself, along with Cranston.

The girl said that Mr. Raft was working late and didn't like to be disturbed, but that she would ring his private office. Stopping her, Weston said that he would go into the other office without such unnecessary formality.

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The commissioner drew a gun as he opened the door. Just why he pictured Kirk Raft as a hand in crime, was something that Weston couldn't explain afterward. His mistaken confidence, however, reversed itself in a fashion that jarred him worse than at Halden's. Half into the lighted office, Weston actually dropped his gun and clamped a hand to his dampening forehead.

KIRK RAFT was a worse sight than any of the former victims. He was a scrawny man, with tight-skinned face, and the effects of the poison had changed his dead face into a human skull.

Lips were scarcely visible above and below his grinning teeth. His eyes seemed sunken in their sockets, but small though they were, they carried the ugly death glint that Weston had viewed before.

One of Raft's hands, his right, was stretched so far across the desk that it dangled from the edge. Its fingers were spread like a starfish, but none of them wore a ring. However, the left hand was still to be considered. It was doubled beneath Raft's slanted body, quite out of sight.

Helping Weston to a chair, The Shadow rounded the desk and started to draw the doubled left hand into sight. It was then that Weston's wits returned.

"No, no, Cranston!" he exclaimed, rising. "Touch nothing for the present! I must call Inspector Cardona and have him catch up with us, bringing the police surgeon. Four deaths within a half-hour! They are more than I can stomach!"

The Shadow could have suggested that Weston get over his weakness and prepare for further shocks, but he was more interested in the ring, that now showed on Raft's partly raised left hand.

It was another specimen of cheap jewelry, a smooth, roundish stone like those that had adorned the other victims, but this one had a trifling lavender tinge. It was a poor variety of domestic amethyst, nothing more, and as The Shadow tilted a light toward it, what little color the stone had faded very promptly.

The girl was coming from the front office. The Shadow stopped her on the threshold. He used Cranston's way of breaking the news calmly, but he was glad when Margo appeared, for Raft's helper had gone white and limp, even without seeing her employer's body.

Margo produced some smelling salts, but before bringing the stenographer from her fainting spell, she thought it wise to mention something that Cranston wanted to know about.

"You can expect Shrevvy," she whispered, "in about ten minutes."

Back in Raft's office, The Shadow found Weston rummaging through the realtor's desk. He'd reached Cardona by telephone, and the ace inspector was on his way. When things became desperate, Weston sometimes relied on Cardona's hunches – for which Joe was famous; though, ordinarily, the police commissioner scoffed at guesswork.

Being in one of his hunch-accepting moods, Weston still insisted that Raft's body be left untouched, on the chance that Cardona might learn something when he viewed it as it was.

The wait actually worried The Shadow. He was looking at Raft's right arm; beneath its elbow, he saw something that appeared to be a memo pad. It was very possible that such a pad would show a notation leading to someone else. However, since The Shadow was depending upon Moe's cab, it was as well to wait.

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Had Moe arrived first, The Shadow might have done some deft work, sneaking the telltale pad from under the dead arm. But it happened that Cardona was the first man to appear. He entered the office and stared glumly at Raft's body. The Shadow was about to point out the memo pad, when an interruption came.

A telegraph boy had entered the real-estate office and was arguing with officers outside. They sent him in to the commissioner, and the messenger stared blankly at Raft's body.

He was an oldish chap, the messenger, well over twenty-one, of the jockey type that never seemed to outgrow the job of delivering telegrams. He handed the telegram envelope to Weston, mentioning that it was for Mr. Raft.

The telegram wasn't very important. It was from an upstate real-estate concern, quoting prices on some lots. Cardona crowded in to have a look at it, while the commissioner was showing it to Cranston.

The messenger inquired drearily if there was a reply. When Weston told him no, the fellow shambled from the office, clamping his hat upon his head.

Looking outward, The Shadow saw Moe's cab pulling up in front. Officers were going out to order it away, and it was Cranston's part to explain the cab's arrival.

He motioned Margo toward the outer door as the messenger passed through; then, following, The Shadow quietly told the officers that the cab had come for Miss Lane.

HELPING Margo into the cab, The Shadow was about to tell her to have Moe cruise around the block, when a better idea occurred to him. In this weird trail of death, the merest trifles might prove important. Certainly, anything that the police ignored was worthy of observation.

At the corner ahead, The Shadow saw the telegraph messenger turning from sight, whistling as he went. On a hunch less justifiable than most of Cardona's, The Shadow said to Margo:

"Have Shrevvy follow him."

Returning through the outer office, The Shadow indulged in one of the slight smiles that sometimes showed themselves on the usually immobile lips of Cranston. He'd supplied another little touch, to dispel Margo's long-held belief that Cranston was The Shadow.

Sending her with Moe along the route of a sauntering messenger-boy wouldn't strike Margo as worthy of The Shadow. She would regard it as real stupidity on Cranston's part, when the trail wound up at a telegraph office.

Of course, the cab would then return, and The Shadow would have it later; at least, so he thought, until he reached Raft's private office again. He came just in time to see Cardona reach for the dead man's right arm, raise it and look beneath.

The memo pad was gone!

Only one person could have taken it: the telegraph messenger! Small wonder that he had looked so old; the fellow was a fake, a crook disguised in uniform, like the men in the truck at Sherbrock's!

The Shadow recalled instantly how Cardona had blocked his view of the messenger while the fellow was in Raft's office. That was when the pretended messenger had snagged the memo pad and slipped it into his cap!

Like other planted clues, the memo pad had been a link arranged by murderers to carry the death trail farther. For some reason, men of crime had found it necessary to eliminate that lead. But the stolen link still existed, and The Shadow had sent Margo along the trail!

It was fortunate that she was in Moe's cab, for Shrevvy was a very clever hackie, a good man at dodging trouble. Nevertheless, The Shadow promptly told Weston, in Cranston's calmest manner, that four deaths were enough for anyone.

Weston agreed. He couldn't blame Cranston for deciding to go back to the club.

Thus did The Shadow manage to be on his way, to again become a figure clad in black, a hidden crime hunter who would be in readiness for whatever word might reach him, regarding the trail of the stolen link to death!

CHAPTER XI. THE BATTLER IN BLACK

MARGO LANE was more than ever convinced that Lamont Cranston was The Shadow. Only The Shadow could have snapped up so innocent a trail as that of a loitering telegraph messenger and picked it as a prize.

For two blocks, Margo had felt herself upon a stupid quest, wondering why Moe, the patient hackie was falling for the joke and sneaking the cab at a snail's pace along the curb.

Then, when the messenger looked back from another corner, Margo's opinion reversed itself. He didn't spot the cab, for Moe had it out of sight between two other cars that were parked on the street. But Margo saw the messenger's face, with its ugly, triumphant leer. She also spied him start into a run as he took the corner.

Moe followed after him. Around the corner, the fake messenger was peeling off his uniform jacket as he sprang into a waiting car manned by other thugs. From then on, Margo was glad that she wasn't at the wheel of her own coupe, trying to trail the group ahead. Shrevvy was much better qualified for that very ticklish job.

He let the other car get out of sight before its passengers could notice the cab behind. Then, taking cross streets, mingling with traffic, Moe picked the right car from a dozen others and was back on the trail again.

Not only on the trail, but free to follow closer, because the men ahead did not suspect his cab. Of all vehicles, taxicabs, the commonest type in Manhattan, were the best to use in work like this.

Margo was gradually piecing facts together. She knew that each murder had been the lead to the next, and reasoned that, in this case, something different had occurred. It could only be that the fugitive messenger had taken the clue that linked Raft's death to one to follow.

But Margo couldn't quite figure why crooks had planted something and then removed it. She felt sure, however, that The Shadow could answer that question, and probably would – through Lamont Cranston – when she met him later.

Events caused Margo to drop that problem. The trail was leading into a rather sinister portion of the East Side, where shabby old buildings ranged on each side of an elevated line. Such neighborhoods were all right normally, but when mobsters dived into them, every house became menacing.

When the car ahead rolled into a side street that stretched, dark and gloomy, toward the river, Margo felt that they were near the end of the ride.

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She was right. Crooks halted their car and disembarked, while Moe deftly extinguished the cab lights and slid into a parking space some distance behind. Margo watched slinky figures cross the sidewalk and sneak into a basement. She couldn't even tell which one had been the messenger boy.

The fact pleased her. It meant that the sidewalk was dark enough for her to do some stealthy work on her own. She opened the rear door of the cab, caught a warning gesture from Moe. Coolly, Margo said:

"It's all right, Shrevvy. I'll be careful."

"They may have a lookout," voiced Moe, shrewdly. "Those guys can konk you quick. I ought to know."

He rubbed his head, as though recalling a few such experiences. Margo laughed lightly, though she was taking the words to heart.

"I'll be very careful, Shrevvy."

MARGO was true to her word. She was wearing a dark dress, which enabled her to keep nicely unobserved as she moved along the line of basement fronts. But, as she neared the one where the crooks had entered, she remembered her promise to Moe.

It was well that she did. As Margo waited, one doorway short, she saw a huddling man shift from the adjoining doorstep.

Drawing back, Margo felt quite secure, though annoyed because she couldn't get closer. This was really a job for The Shadow, and Margo realized it. There was just a chance that luck might come her way – and it did.

The reason that the lookout had shifted was because a door was opening. Men emerged in a shaft of dim light, and Margo was able to overhear their voices. Not only that, she saw a face exceedingly like the sleek but sallow countenance of Dwig Brencott.

The sleek man spoke.

"A couple of you lugs cruise around," he said. "The Shadow has got wise to too much, and even when The Shadow learns too little, he knows too much. So keep cruising for a half-hour; then duck out. I'll call you later."

As the door closed, Margo worked away. She was trembling during the return trip to the cab, fearing every moment that hands might fling from a doorway and grip her. Straight opposite the cab, she was afraid that some clatter from her high heels might betray her, so she took off her shoes and carried them as she stole across the sidewalk.

In the cab, her nerve returned. She was putting on her shoes again, as she leaned to the front seat and said:

"We'd better start, Shrevvy –"

It was then that a real horror overwhelmed Margo. The cab no longer had a driver!

Sinking back, the girl opened her purse and tried to draw out a small automatic that she had there; but her fingers were gone numb.

Not that Margo was short on nerve; she could take care of herself in a pinch; otherwise, she wouldn't be working for The Shadow. But the belief that she might first have to rescue Shrevvy from the clinches of a mob was enough to mentally stun her.

Someone bounded into the cab from the street side and took the wheel. Margo caught a grip on the gun and shoved it forward, saying boldly:

"Don't move!"

A voice answered. It was Moe's. He thought that Margo meant the cab, not himself.

"O.K.," he said. "What are they doing? Prowling around?"

"They may be." Margo slid the gun back into the bag. She was glad Moe hadn't spied the weapon. "Only they're in a car – the ones we've got to avoid."

Moe gave a grunt, as though he expected what Margo told him. Then:

"Find out anything?" he asked.

"Dwig is in the hide-away," replied Margo. "He'll be there for the next half-hour."

"Good enough!"

With that, Moe started the cab. It dawned on Margo that he must have called Burbank, saying that he thought they had located Dwig and that the wanted crook would be around awhile.

Guesswork on Moe's part, but the sort The Shadow liked, because it could be promptly countermanded if it turned out wrong. Otherwise, it would stand, and was a great timesaver, for, if right, such guesses would enable The Shadow to make prompt plans.

There was one point, however, that Margo couldn't fathom. As they turned into an avenue, she questioned:

"Where are you taking me, Shrevvy?"

"To keep your date," was the reply. "The one you made with Mr. Cranston. He said to meet him at the Hotel Metrolite, didn't he?"

Lamont hadn't said anything of the sort, but Margo did not dispute the matter. She was sure that Moe had been told to remind her of the imaginary date. Since it was certainly time for dinner, Margo relaxed, while the cab zigzagged from street to avenue.

As they swung a corner sharply, she landed half around in the rear seat and had a look through the back window.

WHAT she saw, worried Margo. A coupe was jabbing past the same corner, acting very much as if on the cab's trail. Thoughts of the cruising car rang home to Margo. She exclaimed to Moe:

"They're following us! Like we followed them!"

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Taking a look in the mirror, Moe certified Margo's statement and sped the cab ahead. He was neatly in advance when he reached the side door of the Metrolite, but he didn't stop.

Instead, Moe whizzed past, went along the darkened street and swung around the block. He went by so fast, that Margo did not get a look at the hotel's side door.

A man was lounging there: Lamont Cranston. He not only saw the cab, he observed that a suspicious car was trailing it.

Things happened while those cars were rounding the block. Cranston became a figure in black: The Shadow. He signaled some blinks with a tiny flashlight; they were seen across the street. The Shadow had merged with darkness, away from the hotel door, when Moe's cab came past again.

This time, Moe slackened, and Margo thought that he intended to stop; but, instead, he kept on. Of course, the trailing coupe slowed when the cab did, but it didn't resume its speed.

A door yanked open on the driver's side of the coupe. Something hit the thug and sent him clear across the car into his companion's lap. Before the other hoodlum could get rid of the burdening driver, his head took a hard jolt, too.

By then, there were three in the car, and the driver was The Shadow. He pulled to the far curb and stepped out. Harry Vincent promptly joined him; The Shadow blinked the flashlight on the faces of the stunned men. Seeing that they would stay put awhile, he turned the car over to Harry, who drove away.

Finishing another tour around the block, Moe stopped at the Metrolite and let Margo out. Very anxiously, she looked back toward the corner, then decided that Moe must have managed to slip the trailing car. Margo went into the hotel, while Moe was looking at a green blink from a flashlight, farther down the street.

Wheeling over, Moe picked up The Shadow and made a brief report. The Shadow ordered a prompt return to Dwig's hide-out.

"Sorry about Miss Lane," informed Moe. "She's expecting to meet Mr. Cranston at the Metrolite."

"Rather odd," returned The Shadow. "He didn't tell her that he would be there."

"No," Moe admitted. "But I did."

"Then Cranston can blame it on you?"

The Shadow's tone ended with a whispered laugh that carried nothing more significant than the fact that Margo Lane might have a very long wait before she dined with her friend Lamont Cranston.

CHAPTER XII. THE FIFTH VICTIM

IN his squalid basement hide-away, Dwig Brencott was talking on the telephone, while other men stood by.

Sleek, suave of tone, Dwig was a contrast to his companions. They were husky, but dumb-faced, recruits that Dwig had signed to take the place of the lamented gunzels who had suffered, permanently, from meeting with The Shadow and the police.

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Except for the telephone, the hide-away had no furnishings other than a table and some broken-down chairs. It was quite apparent that Dwig, when he gestured for his tribe to follow him, intended to abandon the place. The Shadow could tell that from the looks of the place.

For The Shadow was present, though unseen.

The cloaked investigator had entered the hide-away from the back.

Peering through a partly opened door, he heard Dwig say: "Let's go!" Then, followed by his small but tough crew, Dwig went out through the front.

Even though he glanced back, Dwig did not see The Shadow. Motionless in the other doorway, the cloaked observer had benefit of darkness; but that was not all. It was unlikely that Dwig could have seen The Shadow.

Using the system of remaining absolutely immobile, with even his thoughts fixed, The Shadow was practicing the ways of the Tibetan mystics.

It was their belief that such concentration could produce the equivalent of invisibility. Through experience, The Shadow had demonstrated that complete immobility did reduce an observer's chances to almost nil.

It produced the semblance of a power through which he could cloud men's minds; and many of The Shadow's enemies had sworn that he had suddenly appeared in the midst of a lighted room before their startled eyes.

Only a few could claim that they had seen The Shadow vanish, for the simple reason that it was much more difficult the other way about. Though The Shadow could fade rapidly into darkness, he required ideal conditions if he sought to remain on the very ground, unnoticed. Once crooks saw The Shadow, their minds became too excited to be readily quieted.

If Dwig had any suspicions that The Shadow might be about, they were so vague that they did not bother him. His mind was at ease and tending toward other matters.

Had The Shadow spoken at that moment, in ventriloquial style, he could have startled Dwig into absolute bewilderment. In fact, Dwig would have imagined The Shadow almost anywhere except at the spot where he actually was.

But The Shadow did not speak; nor did he choose to reveal himself. He simply waited, motionless, until Dwig had followed the others outside. Then came the slightest stir amid the darkness, the merest swish of a black cloak, as The Shadow made his own departure from the rear of the hide-out.

Moe's cab was waiting in the next street; from then on, it became the medium whereby The Shadow kept close to Dwig and his crew without being discovered.

The fact that his cruising bruisers had not returned was proof sufficient to Dwig that the way was clear. He'd told them to go their way, and it didn't occur to him that The Shadow might have put them out of the picture by virtue of a surprise attack. Hence, Dwig was going his own way also and providing The Shadow with a very easy trail.

Where that trail would lead was no mystery to The Shadow.

Analyzing the matter of the stolen message more deeply than Margo had, The Shadow reduced it to but one solution. Mobsters had been forced to remove the link to a fifth murder because, somehow, that particular

crime had fallen through. If the police had found the name on the memo pad beneath Raft's elbow, they might have been able to forestall a coming crime.

That, in itself, was an important point.

The very oddity of the four deaths – all by poison, and striking almost at an appointed hour – indicated definitely that they were prearranged. Therefore, Dwig had probably supposed that the fifth man was dead, too, until some last-minute information had indicated otherwise. Naturally, since a murder scheme had slipped, Dwig, at present, was out to amend it.

Dwig and his mob were actually leading The Shadow to the fifth victim before death was delivered. Somewhere along this trail, The Shadow would have to pass the killers and be the first to reach the helpless man they sought!

THE trail narrowed suddenly, as the car ahead stopped near an elevated railway station. Moe parked on the other side of the avenue and The Shadow glided from the cab, prepared to follow an elusive course beneath the pillars, in case Dwig tried a sudden move.

Crooks were watching the steps that came down from the elevated station; it might be that they intended to waylay their quarry when he descended from the platform.

A man appeared from that direction. He was well-dressed, fairly tall, and with an intelligent square-jawed face. His lined features marked him past middle age, but his gait was agile. His expression was a troubled one – that of a man who was bound upon an unpleasant duty; but The Shadow noticed no trace of fear.

Reaching shelter beside the steps, The Shadow pointed an automatic for the window of the sedan in which Dwig and the other thugs were seated.

The mere glint of a revolver barrel would have meant a bullet for the man who showed the gun; but no one in the car tempted The Shadow's aim. Dwig and his watchers let the square-jawed man go past them, but when he had walked a half block, their car moved slowly in the same direction.

It appeared that they preferred to trail their prospective victim to some place where they could kill him with less notice.

Back in Moe's cab, The Shadow had his driver proceed along the same trail. Lights extinguished, the cab sneaked neatly up behind the sedan. The other car stopped; Moe did the same.

The walking man had stopped at a dingy brick house. Abruptly, he went up the steps and into the place. Dwig's car started away, but The Shadow told Moe to wait. He foresaw what the crooks intended. They were going around to the back, to find another way into the house.

Inadvertently, they were giving The Shadow the very chance he wanted. By using the front door, The Shadow could overtake the victim first.

Swiftly, The Shadow left the cab; fleetingly, Moe saw him on the house steps. Then, entering a gloomy hall, The Shadow heard creaks from the floor above and went directly for a flight of stairs.

By the time he had reached the second floor, the man ahead was on the third. As The Shadow neared the top of the next flight, he saw his man stop at a door.

After a few sharp knocks, the man spoke a name:

"Glevin!"

There was no answer. The man rapped again, spoke louder. His tone had an accusing note.

"Glevin!" he repeated. "This is Mr. Talney. Louis Talney. I want to speak to you!"

There was no response. For the first time, Talney exhibited actual hostility. Clamping his left hand firmly on the doorknob, he prepared to drive his shoulder forward, while his right hand drew a small, stubby revolver.

"I'm coming in, Glevin!"

Turning the knob, Talney jabbed his shoulder hard. Whether he expected to crack the rather flimsy door, or merely alarm Glevin, was difficult to tell. In fact, The Shadow did not have time – or need – to decide the question. The door was unlocked, something that Talney had not suspected. Swinging inward, the door carried the tall man on a long lunge.

Talney must have caught himself as he gasped. But it wasn't his near sprawl that brought the odd sound from his lips. The word that Talney gasped was proof of some different sort of shock. The word was a name:

"Glevin!"

FROM the doorway, The Shadow viewed the sight that had so horrified Talney. Small wonder that the tall man was aghast, for it was his first view of the sort of death that The Shadow, as Cranston, had seen on display four times upon this very evening.

Upon a cot that stood beyond a strip of frayed green carpet lay a dead man who stared straight toward the ceiling – a corpse with staring, glassy eyes and bloated features that bore only a grotesque resemblance to anything human. Yet Talney had managed to recognize the face as Glevin's, which proved he must have known the man well.

Standing beside the cot, Talney reached gingerly and lifted Glevin's left hand. From it, he removed a finger ring, which he held toward the gaslight. The ring had a roundish stone, as colorless as a chunk of glass. Stunned by the tragedy of Glevin's death, Talney spoke half aloud:

"I trusted you, Glevin, as a faithful servant. Yet you stole... a worthless ring."

Had The Shadow been acquainted with plans of Armand Lenfell, he would have known that Louis Talney was the fifth member of the secret six; also, that Glevin was the servant who had come in Talney's stead to receive a sapphire ring from Lenfell.

Jorton, Bayle, Halden, Raft – they were the four hooded men who had received rings. Talney was the fifth. Yet none of those rings bore the blue hue of a sapphire, whether real or imitation; nor did any show the peculiar star formation that should have been their characteristic!

Talney's bewilderment proved The Shadow's present theory: that all five of the worthless rings had once been valued as precious. So stupefied was Talney, that The Shadow ended his immobile vigil and moved into the room, approaching the dumfounded man beside the cot.

Once in motion, The Shadow ran the risk of detection; but it seemed slight, considering that Talney was still staring at the ring.

It was the flickering gaslight that betrayed The Shadow. Fanned by a breeze that came through the open window, the flame stretched and wavered, lengthening the streak of approaching blackness that preceded The Shadow.

Staring past the ring, Talney saw the weird, hawkish silhouette that was cast upon the cot where Glevin lay.

Roused from his stupor, Louis Talney uttered a savage cry. Wheeling, he aimed his stubby revolver point-blank for the cloaked figure that was swooping in from the door, and fired!

CHAPTER XIII. DINNER AT NINE

The Shadow's swoop had become a dive when Talney opened fire. The first shot, therefore, whizzed a full foot above The Shadow's slouch hat; but Talney wasn't deceived.

Knowing that he had missed, he shoved his gun downward, intending to score at least one hit upon the unknown invader, who, in Talney's opinion, must be a foe. Talney's second aim was good, but he didn't pull the gun trigger.

The Shadow's dive was toward the stretch of carpet on which Talney stood. Grabbing the green weave, The Shadow gave a hard yank. Talney somersaulted as the carpet went beneath him, his gun flying to the ceiling. The Shadow was on his feet, picking up the revolver, by the time Talney struck the floor.

It wasn't luck on The Shadow's part. He wouldn't have moved in on Talney if he hadn't seen that the carpet was rightly placed for emergency. In fact, the breaks were all against The Shadow. He had counted upon plucking away the carpet before Talney managed to fire at all. The shot, even though it missed, was disastrous to The Shadow's plans.

Heard below, Talney's gun blast was bringing men up the stairs as fast as they could come. Dwig and his crew, in through the back way, knew that something had happened and they didn't intend to let Talney, their wanted victim, get clear.

Coming to his feet, Talney launched for the door, not knowing that death was hurrying up to meet him. The Shadow reached the door first, slamming it across Talney's path. Twisting about, he blocked off the tall man and whirled him toward the window.

Something thumped the door and exploded with a smash that reduced the barrier to kindling. It was a bomb, chucked by one of Dwig's henchmen. That bunch was out to get rid of Talney without finesse or ceremony.

The door took the shock of the explosion, but before Talney could congratulate himself on escaping one death, he was confronted by another. Headfirst, he was going through the open window, propelled by The Shadow.

Talney thought it would be a thirty-foot plunge to a cement court below. He overestimated by twenty-nine feet, and he was wrong about the cement. Instead of taking off on a long plunge, Talney simply flattened on a fire escape outside Glevin's window.

The Shadow had noticed the ironwork of the fire escape, even though Talney hadn't. Rolling through the window, The Shadow flattened beside the tall man just as another "pineapple" scaled through the shattered

door, zipped across the smoke-filled room and landed beneath the cot that held Glevin's body.

The second bomb took powerful effect. Glevin's cot was hurled to the ceiling; his body, already bloated beyond normal recognition, was mangled by the blast. Walls cracked great chunks of the ceiling showered down with Glevin's form. The windows ripped outward, showering Talney and The Shadow with a deluge of glass which cascaded from the fire escape, for the iron framework tilted outward at a crazy angle when the bricks that held it weakened.

In time to catch Talney before he rolled from the canted platform, The Shadow, instead of restraining him, steered him to the steps. Badly shaken, Talney no longer offered opposition. He wanted to get away from the exploding room, and was willing to trust anyone who aided him.

Reaching the ground, The Shadow helped the stumbling, horror-maddened man around to Moe's cab. At intervals, Talney faltered as if paralyzed, and during that slow journey The Shadow recognized that there would be no further chance of trailing Dwig and the murder crew.

They had gone down the front stairway, after hurling the bombs. They couldn't have seen who was in the bombed room, for the first of their explosive missiles had struck the closed door; the next had sailed through a clouded atmosphere of smoke.

Having heard the shot, they might suppose that someone was in the room with Talney; but that was immaterial. They would be satisfied that they had delivered death.

THAT fact suited The Shadow.

It meant that Louis Talney was marked off the book. His servant, Glevin, if even considered, was written off, too. But Talney was the one that counted; he was the fifth link in the chain of death. Whether the chain went on from there, was the next point to learn. Already sure that it did lead farther, The Shadow now held the proof.

Talney's bewilderment over the cheap ring that Glevin wore fitted with The Shadow's own curiosity concerning the rings on the fingers of previous victims. Those rings should have had sapphires as gems. Furthermore, the fact that they did not contain sapphires pointed to the rings themselves as bearing responsibility for death.

Glevin's case backed that point.

The servant had died instead of his master, Talney, and it was doubtful that human poisoners had made the mistake, since Dwig, very active in the chain of crime, knew what Talney looked like.

However, further speculation was hardly necessary, since The Shadow now held a valuable informant: namely, Talney. Should there be a sixth man listed for death, Talney might be able to name him; but there was no rush, for death, if scheduled, was by this time delivered.

Indeed, rush was impossible with Talney. Getting sense from him was equally difficult, as The Shadow learned while riding in Moe's cab.

Beside him, Talney sat staring, muttering useless words. His mind was still numbed by his recollection of Glevin's body and the startling events that had succeeded it. He didn't even see the black-clad battler who sat beside him. At moments, Talney's eyes lighted, when he opened his hand to stare at an object that he had clutched all through the excitement.

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It was the dull, glassy ring that he had taken from Glevin's finger. Momentarily, Talney's eyes would brighten, then fade. This ring was not the one that he expected to see. He couldn't understand it.

The cab pulled up at an address around a corner from Park Avenue. It was the side entrance to the office of Dr. Rupert Sayre, who happened to be Cranston's own physician. Sayre was there, and lost none of his professional calm when he saw the cloaked figure of The Shadow bringing in Talney as a patient.

They helped Talney to a couch and let him lie down; hearing The Shadow's version of the patient's ordeal, Sayre nodded, and made a brief examination.

The Shadow, meanwhile, sat at Sayre's desk in another corner. Coming over, the physician stated:

"Our patient will need about an hour. Nothing serious; the combination of mental shock and physical exertion was too much —"

Pausing, Sayre stared at the ring that The Shadow held between the fingers of his gloved left hand. It was a very cheap ring, and The Shadow had been examining it with a powerful microscope on Sayre's desk. At present, however, The Shadow was doing something that made Sayre think he might be a better candidate as a patient than Talney.

Having laid aside the microscope, The Shadow had picked up an eye dropper and filled it with ink from Sayre's inkstand. He was carefully inserting the point of the eye dropper beneath the colorless quartz that served as a gem for the cheap finger ring.

The Shadow heard Sayre's voice chop short.

"This stone is hollow," spoke The Shadow, quietly. "It is cut en cabochon, as jewelers say, meaning dome-shaped. The microscope shows a special mounting beneath the hollow. Watch this effect, Sayre."

AS The Shadow squeezed the bulb of the eye dropper, the hollow space in the quartz sucked up the blue ink. Only a small quantity, but the effect was splendid. Filled with blue, the worthless gem took on a gorgeous luster. Nor was that all; as The Shadow raised the transformed jewel to the light, Sayre saw scintillating streaks that radiated from the center of the imitation gem.

"A starolite," informed The Shadow. "The trade name for imitations of star sapphires. Usually a starolite is easily detected; but this one is different. The liquid deepens the color and magnifies the marked mounting."

It happened that Sayre had stopped in at the exhibit at Walder's. He couldn't fail to recognize the amazing imitation gem that The Shadow held.

"One of the six sapphires!" Sayre exclaimed. "Those that were cut from the Star of Delhi!"

"Supposedly cut from it," corrected The Shadow. "No one examined them. They were in a sealed casket that had no lights beneath its top of unbreakable glass. Let us try another experiment."

He held the ring to Sayre's desk lamp. As the blue stone heated, little dribs of ink began to ooze from it. Sayre watched The Shadow wipe the blue dabs away with his glove, while the slow flow continued. Fading gradually, the stone was a star sapphire no longer, but just poor quartz.

"You can answer the next question," The Shadow told Sayre. "Suppose the ink to be a virulent poison, oozing because of the heat of the finger that wore it, working its way into a man's pores —"

Sayre interrupted. He defined the very poison by its Latin name. The Shadow listened while Sayre gave more facts; how such a poison, slowly administered, would be absorbed through the entire blood stream, bringing eventual death. In the form of blue crystals, the poison, made into a solution, would have the same hue!

Death's riddle was solved by The Shadow!

Much, however, remained. Foremost was the tracing of the master murderer. The Shadow reached for Sayre's telephone; the physician heard him call the Cobalt Club and ask for Commissioner Weston. For the first time, The Shadow was using Cranston's tone. He seemed startled by what he heard over the phone.

"Another death?" he queried. "A man named Louis Talney killed in an explosion?... What? Someone called Raft's office... The last, you think! Well, that is helpful. I see. No other leads beyond Talney... I'll drop in later, at the club –"

Rising, The Shadow turned toward Sayre, who was seated beside Talney's couch.

"When he comes around," spoke The Shadow, in the whispered tone that suited his cloaked guise, "send him to the Cobalt Club. Tell him not to give his name; he is merely to ask for Cranston."

"But if the commissioner will be there –"

"It will be the last place in the world" – The Shadow's tone was a whispered laugh – "where Commissioner Weston would expect to meet a dead man named Louis Talney!"

The Shadow was gone while Dr. Sayre was considering the unimpeachable merits of that particular plan. With a laugh of his own, Sayre turned again to his patient.

It took ten minutes for Moe's cab to get from Sayre's office to the Metrolite. When The Shadow alighted at the hotel, he was Cranston again. Inside the Metrolite, he found Margo waiting, and quietly apologized, as any gentleman would have, for coming to dinner at nine when he should have arrived at eight. Margo accepted the apology and asked no explanation. But while they dined, she gained the definite impression that Lamont Cranston, though as leisurely as ever, expected to keep further appointments before this night was ended.

CHAPTER XIV. MASTER OF CRIME

COMMISSIONER WESTON was very disappointed by the sudden way in which his friend, Lamont Cranston, lost all interest in the strange chain of quintuple death. Dropping into the club at about ten o'clock, Cranston listened to all that Weston had to say; then he yawned and decided to go home.

"But these are unexplainable riddles!" Weston exclaimed. "Men slain by a subtle poison administered in an unknown manner. We must solve these deaths! Think of the menace of a type of murder that never fails!"

"It failed the last time," reminded Cranston, "in Talney's case." The statement carried far more truth than Weston suspected. The commissioner did not catch the point behind it.

"Talney died!" he insisted. "He was blasted out of existence. Don't you realize it, Cranston?"

"Of course I realize it. Again, I say the perfect murder failed. They had to bomb Talney, instead of poisoning him, and that, I hope, will be the end of it."

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Accompanying Cranston out through the foyer, Weston stopped impatiently while his friend paused to shake hands with a man who was waiting for him. Cranston didn't bother to introduce his acquaintance. He just waved to Weston and went out with the arrival.

The commissioner noted that the man had a solemn, squarish face, but soon forgot it. As yet, Weston had seen no photographs of Talney, a matter on which The Shadow had checked while chatting with the commissioner.

In Cranston's limousine, Talney showed quite plainly that Sayre had brought him fully around. He was very voluble in describing all that had happened, including his recollections of The Shadow.

"Dr. Sayre said that you might help me," concluded Talney. "He spoke of previous deaths and told me that you knew something about them, since you were a friend of the police commissioner."

"I do," returned The Shadow in Cranston's tone. "Five men died, all wearing rings with colorless gems.

"Not rings with star sapphires?"

"No. Rings like the one you said your servant wore. Wait – I think I can recall their names –"

He spoke off the list, keenly watching Talney. Though the man recognized none of them, he was definitely ill at ease. Suddenly, Talney blurted:

"Sayre said the rings could have been poisoned!"

"Poisoned?"

"Yes!" Talney was trembling. "He said it might account for them changing from blue to some other color."

Cranston's face registered amazement. Talney gripped his new friend's arm.

"There is much I have to tell you!" he confided. "Dr. Sayre preferred that I should talk to you, as he is very busy. You must hear it all!"

With that, Talney unfolded the history of the secret six, the group that Armand Lenfell had sponsored for the worthy purpose of selling refugee gems, at proper prices, throughout the country. Talney, of course, was a member of the group, but he had known only Lenfell.

"Only Lenfell." Talney's tone was hollow. "The same was true of the others. Until tonight, I had no idea who the rest might be. But from what you tell me, I am sure that they were four of the men who died so mysteriously."

LINKED deaths!

Those had been a problem, even to The Shadow, but now he understood. It showed the craft of a mighty mind behind the reign of murder. Except as members of the secret six, Talney and the four victims had been definitely disassociated. That was why steps had been taken to link them!

It was a move that led the law in the wrong direction, not the right. It made it seem that they had known one another, instead of being men who met only incognito. In Cranston's deliberate style, The Shadow suggested it to Talney, and the living dead man responded by ejaculating the very name that The Shadow expected:

"Armand Lenfell!"

Coolly, The Shadow inquired:

"You think that Lenfell is the murderer?"

"Who else could be?" demanded Talney. "He knew us all, he alone. It was his idea to cut the Star of Delhi into six portions and have Walder exhibit it. But he kept the real Star for himself, and had five poisoned rings made instead!"

"There were six rings –"

"Yes," interposed Talney. "Lenfell kept one, but obviously, he would not have filled it with the same deadly liquid. That ring, however, will prove Lenfell to be a murderer! We must stop and call the police at once!"

Talney saw Cranston stare idly from the window of the slowly rolling limousine, which was piloted by a very patient chauffeur.

"We are in Central Park," came Cranston's tone, "with no phone booths near. But it would be unwise to call the police. They believe you dead, Talney."

"I shall come to life –"

"And make yourself a target again?" Cranston's head shook slowly. "Quite unwise, Talney. The Shadow might not arrive, the next time, to save you!"

Talney slumped back into the cushions. He rallied, suddenly, to announce:

"I shall go direct to Armand Lenfell!"

"To accuse him?" interposed Cranston. "That would be dangerous. You would be giving away the fact that you live, straight to the man that plotted murder. He wouldn't have to wait for the police to proclaim the fact."

"But someone must go to Lenfell!"

The Shadow nodded, as he pretended to give the statement deep consideration. Then, in Cranston's slowest tone:

"I shall go," he said. "Lenfell will not suspect me. Stanley, my chauffeur, will take you to my home in New Jersey, and you can remain there, Talney, as long as it is necessary to play dead. I shall tell you later how I make out with Lenfell."

SOON after sending Stanley home, with Talney as a passenger, The Shadow approached Lenfell's gloomy house, but not as Lamont Cranston. The Shadow was cloaked, the proper guise for this occasion. In a way, he had borrowed an idea from Talney, based on the latter's tale of the secret six.

Since hooded men had moved in and out of Lenfell's practically at will, a cloaked visitor should find the same process satisfactory. But The Shadow was not taking this expedition as a sinecure.

From Talney's account, he inferred that Lenfell had given the servants evenings off whenever he expected his hooded friends – or dupes – to visit him.

Lenfell's house was an index to that fact. It was not as gloomy or formidable as Talney had described it. The Shadow saw lights that appeared to be in the kitchen; others, on the third floor. Unquestionably, there were servants about. But when The Shadow glided to the side door and tried it, he found it unlocked.

The Shadow paused just inside. If Lenfell expected no more visits from his five companions in the secret six, why was the door unlocked? There was a plausible answer: the servants.

Probably Lenfell locked the doors himself; otherwise the servants, in the past, might have unwittingly blocked out the hooded visitors. It wouldn't be wise for Lenfell suddenly to change that policy over night, particularly on a night when murder was rampant.

Finding Lenfell's study was doubly easy. Talney had mentioned its location; from outside, The Shadow had seen a light in the room. Of all mysterious visitors who had entered Lenfell's house, none moved with more stealth than did The Shadow as he took the side stairway to the second floor. None, that was, except Jan Garmath, on the occasion when the elderly gem maker had returned to eavesdrop at Lenfell's study.

So far as the servants were concerned The Shadow's stealth was superfluous. None was close enough to overhear his approach to the study. The Shadow was thinking purely in terms of Lenfell, and when he reached the study, his gliding arrival gave proof of dividends. Through the door, which was ajar, The Shadow saw Lenfell seated at the desk.

Only a lamp gave light. It was on the desk, and its rays were directed toward a sheaf of letters. Lenfell was leaning forward in his chair, one elbow on the desk; his face, though away from the light's glare, was plainly directed toward the stack of letters. His other hand gripped a fountain pen, ready to affix a signature.

Easing the door open, The Shadow performed a quick, roundabout glide, skirting the desk in darkness. An automatic drawn, he approached Lenfell and stopped short of the seated man's shoulder. One nudge of the gun muzzle, Lenfell would be helpless.

But The Shadow did not touch Lenfell with the muzzle. He did not even brush the back of the chair. He did feel a floor board give loosely beneath his foot, but he suppressed its creak by adding pressure.

That same board ran beneath a leg of Lenfell's chair. It might have jarred the chair a fraction of an inch, but not enough for Lenfell to have noticed it, because a slight shift of his own body would have produced the same motion. In fact, Lenfell did not notice the effect at all; nevertheless, the result was large.

Lenfell's pen hand slid across the desk. It flopped past the edge, and its weight carried him with it. Rolling from the chair, the financier struck the floor and stretched there. His broad face, though turned upward, was not in the light, but his left hand was. It lay across his chest, and upon the third finger The Shadow saw a ring.

Not a ring with a sapphire, real or synthetic. The ring contained a specimen of very pure glass, as colorless as other worthless pieces of junk jewelry that The Shadow had viewed earlier.

Normally broad, Lenfell's face did not look bloated away from the light, but when The Shadow tilted the lamp toward it, the condition was plainly discernible.

The Shadow had come to meet the master of crime. He had found Armand Lenfell. The two were not the same, however deep Lenfell's schemes, no matter what part he had played in the strange plot of murder. For no man of hideous crime would have numbered himself among the victims.

Armand Lenfell was stone dead, struck down by the same virulent poison that had taken the lives of others whose fingers bore rings of doom!

A low, grim laugh whispered in the darkness above the dead figure on the floor. It was still The Shadow's task to find a master mind of murder!

CHAPTER XV. CREEP OF DOOM

UNDER the lamplight, Lenfell's face seemed to grimace upward at the eyes above it, as though the man enjoyed the death that had come his way. Certainly, Lenfell had more cause to grin in death than in life. Had he been living at this moment, he would not have grinned at all.

There wasn't a doubt that Lenfell had betrayed the trust that others had placed in him. But his crimes did not include murder. Lenfell, alone, could point the finger upon the master plotter who had gone still further, to trick him along with his dupes.

Lenfell's knowledge, however, was locked as tightly as the teeth that gritted from the midst of his wide death grin.

The trouble was that Lenfell had known too little. Had he known enough, he would not have been lying dead.

Thinking in terms of the unlocked door below, The Shadow came to a new conclusion. There was another reason why that door was open, and a good one. It could mean that Lenfell still expected visits from members of the secret six, not knowing that death was to befall them. A good explanation, since it gave a plausible reason for Lenfell's own death.

Considering the complexities that Lenfell's death produced, The Shadow turned toward the large safe that stood at the rear of the financier's study. Catching the glow of the lamplight, the glistening bulk added challenge of its own.

Like its owner, Lenfell, the safe refused to talk. But it might be possible to pry facts from the safe, instead of Lenfell's grinning jaws. Stepping to the safe, The Shadow crouched, pressed his gloved fingers against the dial.

Before he could test the intricate combination, The Shadow was attracted by a sound outside the study. It came as a slow creeping, and it was close, yet elusive, as it traveled along the hall.

Having heard no creaks from the stairs, The Shadow was sure that the creeping arrival must have been cautious while coming up from the ground floor, only to drop the guarded manner as he neared Lenfell's study.

Adding that to previous facts, The Shadow found the answer.

The man whose creeps were coming closer was the murderer of Armand Lenfell!

Such logic was perfect. In his own approach, The Shadow had moved silently all the way. The newcomer had done the same only as far as the second floor. He was taking pains to avoid being heard by servants in the kitchen, but once near Lenfell's study, he did not care what sounds he made. It meant that the approacher knew that he would find Lenfell dead.

Properly translated, the facts proved that this was Lenfell's murderer. If not, the creeper would still be using caution.

Turning from the safe, The Shadow sidled into darkness, drawing an automatic, to await the appearance of the creeping criminal who was in the hall. Yet, even to The Shadow's skilled ears, the approaching sound was elusive. At moments, it seemed close, then far away until, when The Shadow did not actually expect it, a huddling figure showed itself within the doorway.

Even when close, the creeping man's face could not be distinguished. The Shadow, himself, was partially to blame. He had turned the lamp so it no longer shone toward the door. Creeping footsteps entered, their maker with them, and the huddling man kept looking toward the desk for a sight of Lenfell. The action turned his face away from The Shadow.

Of one thing only was The Shadow certain: that this was not Dwig Brencott, nor any of the slick crook's crew. This was the master criminal, in person, the conniver who had somehow managed to pass death along with the faulty sapphires that Lenfell had given out.

So far, the chief criminal had not shown his hand on other scenes of death, but he obviously had business here in Lenfell's study.

Drawing still farther into darkness, The Shadow watched. He saw the crouched man reach the safe and begin to thumb the dial without the need of extra light. Evidently, the interloper knew the combination, which indicated that he had visited these premises while Lenfell was alive.

What the murderer was about, The Shadow did not fully know, though he could guess. To substantiate his opinion, he glided forward, moving close behind the man at the safe.

Never before had The Shadow sought to trap an intruder who possessed such sharpened senses. Only the most suspicious of eyes could have spied the glide of darkness across the already dimmed floor. Few ears could have caught the slight swish of The Shadow's cloak.

Perhaps the crouching safe-tapper possessed some uncanny ability to recognize the approach of a challenger. Whatever the case, he sensed The Shadow's presence.

LIKE an uncoiling snake, the crouched man unlimbered. Spinning around, he flung himself straight for The Shadow, whipping out a revolver as he came. There wasn't time to sight the man's face, for the light was behind him. All that The Shadow could do was meet the lightning attack by as quick a counterthrust.

Swinging his gun hand in a wide arc, The Shadow outdid his foe in point of speed. Guns clashed, automatic against revolver, before the unknown man could give a trigger tug. The force of The Shadow's stroke slashed the weapon from his adversary's hand.

With the blow, The Shadow delivered a low but recognizable laugh – a taunt that would have fazed an ordinary criminal. The mirth did not work with this man.

His gun lost, the creeper simply took advantage of his weaponless condition. In bashing the revolver, The Shadow had swung himself off balance, and quick eyes noted the fact. Long arms shot forward; one hand caught The Shadow's wrist, while the other sped to his throat. His own gun forced upward, The Shadow hadn't time to fire.

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He did the next best thing. A quick twist, a backward fling, and The Shadow was starting his opponent on a jujitsu flip that should have carried him to the wall. But the master criminal performed an amazing gyration in midair and did a side twist of his own. Though he struck the floor, the twist that he gave The Shadow's wrist was sufficient to yank away the cloaked fighter's automatic.

Undaunted, The Shadow drove anew for his foe. By then, they were halfway to the door, well distant from the desk lamp.

In this first battle with Jan Garmath, the creeper who had come to Lenfell's study, The Shadow was meeting with surprising opposition. But it wasn't the sort that could continue. Clutching his snakish adversary, The Shadow managed to get his gloved hands on the man's neck.

A quick choke and Garmath would be helpless, his identity revealed as soon as The Shadow could drag him to the light. But Garmath, tugging at the gloved hand's that throttled him managed to raise an outcry. He shouted, not in his own voice but in excellent imitation of Lenfell's tone:

"Help! Andrew – George – help! They are murdering me!"

In the midst of his cries, Garmath managed a side twist toward the desk. He was still wrestling hard against The Shadow when Lenfell's servants arrived. They came with a promptitude that The Shadow had not expected.

Piling through the door, they saw a writhe of blackness blocking off the light from the desk lamp. Hurling themselves upon The Shadow, they tried to haul him from a victim that they thought must be their master, Lenfell.

The servants were only half successful, but Garmath supplied the rest. Out of The Shadow's clutch, he ducked around the desk leaving the cloaked fighter in the hands of Andrew and George. They were too ardent in their attack to observe Garmath's quick flight.

Only The Shadow saw the running man who scooped up the revolver from the floor and kept on his way. But The Shadow had no chance to spy Garmath's face. The smart crook did not show it.

Flinging Andrew in one direction, George in the other, The Shadow recovered his automatic and went after Garmath, with George and Andrew following. Garmath was at the bottom of the front stairs when The Shadow reached the top; he was slamming the front door when his cloaked pursuer arrived at the bottom of the stairway.

Having a similar lead on Lenfell's servants, The Shadow seemed free for uninterrupted pursuit; but he was due for unexpected opposition. Garmath was across the street by the time The Shadow sprang from the front door, and from an arriving car blockers sprang up to cut off The Shadow's course.

Had they been mobsters, like Dwig and his outfit, The Shadow would have dealt them a proper dose of bullets. But these weren't crooks; they were detectives, backed by none other than Inspector Joe Cardona!

GUNS talked, as The Shadow jogged the hands that held them. Recognizing The Shadow, Cardona was shouting orders that the barking revolvers drowned. From the doorway of the house, Lenfell's servants were shouting: "Get the man in black!" Their cries were louder than Cardona's, after the roar of the guns ended.

Tripping one detective and tumbling him across the other, The Shadow made a dive for darkness, hoping that Cardona wouldn't suddenly change his opinion and decide that, for once, The Shadow might be in the wrong.

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Joe didn't decide so, but he wavered, and that was why The Shadow took to the darkness of the side passage leading past Lenfell's, instead of going across the street in chase of Garmath.

Out back, The Shadow found Moe's cab and sprang into it, ordering the speedy hackie to round the block and try to pick up the trail of another car. But the lost time proved costly.

Garmath was gone when Moe made the circuit. The only car that hove into sight was the official one belonging to Commissioner Weston. Sight of that bulky vehicle was cause enough for Moe to veer off in another direction, without awaiting The Shadow's bidding.

The scene that Weston viewed in Lenfell's study was not a great surprise. The commissioner had come to Lenfell's in response to another tip-off. Weston was puzzled merely by the statements of the servants and the detectives. They all insisted that a black-cloaked fighter had fled the house, one who answered far too closely to the known description of The Shadow.

When Cardona listened to those statements, he caught a glare from Weston. Remembering the alibi that he had given The Shadow at Sherbrock's, Cardona was definitely perturbed. With Lenfell's body in plain view, and The Shadow the only intruder on the premises, the cloaked investigator's reputation was encountering a severe strain.

Joe only hoped that Weston would not think back to the Sherbrock case. To forestall such a prospect, Cardona gestured at Lenfell's safe.

"Maybe we'll find the answer there," he said to Weston. "Whoever came here might have been after something important. Suppose we see what's inside."

The idea appealed to Weston and took his full attention, for it wasn't easily accomplished. None of the servants knew the combination, and Weston's guesswork at the dial proved quite unavailing.

Cardona, meanwhile, was consulting a little book that contained the phone number of a specialist in safes. The man proved to be at home, and he agreed to come right over.

It took the legitimate cracksman fifteen minutes to arrive; another quarter-hour to solve the combination of Lenfell's safe. When the big door came open, Weston poked head and shoulders through and pounced upon the first object that he saw, which happened to be a squarish jewel case.

Opening the box, Weston was too surprised to speak. Cardona had to look over his shoulder to observe what the commissioner had found.

Gleaming from within the box, catching the focused lamplight with radiating streaks, was a giant star sapphire that answered the description of the famous Star of Delhi.

It was little wonder that Weston was surprised. Had Lenfell's body come suddenly to life, it couldn't have amazed the commissioner more. For the Star of Delhi, according to the unimpeachable word of Raymond Walder, the now-dead jeweler, had been divided into the six gems that Walder himself had exhibited in his store!

SUCH astonishment was something that Weston had to share. When he arrived back at the Cobalt Club, he made a call to New Jersey and spoke to his friend Cranston, who answered in a very sleepy tone.

"Another murder, Cranston!" exclaimed Weston. "With it we have found the Star of Delhi!"

"Good!" was Cranston's reply. "So you've solved everything. Good work commissioner."

"But that only increases the mystery," Weston insisted. "The Star of Delhi was supposed to be cut up. But we've found out that it wasn't."

"Too bad," responded Cranston. "I thought it was cut up. Saw it myself, all in pieces. How are you going to find the Star of Delhi when there isn't any Star of Delhi?"

"But we have found it –"

A click interrupted from the other end. Evidently, Cranston was too opinionated to give any credence to Weston's statement. At his end of the phone, the commissioner fumed and muttered a few comments regarding Cranston's obstinacy. He was sorry that he had bothered to call his friend at all.

The Shadow wasn't sorry.

At his end of the line, The Shadow stood with half-closed eyes, picturing the possible results to which the finding of the great sapphire might lead. Then, from the fixed lips of Cranston, came a grim but softly whispered laugh.

It was the laugh of The Shadow, presaging new and curious quests along the trail to strangely hidden crime.

CHAPTER XVI. TRAILS DIVERGE

IRKED by Cranston's indifference to the finding of the great sapphire, and desirous of showing some success on an evening when murder had reigned, Commissioner Weston lost no time in informing the press that the Star of Delhi had been recovered in its original shape.

The news created a vast sensation, and somewhat counteracted public criticism over the matter of six mysterious deaths.

It was the sort of story that the newspapers liked. Every great gem had some curious past history, and the Star of Delhi was no exception. Journalists dug for facts, and produced them.

Once famous as the principal gem in a Hindu rajah's crown, the Star of Delhi had undergone a century of travel and transfer, leaving slaughter and rebellion in its wake. Reaching the possession of a European collector, it had brought him ill luck, including the forced sale of the prized blue jewel.

The jinx was still at work, and the fact that it had cost the lives of six men could be attributed to the greed of all. Each man, it so seemed, had shared a sinister secret – that of six false sapphires which had passed as portions of the Star of Delhi.

How much Walder, the dead jeweler, had known; how deeply Sherbrock, the missing lapidary, was involved, were perplexing questions that bothered the press quite as much as the law.

Certain it was that six smaller gems had been exhibited as parts of the great sapphire, stones so well matched that they must have been of the same origin. The question of the false gems led to a discussion of synthetic sapphires, which offered the only solution to the fraud.

At late breakfast in the quiet of his New Jersey home, Lamont Cranston read the newspaper reports and made comment to Louis Talney, who was seated across the table.

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"They seem more stirred by the finding of the Star of Delhi," said Cranston, "than by your death, Talney, and those of six others."

"Five others," reminded Talney. "I wasn't killed."

"Six others," Cranston corrected. "You are forgetting your own servant: Glevin. It seems that his body was found, but was mistaken for yours."

Talney's face showed an expression of relief. As circumstances stood, he preferred to be counted as dead.

"Any other news?" he queried. "Anything about the man who fled from Lenfell's?"

"You mean The Shadow?" queried Cranston, glancing at the newspaper. "No. They aren't sure that he's to blame. His case doesn't puzzle me so much, Talney."

"Why not?"

"He may have gone there investigating the chain of crime. What does surprise me is the matter of the poisoned rings."

"You're surprised because the police have not suspected them?"

"No." The Shadow shook his head in a leisurely fashion. His steady tone was Cranston's. "I can't quite understand why murder was so necessary."

The remark was meant to draw an opinion from Talney. It succeeded.

"I understand," expressed Talney. "There wasn't any need for Lenfell to murder us. We trusted him too much. But whoever else wanted to steal the Star of Delhi, had to kill Lenfell in order to get the gem. That meant murdering the rest of us, because we all knew Lenfell."

"Who do you think the murderer is?"

"Probably Roger Sherbrock. Maybe Lenfell made a deal with him, to fake six sapphires instead of cutting the large one. When the police found out that Sherbrock was the brain behind the jewel robberies, it put Sherbrock outside the law. So he decided to go after the Star of Delhi."

The Shadow nodded, even though he knew that Talney's theories were very wide of the mark. In The Shadow's opinion, Sherbrock was quite innocent, though the police, like Talney, thought the opposite. Sherbrock was the scapegoat for the crimes of others, which The Shadow could appreciate, since he was getting into the same class of the falsely accused.

"I'll drop into town," The Shadow decided, "and have a chat with my friend, the commissioner."

"The sooner you come back," returned Talney, "the better I'll like it, Cranston. I'm eager to know what else develops."

DEVELOPMENTS were under way while Cranston's limousine was starting to Manhattan.

In his office, Commissioner Weston was receiving a delegation of prominent jewelers, all eager to see the Star of Delhi. Among them was a dryish-faced man named Jan Garmath, known as an expert on artificial

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gems. It was Garmath who supplied some facts that Weston wanted.

"Synthetic sapphires are quite common," declared Garmath. "They are produced by fusing aluminum sesquioxide and the necessary chemical coloring. Only under the microscope can they be told from natural gems."

"Ah!" Weston exclaimed. "Then we could detect the six false sapphires, should we regain them!"

"You could," agreed Garmath. "You must look for the structural lines. You will find them curved, instead of straight. Furthermore, synthetic sapphires contain bubbles. Look at the Star of Delhi, commissioner" – Garmath provided a powerful lens – "and you will see straight lines, but no bubbles."

Weston studied the great gem through the glass.

"You said curved lines," he remarked, "and bubbles. Was I right, Mr. Garmath?"

"Yes, commissioner. Synthetic sapphires fit that description."

The commissioner was idly laying down the glass and replacing the Star of Delhi in its plush-lined box. He stopped abruptly, popping up in his chair, looking from one witness to another.

"Synthetic!" he exclaimed. "Did you say synthetic?"

"I said –"

Garmath couldn't complete it. Others were pouncing for the Star of Delhi, all bringing out their magnifiers. In half a minute, Weston's office was teeming with confusion. The great sapphire, seen under the glass, had curved structural lines and bubbles.

The Star of Delhi was a fake!

Never before had these jewelers seen such a large imitation gem.

Theories were popping thick and fast, all to one conclusion. Facts had been reversed, with but one possible explanation, according to the experts.

Roger Sherbrock must have cut the real Star of Delhi into six matched gems. That was the really clever part of it. Small sapphires were more apt to be suspected than one so well described as the Star of Delhi.

Probably Sherbrock had sold the imitation Star, a wonderful replica of the original, to Lenfell. He had then disposed of the six matched gems to Walder, who had probably learned that they were the portions of the real Star and had advertised the fact.

Threatened with exposure by Lenfell, the man he had swindled, Sherbrock had been forced to murder his dupe and other men who knew about the crooked sale. It was a sound theory, and one that pleased Weston as well as Cardona who was present, for it cleared The Shadow.

Undoubtedly, Sherbrock had come to Lenfell's last night to steal back the fake Star of Delhi, thereby disposing of evidence against himself. The Shadow had been on hand, crossing Sherbrock's trail again, as on a preceding night. Weston was mentioning this in an aside to Cardona, when The Shadow himself appeared in the office.

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Of course, he came as Cranston. Out of the hubbub, he learned of the recent discovery, and looked at the Star of Delhi for himself. Turning to Weston, The Shadow inquired quietly:

"Who detected the fraud?"

"I did!" bragged Weston. Then, noting glances from some jewelers: "Thanks to Jan Garmath."

"Which man is he?"

Looking about, Weston couldn't find Garmath. It turned out that Garmath, like some of the other jewelers, had supposed that the conference was ended, and was therefore gone. When Weston asked where Garmath could be reached, no one knew. Garmath, it appeared, had a large fortune which he had brought from Europe, and was retired, rather than active, as a jeweler.

"It sums up to this, Cranston," declared the commissioner, no longer interested in Garmath. "Six real sapphires have gone back to their original owner, whoever he may be. We believe that those stones were cut by Sherbrock from the actual Star of Delhi. We shall try to find the owner and question him – confidentially, of course – in hopes of evidence against Sherbrock."

"Naturally, the owner of the six sapphires may be loath to declare himself, for fear of death. Nevertheless, we know what we are after – and that it is the first important step."

LATER that afternoon, Lamont Cranston met Margo Lane and calmly told her how Louis Talney was a guest at his residence, sent there by The Shadow. After piecing Talney into the picture, Cranston remarked:

"I shall have to call him later. He will be interested to hear about the Star of Delhi."

"How it was really cut into six smaller gems," nodded Margo. "I read all about it in the early afternoon editions. Clever of your friend, the commissioner, to find out that the large sapphire was an imitation. Well, it's up to the police to look for the six small stones."

"Which they can never find."

"Can never find?" Margo echoed. "Why not?"

Seldom did The Shadow put so much emphasis into the tone of Cranston as he did on this occasion, in response to Margo's query.

"It was Garmath, not Weston," he said, "who exposed the great sapphire as a synthetic stone. After that, Garmath conveniently disappeared. It is Garmath who must be found. I believe that he manufactured the synthetic gem."

"And sold it to Lenfell?"

"No. Lenfell already had it. He wanted to keep it and dupe Talney and the rest into thinking that it had been cut. So he needed six small, synthetic stones, and asked Garmath to make them."

"Which Garmath did –"

"Which Garmath did not!" Cranston interposed. "He made six poisoned rings, instead. Knowing that Lenfell had a sale for the real Star of Delhi, Garmath naturally kept it. He made the large synthetic sapphire to dupe

Lenfell. The poison worked too soon for Lenfell to ever take it to his customer."

It all struck home to Margo. Trails had diverged; the one that the police sought was quite different from The Shadow's quest. The law was after six real sapphires, whereas The Shadow wanted to uncover a single stone, the great Star of Delhi itself. The law's trail did not exist, but The Shadow's did!

Arriving late at the commissioner's conference, The Shadow had lost his opportunity to trail immediately the daring supercreek, Jan Garmath, who had personally given Weston the wrong start. But The Shadow would soon find a way to pick up Garmath's trail.

It wouldn't be through the two thugs captured the night before. At dusk, when The Shadow, fully cloaked, appeared within his sanctum, the hidden room where he formulated campaigns against crime, he found blank reports awaiting him. Harry Vincent and other agents had been unable to locate Dwig Brencott through the prisoners.

But there were other sheets of consequence, supplied by Rutledge Mann, an investment broker in The Shadow's service. Those sheets listed the names of wealthy men who were investors in gems, as well as stocks and bonds.

Less than an hour after he had left Margo Lane, The Shadow completed a check-up of the lists.

The Shadow had rated them in order of importance, intending to investigate them, each in turn. He felt sure that one of the first four would prove to be the man who could supply much-needed information.

In that surmise, The Shadow was correct: Second on the list was the name of Uriah Crome.

It should have topped the list, as The Shadow was soon to learn!

CHAPTER XVII. A MATTER OF PRICE

WHILE The Shadow was still busy in his sanctum, Uriah Crome was receiving a visitor, which was something very unusual. Though he lived near the center of Manhattan, Crome was twin brother to a hermit. His penthouse, located on the flat roof of an antiquated eight-story office building, might well have been a cave in the middle of a wilderness.

Old, dyspeptic, as bald as an eagle and beak-nosed as a vulture, Crome had only two delights in life: jewels and milk toast. He liked gems because they glittered, and appealed to his miser's sense of ownership. He preferred milk toast because it was the only fare that did not cause him indigestion.

Crome's penthouse could only be reached by an elevator that had a night operator especially for service to the top floor. Since Crome owned the office building, it was impossible for anyone to come upstairs without his permission. The night man always telephoned up first, to make sure that Crome would receive any candidate for admission who happened to be downstairs.

On this evening, Crome was seated in an oak-paneled room which he termed his den, when one of his several servants entered with a note. After reading it, Crome placed bony fingers to his thin chin, pondered for a few moments, then ordered:

"Show the visitor up."

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The visitor was Jan Garmath, and Crome received him alone. While he finished his milk toast, the vulturous man kept surveying his dry-featured visitor with a look that would have suited a bird of prey.

Crome's gaze, however, was actually defensive. He regarded Garmath as the vulture; himself as anything from a worm to a fat-sized guinea hen, or whatever sort of tidbit a vulture might choose.

Crome opened negotiations with a sharpish query:

"You have come regarding the Star of Delhi?"

"I have brought the Star of Delhi," returned Garmath in the mild tone he so often used. "I thought that you would be pleased to view a priceless gem that happens to have a price."

Producing a small jewel case, Garmath exhibited a great blue gem, which, to all appearances, was the synthetic replica that Commissioner Weston had taken credit for detecting that afternoon. Crome had evidently read the newspapers, for he shook his head as he held the jewel to the light.

"Bah!" he snorted. "This sapphire is false!"

"It happens to be real," returned Garmath. "The synthetic stone is now in the possession of the police."

"But this could be an imitation, too."

"There could be another imitation," agreed Garmath, "had I chosen to manufacture two, instead of only one. But one" – he gave a dry cluck – "was all I needed. This is the genuine Star of Delhi!"

BUSY with a microscope, Crome was learning for himself that Garmath spoke the truth. He pressed a button on his desk. One of the wall panels swung about, becoming a jewel case with shelves of resplendent gems that gave a great glitter to that side of the room.

"Bah!" Crome pressed the button again, to turn the shelves away from sight. "I must have these buttons marked. I pressed the one that controls the emerald showcase, by mistake. Here is the sapphire button."

He pushed it. A block of shelves swung from another panel, creating a bluish shimmer as they came. Hobbling over to the display, Crome compared the Star of Delhi with other large sapphires. The comparison was in favor of the great gem that Garmath had brought. Coming back to the desk, Crome planked the Star in front of him and said to Garmath:

"I want it!"

"Of course you want it," chuckled Garmath. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have made a deal with Lenfell. Let me see" – Garmath faked a tone of recollection – "what was the price he wanted? Three hundred thousand dollars?"

Garmath was simply making an estimate, for he had not heard Lenfell mention price to Crome during their phone conversation. Garmath calculated that if six smaller sapphires would have rated fifty thousand each, Lenfell certainly would not have set the price for the Star of Delhi as less than the sum of the smaller stones, had they been cut from the great gem.

Garmath's own deals with Lenfell had been strictly limited to the providing of six small synthetic sapphires; nothing more. But he wanted Crome to think that there had been a closer association.

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The estimate was near enough. Early in negotiations with Crome, Lenfell had mentioned three hundred thousand dollars as a suitable price. Hence, though Crome shook his head, he did it slowly.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Crome told Garmath. "That was the most that I would have paid Lenfell. But my present offer" – he dug clawish fingers into the desk and leaned across with a triumphant grin – "is only two hundred thousand!"

Garmath's eyes showed surprise, so well feigned that Crome was deceived. His beakish face agleam, Crome gloatingly detailed why he expected the Star of Delhi at a bargain price.

"I knew Lenfell's ways," asserted Crome, "the measures that he was taking to acquire the Star of Delhi as his own. He was betraying his associates; more than that, he was actually swindling them! That, of course" – Crome shrugged – "was not my affair. It was Lenfell, not I, who had to cover up what he had done.

"Nevertheless, his failure to do so could have caused me certain difficulties, should it become known that I owned the real Star of Delhi. I insisted that Lenfell take that into consideration, and he did.

"Now, in your case, Garmath, men have not merely been swindled; they have died! Too bad" – Crome was clucking as though really sorry – "but it means that you will have to give some extra consideration to the matter of price, in selling the Star of Delhi."

Crome meant "extra" to the tune of fifty thousand dollars, which he expected to retain, at Garmath's expense, in return for silence regarding Crome's own suspicion of the murders that Garmath had maneuvered. He was reaching to a desk drawer, bringing out crisp currency in bills of a thousand-dollar denomination and higher.

"Ten, twenty, thirty –" Crome had come down to the mere thousand-dollar bills, when he finally said: "Two hundred." He extended that sheaf to Garmath, while he put other bills away. Garmath merely folded his arms.

"My price," he said, "is half a million."

"What!" exclaimed Crome. "Preposterous!"

"Not at all," remarked Garmath mildly. "I reason rationally, not the other way about, as Lenfell did. The greater the crime, the greater the risk, and therefore – the greater the price!"

Crome swept back the money and dumped it in the desk drawer. Garmath was not at all annoyed. He simply leaned forward and added, pointedly:

"And the more certain the sale!"

THE words crept home to Crome as insidiously as the creep of Garmath's footfalls had once impressed Lenfell. Crome's hand had made an involuntary gesture toward the telephone. Garmath waved for him to complete it.

"Call the police," suggested Garmath. "Tell them that you intended to buy the Star of Delhi. When you do so, you will implicate yourself, not in five swindles, but in six murders! The police will find you, Crome, but they will not find me!"

Crome sagged back into his chair.

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"No police?" queried Garmath. "Then call your loyal servants and, have them eject me, while you keep the Star of Delhi for yourself. That is as far as you would dare go, Crome, for neither you nor your servants are of sufficient grit and caliber to go through with murdering me.

"But I specialize in murder, Crome!" Garmath's tone had as snap as pronounced as the glint from his eyes. "I, and the men in my employ. Remember that, Crome, if you do not buy the Star of Delhi. Should you buy it" – his tone was easing – "you can remember that I also give protection to those that I think deserve it."

Crome's breath came back with a great gasp.

"You mean that if I buy the Star of Delhi at your price, no one will ever know of the transaction?"

"Not through me," returned Garmath. "Moreover, should anyone learn the fact" – his chuckle became raspy – "I can guarantee that they will never tell. Whatever service you may need from me goes with the sale, as a matter of good will."

Good will from a master of evil!

The paradox struck Crome hard; nevertheless, he felt forced to take Garmath's word. His numbed expression showed that Crome was reasoning matters slowly, but he was coming to a sound conclusion.

Good will or evil, Garmath's word could be relied upon. It would have to be so; otherwise, he couldn't have kept the confidence of murderous accomplices to the extent that he undoubtedly had.

With trembling hands, Crome reached for the money drawer, brought out the cash and began to count it. He made up a total of some three hundred and sixty thousand dollars, and looked worried about the remainder, when Garmath suggested:

"Your check will do, or – better – checks for some odd amounts, made out to cash. I understand that you often purchase jewels in amounts up to fifty thousand dollars. So keep the various checks below that sum."

Crome wrote out the checks and handed them along with the cash. After counting up to the total and finding that it made exactly half a million, Garmath arose with a gratified smile. He pointed to the Star of Delhi, then gestured to Crome's showcase.

"Put it with your other sapphires," Garmath said. "You can feast your own eyes upon the prize as often as you wish. But do not let others see the Star of Delhi. I spoke of protection. I have already given it. The police do not know that the Star of Delhi still exists.

"Hence, you are quite safe – while they are looking for six sapphires, matched ones that can never be found. However, as part of our bargain, I shall call you occasionally, beginning with tomorrow night. Good evening, Crome."

Rising, Garmath went to the door and Crome noticed the creeping sound of the murderer's departure, recalling, numbly, that his visitor had entered in the same style, though Crome hadn't regarded it as insidious, then.

A servant was outside the door; hastily covering the Star of Delhi with one hand, Crome gestured with the other, signifying for the man to show Garmath out.

When Garmath reached the ground floor, he went out by the back way, as there were two exits from the office building. His creeping walk, which he did not try to hide, echoed uncannily back through the passage, bringing shivers to the elevator man who was seated in the car with the door open.

The elevator operator wasn't the only one who heard those sounds.

FROM a limousine that had just stopped out front, a tall man in evening clothes was entering the building. He was Lamont Cranston, coming from a chat with one millionaire jewel collector, to call upon another. With the head man off The Shadow's list, Uriah Crome was next in line.

The Shadow heard Garmath's last evasive creeps just as they faded, with a quickened touch, from beyond the closing rear door. Before he could snap from Cranston's leisurely pose and move in the rapid style of The Shadow, he was confronted by the elevator man, who, hearing new footsteps from the front, was peering out to see what they meant.

Easing into Cranston's manner, The Shadow nodded to the elevator man and announced himself, saying that he had come to see Mr. Crome. He knew that the name of Cranston would carry weight with the old collector, for, though they had never met, Cranston had sometimes outbid Crome's representatives when they appeared at jewel auctions.

As one collector to another, Crome couldn't afford to entirely ignore Cranston. Within a few minutes, they were chatting with each other over the telephone, and though The Shadow detected a tremolo in Crome's tone, it was one that could have been attributed to his advanced age – as the old man, himself, was smart enough to recognize.

But The Shadow, having heard the creeping below, had quite another explanation for the wavering tone that he heard across the wire. In his turn, he did not drop one whit from Cranston's quiet form of speech; nevertheless, his words made a hard dent on Crome.

The old collector was saying that it was too late for him to receive a visitor; that he would be glad to have Cranston call some other time. Pressing the point, The Shadow set the meeting definitely for the morrow; then he sprang a neat surprise.

"I am calling on behalf of a friend," he stated. "One who is very anxious to meet you, Mr. Crome. I may not be able to come tomorrow, but I would appreciate it if you would receive my friend."

"Of course, of course," interposed Crome, hastily, his voice betraying only a slight touch of its quiver. "Any friend of yours will be welcome here, Mr. Cranston. But about this friend –"

"He is deeply interested in gems," came Cranston's interruption, "particularly in rare sapphires. He hopes that some well-informed person, like yourself, can give him the advice he needs. Good night, Mr. Crome."

Upstairs, Uriah Crome was half slumped at his desk, his shaky hand barely able to replace the telephone on its stand. He had an idea who Cranston's friend might be: Police Commissioner Ralph Weston. The very thought horrified Crome; he wished with all his might that Jan Garmath had still been around when Cranston's call came through.

Then, gradually, Crome's nerve returned; he managed to force a laugh between his trembling lips. Let Weston come! As Garmath had said, the police were thinking in terms of six small sapphires, not one large gem. He'd talk in terms of small sapphires, too, Crome would, and thus veer the trail still further from himself.

Nevertheless, as he stared at the great Star of Delhi, with its rare radiant streaks gleaming up from the jewel case upon the desk, Uriah Crome could find no happiness in possession of the gem that he had so long coveted.

CHAPTER XVIII. CROME'S WAY OUT

IT was singular, to Margo Lane, the way that Lamont Cranston suddenly lost interest in the Star of Delhi and the chain of murder which the famous gem had caused. For all of Cranston, the police could keep on hunting for six lesser stones that didn't exist, while he kept his own opinions to himself.

That, at least, was Margo's conclusion while she lunched with Lamont. He was so totally indifferent to the case, that when he did glance at the newspaper, he turned to the sporting pages. There he found something that intrigued him. Margo guessed that it had to do with polo.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Cranston. "Another old friend has arrived for the matches. I'll have to drop around and chat with him. Here is his picture."

He passed the newspaper to Margo, who expected to see a photograph of some wealthy polo player from the Argentine, since Cranston was well acquainted with many members of South American teams. The picture that Margo did see rather amazed her.

She saw a handsome, darkish man who wore a turban; the rest of his attire was a military uniform, well sprinkled with medals. Beneath the picture, she read the name: "Rajah of Lengore."

"Fancy the rajah being in New York," chuckled Cranston. "With all his palaces and possessions you'd suppose he would never leave India. I remember his great jungle estate, so large that we were lost for three days while on a tiger hunt."

With sharp gaze, Margo tried to pierce Cranston's impassive front. When looks failed, she tried words.

"The rajah has many jewels, I suppose?"

"What rajah hasn't?" queried Cranston calmly. "I saw his rubies, the real Oriental kind, as large as marbles. Emeralds, too, and diamonds –"

"What about sapphires, Lamont?"

"Sapphires?" Cranston gave an indulgent headshake. "Too common. Only the rajah's servants would wear them. He might use them for coat buttons."

Cranston was reaching for the newspaper again. Margo couldn't curb her patience any longer.

"What about sapphires like the Star of Delhi?" she demanded. "Wouldn't such stones interest this all important rajah?"

The question actually took away some of Cranston's calm, but Margo recognized that his sudden interest must also be a pose. He'd just been waiting for her to bring up the question that was already in his mind, and he was letting her take the credit for it.

"A real thought, Margo!" Cranston exclaimed. "I'll speak to the rajah about the Star of Delhi, and tell him that it was your idea. He'll be so pleased that he'll want to meet you. So there's your reward, Margo – a meeting

with a real rajah."

During the afternoon, while still waiting to hear further from Cranston, Margo tried to convince herself that rajahs meant nothing in her life; but despite such efforts, she had to concede that a meeting with the handsome Rajah of Lengore would be an interesting experience.

When Cranston called up, later, and said he'd arranged it for early in the evening, Margo couldn't control the enthusiasm that she felt.

"The rajah will call for you," Cranston told her. "By the way, I sent a package over to your apartment, along with a note. Sorry I can't see you, or go along, this evening. The commissioner insists upon my meeting him at the club."

AT her apartment, Margo found the note and the package, and didn't know whether to be irked or intrigued.

It seemed that Cranston had arranged some scheme with the rajah that probably involved the Star of Delhi, though the note did not specify it. At any rate, the rajah was going somewhere with his niece, a Hindu princess.

Not having a niece who was a Hindu princess, the rajah had been stumped, until Cranston elected Margo for the part. So the package contained the costume that the girl was to wear, and with it, Cranston had sent along a bottle of make-up dye which he guaranteed would furnish Margo with a delicately dusky complexion.

At first Margo rebelled; then, having intended to get dressed for the evening anyway, she decided to try the Hindu costume. Having put on what there was of it, she took a look at the effect in a full-length mirror. Except that it made her feel like a prospective guest at an artists' ball, Margo rather liked it.

The costume had very ornate slippers, a pert jacket studded with real jewels, and a split skirt that gave the effect of bloomers. The skirt was filmy, even away from the light, and though not exactly daring, wouldn't do for street wear in New York.

However, Margo decided that a Hindu princess would probably be privileged to wear a fur coat in a cool clime like America, so she proceeded to dye her face and neck.

The effect was good, and she added the brownish hue to her arms and hands.

She was just finished, when the apartment bell announced the Rajah of Lengore.

Margo met her escort in the apartment lobby. He was as handsome as his photograph, and quite tall.

His smile of greeting was a bit troubled by sight of Margo's fur coat, but when she explained that she was wearing the Hindu costume, too, he gave a pleased nod. The rajah, himself, was wearing his uniform and a compact turban.

They stepped into a waiting limousine, and as they rode away together, the rajah produced an array of rings and bracelets for his niece to wear.

There was an anklet, too, the most expensive item among all the jewelry. Of gold, studded with diamonds and rubies, it was so heavy that when Margo crossed her knees, she found it more comfortable to keep her left foot on the floor, since the band of gold was on her left ankle.

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When they reached their destination, Margo was rather surprised to find it an old-fashioned office building. A man stepped from an elevator to give the Oriental visitors a curious look, but when the rajah announced in slow but perfect English that he was Cranston's friend, the elevator man took them up.

At the top, Margo saw an elevator door which had a pane of thick bulletproof glass. Peering through, a servant studied the visitors, then opened the door.

They were ushered into a room of paneled oak, where a crabby old man sat behind a desk on which rested a tray with a half-finished bowl of milk toast. The servant was already helping Margo remove her fur coat, when the old man looked up. The expression of annoyance that Uriah Crome was showing to impress Commissioner Weston, took a very sudden change.

Open-mouthed, Crome scanned the uniformed Rajah of Lengore, then, let his widening eyes take in Margo from head to foot. The rajah was introducing himself, and announcing that the lady was his niece, which Crome could readily believe.

Margo's complexion looked about the same hue as the rajah's, and her bizarre Oriental costume revealed a shapeliness that suited the specifications of a Hindu princess. But the feature that overwhelmed Crome, and won him to immediate belief, was the display of jewelry that Margo flashed for his especial benefit.

The rajah had placed a necklace of emeralds and diamonds around his niece's neck, and those gems made a wonderful splash. Bracelets and rings attracted Crome's down-sweeping eye, and when he saw the anklet, with its sparkle of diamonds and fire of rubies, he drew a long, amazed gasp.

The bitter flicker to his lips was just a recollection of the half million dollars that he had spent, under forced pressure, for the Star of Delhi.

If the Rajah of Lengore intended to pawn his niece's gems, and had asked her to wear them here for the effect on Uriah Crome, it was certainly a case of super-salesmanship. Already, Crome was wishing that he could afford to purchase those adornments wholesale.

Catching the covetous glint in the old man's eye, Margo began to picture herself peeling off layers of jewels and dropping them on Crome's desk, while the rajah would be counting money in return.

It made her angry at Lamont, and at the rajah, too. Cranston's helping the rajah to sell jewels to Crome was fair enough, but Margo didn't like the idea of being used as an attraction to raise the price. She could imagine how a real Hindu princess would feel if called upon by an avaricious uncle to make a public sacrifice of her personal jewels, to impress an old miser like Crome.

She intended to tell Lamont what she thought of him, when she met him. Meanwhile, she'd act the part that she was playing, even though it was helping the very cause that she considered detestable.

Then, as the Rajah of Lengore spoke in a slow, musical tone, Margo was overwhelmed with remorse for having formed so wrong an opinion of Cranston and his Hindu friend.

The rajah, too, had observed Crome's gaze and was politely telling the old collector that none of his niece's jewels were for sale. Instead, the Rajah of Lengore had come to buy gems from Uriah Crome, and had requested his niece to accompany him, that she might compare with her present adornments whatever items Crome offered.

Indeed, the rajah's tone implied a doubt that Crome had many jewels that the princess would care to own.

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It was the right way to deal with Crome. Testily, the old collector pressed buttons on his desk and started panels spinning all about the room. Bobbing about like a jack-in-the-box, he pointed his visitors to one display case after another, trying to impress them with his marvelous collection.

They went from topazes to opals, past shelves that teemed with specimens of turquoise and amethyst. On beyond an array of diamonds, to emeralds and rubies, finally stopping at a case of sapphires. It was there that the rajah made his closest study; he shook his head in disappointment.

"I had hoped to find the one gem that I wanted," he announced. "The great Star of Delhi."

Never had any man been taken more off guard than Uriah Crome.

Margo looked quickly at the old collector, saw his face go as purple as the shelves of sapphires. Crome's lips were wagging, but no words came from them. It was the Rajah of Lengore who spoke.

"In my land," said the rajah sagely, "we regard no gem as worthy of importance unless men have died in quest of it. Every great ruby can be said to own its color from the blood of those who have warred for its possession. The green of emeralds comes from the grass that grows above the graves of those whose lives were lost in seeking to gain, or keep, the stone they so prized.

"Seldom has any sapphire brought murder to its owner. But the stars of the sky have now looked down upon six scenes of death. I would like the Star of Delhi, itself, to speak its story, like the stars of the firmament. In my land, we believe in the stars. They have told me that the Star of Delhi was not destroyed –"

"No, no!" interrupted Crome. "It was cut, I tell you, into six smaller sapphires!"

"Such could not be," inserted the rajah, while Margo stared, enraptured by his manner. "No man like yourself, Mr. Crome, would have allowed such a crime to happen. Such a crime, I mean, as the ruin of the priceless Star of Delhi. I would only like to see the gem, to know if it could have a price."

THE rajah's definition of crime was the point that made Crome capitulate. He felt, at last, that he had found a friend in whom he could confide. Weighed down by the secret of the Star's true story, craving to be rid of the purchase that Garmath had forced upon him, Crome staggered to a safe and opened it.

Not only did he show the rajah the Star of Delhi, he poured out the whole history of Lenfell's swindle and Garmath's double cross. With it, Crome swore that he had known nothing of impending murder until after the deaths had been delivered. Garmath's visit had been his first meeting with the master killer.

Margo believed him, as did the rajah. Finding them sympathetic, Crome added to his tale of woe.

"If I sell the Star of Delhi," he said hoarsely, "Garmath may kill me! He knows that I am worried –"

The telephone bell began to ring. The start that Crome gave convinced Margo that the old man expected a call from Garmath. The Rajah of Lengore was of the same opinion. He stepped close to Crome.

"Tell Garmath that you are glad you bought the Star," advised the rajah. "Say that all you want is a way out, in case anyone accuses you of owning it."

"But – how?"

"Garmath made one replica of the Star of Delhi," returned the rajah. "Ask him to manufacture another. It will be your alibi. You can produce it, upon demand; when it is examined and found to be synthetic, you will be regarded as another dupe, like Lenfell; nothing more."

His lips tightening in a wise smile, Crome picked up the telephone. His voice firmed as he chatted with Garmath. In the course of conversation, Crome put the request that the rajah had suggested. His call finished, he hung up, still retaining his smile.

"It will take forty-eight hours," he declared. "Then, Garmath will deliver the replica. After that, I can sell you the Star of Delhi. I shall put the false stone with my other sapphires, where anyone can view it, while I smile. Anyone, including Jan Garmath, should he visit me!"

Margo thought that the visit was completed, but she was wrong. For the next fifteen minutes, the Rajah of Lengore continued to talk terms with Uriah Crome regarding the future sale of the real Star of Delhi.

When she left with the rajah, Margo felt nervous. As they rode in their limousine, she was sure that another car was following them.

A word from the rajah to the chauffeur, and the big car pulled suddenly into an obscure parking place. Looking back, Margo saw a car round the corner and roll past. After it came a taxicab that looked very much like Moe Shrevnitz's. Margo turned to speak to the man beside her. Her new friend, the rajah, was gone!

The cab was slowing, but only for a moment. As it picked up speed, Margo saw blackness within its door, which had opened, and now was closing as if of its own accord. It was Moe's cab, and it had picked up a cloaked passenger, to take him along a new trail.

Alone in the limousine, Margo Lane, the erstwhile Hindu princess, realized very suddenly that Lamont Cranston couldn't have gone to the Cobalt Club this evening. Instead, he had come to take her to Crome's.

For Lamont Cranston had played the part of the imaginary Rajah of Lengore; now both – Cranston and the rajah – had merged into the cloaked personality of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIX. CRIME'S FORCED THRUST

IN a little boxlike room, Jan Garmath sat at a desk studying an array of gems. He recognized the knock at the door and spoke for his visitor to enter. Dwig Brencott stepped into sight. Without looking up, Garmath used a pair of tweezers to lift a fair-sized ruby and hold it into the light.

"How do you like it?" queried Garmath. "I fused it from three smaller stones. One good way to dispose of stolen goods at high prices. This work intrigues me, Dwig –"

"Trouble, chief," Dwig interposed. "Thought I'd better tell you."

"Is it Sherbrock again?" snarled Garmath. "We've been too lenient with the fellow. Maybe he realizes that we are feeding him well, and keeping him in good health, so they will not believe him should he claim that he was kidnapped."

"We can put Sherbrock back in circulation soon enough," affirmed Dwig. "He's the fellow to take the rap for all the job's we've pulled. But Sherbrock isn't the trouble. It's Crome."

Garmath perched his thin chin in his hand and gave Dwig a very dubious stare.

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"Listen, chief," Dwig insisted earnestly. "You've got to take this seriously. Only two nights ago, I tried to trail the Hindu who stopped in at Crome's –"

"And failed –"

"Yes," Dwig, conceded, "I failed. But suppose The Shadow was around. What if he trailed me back here?"

Garmath shook his head, as though the argument wearied him.

"If The Shadow had located us," declared Garmath, "he would have attacked at once. Calm yourself on that point, Dwig. Now – what about Crome?"

"I called our look-out over there," replied Dwig. "He says that Commissioner Weston just dropped in for a chat with our dear friend, Uriah Crome!"

There wasn't a flicker of alarm on Garmath's dryish features. Rather, the situation intrigued the master murderer. He drew a watch from his pocket and noted the time; then remarked:

"Only an hour more –"

He shrugged, as though a trifle disappointed. Then, gathering his fused gems into a box, Garmath considered the changed situation. He finally explained it, for Dwig's benefit.

"I had intended to let you deliver the synthetic sapphire that Crome wanted," Garmath said. "Partly as a test; also, so that you could get a good look at his premises. Had he decided to sell the Star of Delhi to the Rajah of Lengore, it would have meant the end of my promise to protect him. I planned to wait and see."

"And send me to Crome," reminded Dwig, "if you found out he'd double-crossed you."

"Precisely! His receiving the police commissioner is the equivalent of a double cross. It gives us the privilege of reprisal. Go there at once, Dwig, with your crew, and settle scores with Crome."

"We're to handle the commissioner, too?"

"Of course! By this time, Crome is probably telling him the whole story. Bring back all of Crome's jewels, including the Star of Delhi."

With Dwig, Garmath walked from the tiny room into a larger one. Lights showed a stone-walled passage just ahead. This hide-away was underground. Dwig started out through the passage, then paused.

"If I pull away the whole crew," he reminded, "the place won't be safe –"

"Anything unknown is safe," interrupted Garmath testily. "Try to forget The Shadow, Dwig. However, you may leave one man, to answer the signal when you return. Of course" – he nudged toward a narrow stairway that led upward – "I still have Krem. He is worth half a dozen of your men."

Dwig didn't dispute the question. He went out by his own route, taking along five men who were waiting in another room. Cautiously, they left by a steel door and came up to the level of the sidewalk. Sending four men across to a darkened alley, Dwig told one to wait.

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"We're going on a job," Dwig informed the guard. "Three raps – two quick, then a slow one" – Dwig illustrated, by clanking a revolver butt against the door – "means we're back. Don't waste time letting us in. We may be in a rush."

Dwig waited until the guard had gone back into the hide-away and bolted the door, then he joined his companions, glancing along the street as he crossed to the alley. He didn't observe the long, black form that detached itself from the wall beside the door to the hide-away.

The Shadow was here!

QUITE in variance to Garmath's theory, the cloaked investigator had attempted no invasion, even though he had discovered the hide-away two nights before. Garmath had disregarded one very vital point: the fact that Sherbrock was a prisoner.

Perhaps Garmath thought that The Shadow didn't know it. Possibly, Garmath's own disregard for human life was so inbred that he couldn't credit The Shadow with changing vital plans on the slight chance that a man like Sherbrock might be still alive.

But The Shadow was gambling much on that possibility. He was making himself a double task, just on Sherbrock's account.

Having reasoned that Garmath would treat Sherbrock well if he kept the prisoner alive at all, The Shadow had seen no need to hurry a rescue. He wanted to make the rescue sure, and the departure of Dwig's crew increased that prospect.

Yet there was something else to do before attempting to aid Sherbrock. Gliding in the other direction, The Shadow passed beneath the abutment of a great East River bridge. He reached a car of his own and started a quick trip around by streets that led up to the bridge itself.

The hide-away was on the Long Island side of the river. As The Shadow sped up the approach, he saw Dwig's car ahead, but paid it small attention. He was more interested in taking another look at the top of Garmath's hide-away, which squatted just below the bridge, visible in the glow of lights that lined the approach.

It was a squatty, concrete structure, simply the windowless foundation of a building that had gone no further in construction. In the top was a black square that represented a trapdoor, but from one angle the bridge lights gave that patch a silvery glisten. The trapdoor was covered with steel, making it too stout a barrier for ordinary attack.

Certainly, Jan Garmath had chosen himself an unusual hide-away; a veritable stronghold. Whether or not it would come up to the conniver's expectations was something that The Shadow hoped to settle later. For the present, his thoughts reverted to Crome.

Giving his car speed, The Shadow whizzed past Dwig Co, who were in another traffic lane. Men of their ilk never drove too fast across a bridge. Arguments with traffic cops were not to their liking.

The Shadow was the first to reach Crome's. He approached the elevator, gave a low, weird whisper that captured the attention of the seated operator.

Peering out, the fellow met a greeting quite different from the affable one that Cranston had accorded him two nights before. With a sweep, The Shadow gripped the operator, stifled his cries, and hauled him out to

the rear street.

Some of The Shadow's agents were waiting there. Turning the elevator man over to them, The Shadow returned into the building accompanied by one agent: Harry Vincent. They went up in the lift. Servants saw its arriving light, peered through the glass-paned door. They were surprised to find the car empty. One puzzled servant opened the door.

For the first time, Garmath's servants learned that there were blind spots at the front corner of the elevator that couldn't be seen through the pane. The Shadow swung from one corner, Harry from the other. Both had guns, and they took the servants flat-footed.

As soon as the three servants had raised their hands, The Shadow marched them to a side room, while Harry took the car down in a hurry. He had left the building when Dwig and the four thugs arrived.

GARMATH had given Dwig diversified instructions about getting up to Crome's – such as phoning the old collector and putting up a bluff, or threatening the elevator man and make him do the rest.

Neither prospect quite suited Dwig, so he was pleased when he found an empty elevator waiting.

Thinking that the operator had stepped out, Dwig hurried his men into the elevator and ran it to the top. When he tried the upper door, it yielded. Dwig didn't guess that its catch had been left loosened. Motioning for his men to follow, he started straight to the room where he knew he would find Crome.

Dwig's spy hadn't mentioned another visitor beside Weston. There was one: Margo Lane. She was listening while Weston questioned Crome about small sapphires, of the sort for which the police were searching.

All the while, Crome was tossing occasional looks toward Margo, as though he vaguely recognized her. So far, however, he hadn't identified her as the Hindu princess who had visited him with the Rajah of Lengore. Margo was beginning to understand the reason for the masquerade of two nights before.

Crome was showing Weston many sapphires, some of the star variety, giving his opinion of how the six portions of the famous Star of Delhi would look. Though Weston didn't detect Crome's worryment, Margo did. Knowing that Cranston was a link between the rajah and the commissioner, Crome had a right to be worried.

Strolling over to a large French window, Margo slid her hand behind her and unloosed the bolt, something that Cranston had told her to do upon this visit. That was just done when Weston turned, to ask suddenly:

"I wonder what's keeping Cranston!"

"I don't know," returned Margo, truthfully. "Lamont simply said that he would meet us here. He insisted that Mr. Crome could help you find the sapphire that you want."

"The sapphires," croaked Crome weakly. "There are six, Miss Lane. Six star sapphires, each about the size of this one."

He was holding up a small sapphire, to illustrate, when Margo interrupted with a quick cry of alarm and darted for a corner. Weston, wheeling, flung himself the other way, carrying Crome in a sprawl beyond the desk. Five men, all masked, were entering the room with drawn guns.

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For the moment, Margo thought that The Shadow's plans had missed, particularly when she saw black emptiness in the doorway behind the invaders. Then, from that very blackness came the challenging tone that made the masked crooks wheel – the laugh of The Shadow!

Five guns blasted as one, all for a target that wasn't there. Those shots were but an added signal to The Shadow's mockery. Amid the gun echoes, the French windows smashed open and in from the penthouse roof piled another squad of men, detectives headed by Inspector Joe Cardona.

Their guns ripped. The leader of the masked tribe wheeled, saw Cardona and tried to fire. Joe beat him to the shot and sprawled him to the floor, where the mask, sliding from above his eyes, revealed the face of Dwig Brencott.

Detectives, meanwhile, were lunging for the other four; whether they'd fare as well as Cardona had, was a question.

A question settled by The Shadow.

Swinging in from the side of the door, The Shadow nicked a pair of masked men with two neat shots that, to Margo, seemed simultaneous. They sprawled, those two who might otherwise have done damage. The second pair weren't dangerous. Detectives were quick enough to grab them.

Crome's servants dashed into the room as The Shadow stepped away. He had taken them into his confidence and told them to await his word. They helped the detectives suppress the wounded strugglers. Seeing that victory was won, Cardona turned to the door, as did Margo:

All that either saw or heard of The Shadow was a vanishing trace of black, a strange laugh that trailed back uncannily, to end, suddenly, with the clang of the elevator door. That mockery, however, was no tone of final parting.

It told that The Shadow was on his way to some further mission, where he would again summon men of the law!

CHAPTER XX. CRIME'S PROOFS

EVEN more than the timely arrival of The Shadow, the appearance of Inspector Cardona had amazed Commissioner Weston. Commotion ended, Weston demanded to know how and when Cardona had arrived at Crome's. In his turn, Joe was surprised to find his chief on the scene.

Cardona explained that he had received a tip-off from The Shadow, who told him to bring his men to the ninth floor of an adjoining building and stay on watch outside a lighted penthouse. He hadn't known that the place was Crome's, nor that Weston was a visitor.

Those details were scarcely explained before Crome interrupted the discussion. In a high-pitched quaver, the old gem collector was giving his story. Knowing that Dwig and the accompanying thugs must have come from Garmath, Crome felt that his real friend was The Shadow.

Confessing that he owned the Star of Delhi, but swearing that he had played no part in crime, Crome faltered over to his safe and opened it, to fling the half-million-dollar jewel on his desk.

It took some time for Weston to get the coherent details, which included Crome's forced purchase of the gem. Crome was so desirous to establish innocence, Weston so willing to hear such details as Lenfell's proposal of

a swindle that had led to Garmath's reign of murder, that neither the commissioner nor the old collector heard the ringing of the phone bell.

Cardona answered, held a brief conversation. He was starting toward the door, when Weston saw him.

"Where are you going, inspector?" called the commissioner. "This case is only half complete! We've got to find Garmath!"

"That's what I expect to do!" returned Cardona, across his own shoulder. "I've just had another tip—off from The Shadow!"

The elevator was reaching the top floor when Cardona and his squad approached. It was being brought up by a rather dazed operator, who was somewhat surprised to find himself back in the car. Cardona and the detectives entered the car and went down.

OVER at the hide-away beyond the big bridge, the guard posted by Dwig heard the signaling thumps of a gun handle. He peered out cautiously, saw the dim lights of a car parked in the opposite alley.

The lights went out, indicating that Dwig's men were about to follow their leader across the street. But it wasn't Dwig, who had thumped.

Gloved hands hooked the guard's throat and lashed him clear of the partly opened door. A sinister whisper, fraught with mockery, sounded in the thug's ear – The Shadow's whisper – enough to take the fight from any man of crime. Into the arms of arriving agents, The Shadow tossed the limply settling figure of his gasping prisoner.

Then, alone, The Shadow ventured into the hide-away.

It was still no time for a massed onslaught. Alone, Jan Garmath would be a difficult foe. He was the elusive creeper whose footfalls were almost as deceptive as The Shadow's laugh. Once he sensed the approach of enemies, Garmath would employ uncanny cunning. The only policy was for The Shadow to use lone tactics of his own to force a meeting with the supercrook.

Proof came immediately.

Barely started into the passage, The Shadow heard the creep of footsteps and sidled into a darkened corner. His gloved hand motioned a signal back to the door, where Harry Vincent, just inside, pressed the door shut and turned toward it.

From somewhere in the passage, Garmath saw Harry's back and mistook him for the guard.

Footsteps shuffled away. It was impossible to tell their direction, at first; then The Shadow sensed that they were going upward, which meant that Garmath must have come from a lower room and started to a floor above. Silently, The Shadow glided inward, found the stairs and followed.

At the top, he saw a doorless opening into a large room. In one corner was a smaller room, barred like a cell. The Shadow saw Garmath look that way. Through the bars, a white face peered back.

It was the face of Roger Sherbrock, the kidnapped lapidary. The scene was setting itself as The Shadow wanted.

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Above, The Shadow saw the glister of the steel trapdoor, which, as he expected, was double padlocked on the underside. It was in the very center of the large room, about eight feet above the floor.

There was a doorway in another corner, but Garmath did not go that far. Instead, he stopped at a squatty contrivance that looked like an electric furnace. He busied himself there so intently, that The Shadow decided to approach.

Exact in everything he did, Jan Garmath was not the man to let one plan interfere with another. It might be, in his estimate, that Dwig Brencott would return from Crome's with the news that all was well there. Garmath knew how he had personally thrown fear into Crome, and perhaps the old collector would be capable of staging a good bluff.

If so, Crome would deserve the synthetic sapphire that he had requested, as an alibi to cover his possession of the Star of Delhi. That sapphire was ready, in the same mold that Garmath had used to make a similar gem for Lenfell.

The crucible had cooled; when Garmath opened it, his eyes sparkled as if reflecting the sight he saw.

Shining from its mold was a blue starolite, as good as the imitation that Lenfell had once mistaken for the original Star of Delhi, and which now belonged to Commissioner Weston. Its color was perfect, a rich deep blue. But as Garmath reached for it, he saw the sapphire darken – something which he couldn't quite understand.

He stepped to one side, to study it from another angle. Garmath's hand brushed the cloth of a cloak sleeve.

Suddenly paralyzed, Garmath felt the cloth slide forward. A gloved hand intervened between his own and the brilliant imitation gem that twinkled from the mold. The hand of The Shadow, whose lips were uttering a taunt in Garmath's very ear. Crime's foe had found crime's maker!

There, in The Shadow's reach, lay crime's final proof. It was evidence that Garmath, free in this hidden laboratory, dealt in the manufacture of great, synthetic gems, while Sherbrock, a prisoner in the same place, was helpless to prevent him!

So petrified was Garmath, that he seemed truly conquered. Then, in an instant, his manner changed. He was whipping away, in snakelike style, uttering a defiant hiss: a new challenge to The Shadow.

Drowning Garmath's tone came a cry from Sherbrock. The prisoner was pointing excitedly to the other corner and its open door.

Through that space lunged a huge figure, Garmath's ace in the hole, the man called Krem. Garmath had credited Krem with being stronger than Dwig's whole crew, and Krem proceeded to back the claim.

Swooping before The Shadow could turn upon him with drawn automatic, Krem clutched the cloaked fighter about both arms. When he found he couldn't keep a grip upon his twisting adversary, the giant flung The Shadow half across the room.

Rolling to his feet, The Shadow looked groggily for Garmath and saw the murderer making for the door that led below. With a spurt of his old speed, The Shadow tried to head off the fugitive; but Garmath stopped short of the door and tugged a switch, set in the wall. A steel curtain slashed downward, blocking the door.

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Krem was almost upon The Shadow. Knowing he hadn't time to meet the bone-crushing giant, The Shadow sprang for Garmath, who was drawing a gun. Had The Shadow shot Garmath at that moment, he would never have been able to stop the vengeful Krem.

Instead of shooting, The Shadow spun Garmath about; imitating Krem's tactics, he sent Garmath spinning across the room, which brought Krem to a momentary halt. Making the most of that interval, The Shadow drove straight at Krem, aiming his gun at the huge man, instead of Garmath.

Krem caught The Shadow's arm and shoved it upward. Gleefully, he forced his cloaked adversary back against the wall, expecting Garmath to return and supply the finish with some bullets.

The Shadow was shooting, but his aim was toward the ceiling, and he was foolishly wasting all his shots. So Krem thought, and the giant gave a huge, bellowing laugh.

There were two things that Krem couldn't see. One was where The Shadow's hard fling had sent Garmath – straight, to the door of Sherbrock's cell, where the prisoner had clutched his hated captor through the bars and was wrenching his gun away from him, a task made easy, because Garmath had hit the cell door with a force that badly jarred him.

The other thing that Krem missed was the effect of The Shadow's shots. His aim was toward the trapdoor in the ceiling, and his bullets were shattering the padlocks that barred it!

Slumping suddenly, The Shadow went almost to the floor, with Krem pouncing after him. A quick twist, and The Shadow was away. Garmath saw him and wrenched from Sherbrock's grasp, going after the cloaked fighter barehanded, for Sherbrock had obtained the gun.

Not realizing that Garmath was too dazed even to reach The Shadow, Sherbrock fired all the shots he had.

The bullets sprawled Garmath at The Shadow's feet, just as the cloaked fighter, with a sudden twist, was drawing a fresh gun to catch the blundering giant, Krem, from an unexpected angle. The Shadow had finally tricked Krem, though the giant, very shortly before, had seemed too formidable to be allowed his present leeway.

PROOF of The Shadow's foresight came in a barrage from the lifted trapdoor. Cardona and his squad had spotted their goal from the bridge, by following The Shadow's tip-off. With bullets that shattered the padlock, The Shadow had opened the way for the police, since his agents, blocked off by the steel curtain, could not reach the scene from below.

Riddled with bullets that Cardona's squad provided, Krem fell dead before The Shadow could personally settle the giant fighter.

In his fall, Krem sprawled across the body of his dead master, Jan Garmath. Dropped by bullets from his own gun, served by Roger Sherbrock, Garmath had met a proper fate at the hand of the man upon whom he had falsely foisted evidence of guilt.

Down through the trapdoor, Cardona and his detectives were finding crime's real proof. In the open crucible, they saw the false sapphire that only Garmath, free, could have manufactured – a fact which fitted with Crome's recent testimony – while Sherbrock, still a prisoner about to be released, was in a position which fully bespoke his actual innocence.

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While the detectives were cracking open Sherbrock's cell, Cardona looked for The Shadow. Joe saw blackness, but it was only the open doorway to the stairway that led below. The Shadow had pulled the switch, raising the steel curtain, and was on his way to rejoin his anxious agents.

Back from the stairway came a sound as strangely untraceable as the creepy footsteps that Jan Garmath would never again provide as symbols of insidious approach. The sound that Cardona heard was not a token of advance. It was a sign of departure.

It was the laugh of The Shadow, fading off into the realm of night, though its echoes seemed to linger, as well they might.

For The Shadow's tone not only signified his triumph over crime. It was a reminder that with such conquest, he had solved the last riddle connected with the famous sapphire known as the Star of Delhi!

THE END