

SVENGALI KILL

Maxwell Grant

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SVENGALI KILL

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

"IN full view of four thousand people he is going to die." The hand that was writing relaxed. The pen shone in the light from the lamp on the desk. "With eight thousand eyes focused on him, he will be murdered. Not only the perfect murder, but one that is foolproof and one for which I cannot be held.

"I feel buoyed up, tensed, but it is a pleasurable tenseness. I imagine this sensation will continue until he dies. After that? Who knows... will the zest depart from life? I cannot tell, nor do I care. What is important is that he is to die and die as no man ever has."

The potential murderer smiled. His plans were all made. The guns had been switched. The cue sheet was at the theatre. All that remained was to phone. He dialed the number.

"Yeah, sorry but I can't make it tonight. Strep throat. Uh huh, Billy will be able to take over. I've coached him. Sure. He has the cue sheet. There's nothing he can forget. Don't worry, it will be all right."

He listened to the voice at the other end. Then he said curtly "You know I'm sorry, Gall, but what can I do? I can barely talk now. What do you think my voice will be like at eight thirty? Okay, I knew you'd understand. Bye now." He hung up.

That did it. The plan was finished. If Barry Owden went up on stage, tonight, as he was almost sure to, he would die.

If he didn't go on stage that night, another night would do. The potential murderer got up and stretched. He smiled. He was satisfied. Looking in the mirror at his fairly young, rather handsome face, he wondered if anyone could see the death in his eyes. He shrugged. No sense in getting silly about all this. There was no mark of Cain that could appear to brand him.

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Feeling his chin thoughtfully he realized he needed a shave. He grinned again. No reason to allow a little thing like a murder to interfere with neatness. He would shave.

He was halfway through with his shave when the doorbell rang. He answered it with his half-soaped face making him look bizarre.

"Darling! Good to see you. C'mon in." He put his dry hand on the pretty girl's shoulder and guided her in. She smiled. He looked more like himself today.

"Go finish shaving, foolish." She sat down on one of the rickety hotel chairs.

"I hate to have you come to dumps like this, Betty, I..." His voice trailed off as he twisted his mouth to shave under his bottom lip.

"I'm sure I don't mind, so why should you?"

"Aurgh..." His voice was muffled.

"Don't try to talk till you're finished." She settled herself back. Dear, foolish, sweet Andy. He worried about more things than anyone she knew.

He came out of the bathroom arms akimbo, mimicking an acrobat. "Ta-daaa..." He threw her the towel.

"A fine acrobat you'd make. Why, you didn't even pretend to fail twice. They can only do something on the third try."

On the third try... this would be the third time... this time he could not fail. Owden must die. He shrugged. Better to put the whole thing out of his mind till tonight.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Starved. Let's grab a bite. I have to do some shopping. All ready?" She smiled.

"Sure, all ready." He certainly was. There was nothing left to do. The rest was in the lap of the gods. He threw on his coat and grabbed her by the arm.

In the elevator the operator looked at them enviously. He felt his pimply chin and thought, some guys have all the luck... a good-looking chick like that... in show business, what's he got to worry about?

"How're you, Charley?"

"Pretty good, Mr. Ager. Pretty good. Got a tip on the ponies if you want it."

"Why not? Today's my lucky day."

"Pimlico, the third race, Johnny Dodds."

"I'll put a buck on it for you, Charley."

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Ager." He watched them leave. Her trim straight back, his broad shoulders. Some guys did have all the luck. His mouth twisted. He hoped the horse ran last. To hell with the buck bet.

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In the restaurant of the run down hotel, Andy said, "If you see anyone who even looks like Gall, let me know. He thinks I'm sick."

"How come, Andy?" She looked at him quizzically.

"Just don't feel like working today."

"Who's taking your place?"

"Stupid."

"Who... oh, you mean poor Billy Boy..." She thought a moment. "But, can he do it?"

"I wrote the whole thing out. If he can't read, why it's just Gall's bad luck."

"I'm sure he can read. I saw him looking over a tip sheet." Andy smiled grimly. The dope better be able to read... if he couldn't...

The time dragged. It seemed to take days before the fat sloppy-looking waitress took their order, then it seemed a week before she got back with the droopy-looking ham and eggs.

"They look a bit tired, don't they?" Andy asked of no one in particular.

"Whadda ya want, the Ritz?" The waitress was tired of smart guys. "I don't lay the eggs, ya know." She flounced off.

"I wouldn't bet on it." Andy said.

"Shh... it's not her fault."

He stared at the pretty face across the table. "All right, I'm sorry I'm snappy. Dig in. How bad can an egg be?"

The coffee was lighter than tea, but not quite as light as milk. He looked at it in despair. "I suppose if you ask for black coffee you get it brown."

"Don't be so picky." She smiled. "This isn't the first bad hotel you've ever been in."

"It just seems to be." His face was set as he poured the weak coffee into him. Fleabags, crummy trains, lousy food, lousier food, lousiest food. There had to be a superlative, he supposed. Even if it was superlatively bad.

She watched him while he drank his coffee and smoked a cigarette. She had never been able to form any idea of his age. He was the perennial juvenile. He might be thirty, but he might just as well be forty. There was nothing to give you any clue. His eyes were old, but there were no crow's feet around them. He was good looking, but that was no help, for he'd probably be that till the day he died.

He dressed like a young man, that might be part of it... she gave up as she always did. He would not give any indication of his age. Along with the mystery of his age was the even more annoying one of why he wasted his life working as a poorly paid assistant to a phony hypnotist... Now there was a man she really loathed... S. Gall.

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The cape he affected off and on the stage... phooey. Maybe it was good publicity, but when he pretended that he was a real hypnotist she wanted to laugh in his face. She'd seen him making up his face before going out into the street. Tweaking his eyebrows so they'd look more Mephistophelian. Blackening his brows and swirled mustache so he'd look more sinister. It was laughable.

But why did Andy stay on working for the man? He had potentialities far beyond that. It wasn't even as though he were stage struck for he wasn't. He disliked it intensely. He was always talking about the phonies you had to put up with. The grasping agents, the low pay, the ephemeral life of performers...

He was thinking, as he looked at her pert profile, I wonder what she'd say if I told her I was going to kill a man tonight... would she get up and go to the cops, or would she wait till he told her why?

That why was the beginning and end of his life. How to explain that it was more important that the man die than that he, Andy, live?

He paid the check and said, "If you're going shopping, I probably won't see you again before the show tonight."

She looked puzzled and asked, "But if you're telling Gall that you're sick; how come you're going to the show?"

Inwardly he cursed his own stupidity. The first mistake. "Well, it's just that I want to be on hand if Stupid louses things up too much." Weak, but he couldn't think of anything better on the spur of the moment. He couldn't say that he wanted to be there to see his victim die. This was a sample of just how careful he would have to be from now on.

She said, "If you're going to hide out at the show I probably won't see you till afterwards."

"Right, I'll pick you up at the bar."

She smiled and it was a lovely thing, "Till then."

He waved as he walked off. The next time he saw her, his plot would have come to a climax. The man would be dead. He grinned.

CHAPTER II

THE theatre was dark. The curtain went up on time which was rather remarkable. You had to admit that Gall's entrance was effective. Corny, but effective. He was tall, dark, arched eye-browed, the very picture of what the layman thinks a hypnotist should look like.

His black cape swirled after him as he strode out onto the stage center. The cape made him look even taller than his six feet. His hair pushed up into a pompadour added to his height, too.

He faced the microphone and pitched his voice way down in the cellar. "Ladies and gentlemen." He looked around the audience now that his eyes were accustomed to the glare of the footlights. Of course he couldn't see past the first row, and a part of the boxes... you never can because of the flare and glare of the footlights and the spots... but he could see the man he wanted to get up on the stage. He was in the first row of the left box. Owden his name was, or something like that. He was the town skeptic and Gall's act was premised on convincing the known skeptic of his powers. After that the rest of the act was a snap.

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From the audience Gall's eyes were wide and staring. Of course you couldn't see the white line just under his eyelid, or the lining of black under that, but combined the lines made his eyes look like boiled eggs.

The pin spot from the balcony helped too, as did the two baby spots in the foots that were focused on his face. The baby spots were green so that as he turned his face from side to side, vagrant, almost unnoticeable traces of pastel green flickered to and fro across his hawklike profile.

Corny, but effective. He used every trick in the book. He had their attention. The lights and the make-up took care of that. Now he had to sell the soap. He began his spiel.

"You have heard a great deal about the science of hypnotism. Make no mistake. It is just that, a science. The fakers, the carnival workers you may have seen don't change the basic, real facts about this science.

"I want all of you to understand that from the time of Mesmer to the present day, one thing has been true. Hypnotism cannot do or make you do anything that you would not do if you were not hypnotized. If you are not a thief, no hypnotist can make you one. No one can hypnotize you and make you kill."

That line, which was true, helped with reputable men of science. Gall smiled to himself. Always tell the truth when it cannot hurt you. That was his motto and it was one of the things that had helped him to claw his way up from a carny to two thousand bucks a week.

"But one thing is true." He turned on his personality. It was a real thing. He could turn it off and on at will. He projected himself so that everyone in the audience could sense it. He looked out at the audience and you would have sworn that one after the other he was staring in turn at everyone that sat out there. "I can hypnotize. I can hypnotize you no matter how hard you try to keep me from doing it!"

That was a lie, but it always went over. This was no exception, he could see Owden up in the box stir restlessly. "I defy you to prevent me. Do what you will, I will conquer!"

He waited. If Owden was the skeptic that he had been pictured, there should be a response. "If there is anyone in this audience who is stupid enough to think he can resist, let him hold up his hand."

It worked like a charm as it always did. Owden's hand shot up like a kid asking a teacher permission to leave the room.

"You sir, in the box. You think you can resist me? Would you step down the stairs and make your way to the stage?" Gall's face twisted in a saturnine sneer.

There was a wait. In most acts it would be dangerous to let the audience sit while nothing happened on stage. In Gall's act the wait was dramatic. The longer the wait the higher the tension. It was good psychology. Gall had changed hypnotism from some kind of hocus pocus into a contest. A contest of wills. Man is a sucker for contests... witness prizefights, wars and the like.

In the rear of the balcony, Andy Ager sat. His smile was broad. It would have made anyone uncomfortable to have seen it. Luckily the darkness hid it. Ager looked as Monte Cristo must have looked when he said "The world is mine!"

Ager leaned forward as Owden walked up the steps that led to the stage. If only Owden could have known that he was going to his death, it would have enabled Ager to drain the last bittersweet drop of satisfaction from his cup of triumph.

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The audience leaned forward. Gall did that deliberately. He lowered his voice so that the audience had to pay more attention. He said, "Thank you for coming up, sir. Your name?"

"Owden. Barry Owden. And I think you're a faker."

"I see. You're going to make a tough subject. In that case..." Gall turned to an inconspicuous table behind him and picked up a pair of headphones. He held them up as he said, "Since this will be a contest of wills, I would like to rule out all audience sound. If you put these earphones on, all you will hear is my voice. I will speak into the mike and the audience will hear exactly what I say to you as I proceed to hypnotize you."

"Okay by me." Owden, a stout man in his sixties who looked like the very picture of Babbitt, took the phones. He put them on, disarranging his few hairs in the process. The one lock of hair which nature had left him curled up like a horn around the U of the earphones.

"Go ahead, phony. Let's see you try to put the hyp on me!"

Raising one eyebrow in a pantomime gesture of astonishment, Gall said to the audience, "A tough nut to crack, but watch!" Making his voice grating and nasty, Gall went on, "Look me in the eye! Try as hard as you will, you cannot prevent your eyes from getting heavy! They are closing... closing..."

There was a subdued rustle of sound from the audience. They were impressed, for despite Owden's loud talk, his eyes were closing. The lids seemed to get heavy.

"Your eyelids," Gall said and his voice was venomous, "are so heavy they feel as though they were glued together! Try as hard as you will, you cannot open them! Try to!"

Nothing happened. Owden's eyes remained shut tight. Turning to the audience, Gall bowed. There was a ripple of applause. He held up his hands to stop the clapping.

"Please, that was so simple it does not deserve applause! But watch... You!" His voice was commanding. "I am going to hand you a dagger. Solid, glistening steel... razor sharp..." Gall winked at the audience as he picked up a fake stage prop. "I want you to put this needle-pointed dagger to your heart."

Owden's hand came out unwillingly. Eyes still tight shut, head covered by the headphones, he looked strange as he held the prop by the handle.

"Put the point of that dagger to your heart." Gall waited till his command was obeyed. "Now! Plunge that sharp dagger straight into your heart!"

There was a real gasp from the audience. The steel shaft of the dagger had plunged out of sight. But Owden's body didn't even sway.

Gall said to the audience, "You understand that the dagger is a prop. The blade goes into the handle. But, for all this gentleman knew consciously, it was a real dagger. However, his subconscious knows that it isn't a real dagger, obviously, since he isn't really suicidal, nothing, not even the deep hypnosis I have him in would make him do anything that was against his deep-grained will to live!"

The audience smiled at its own fears when, under the hypnotist's command Owden withdrew the dagger. They could see the blade popping back out of the handle propelled by a spring.

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Grinning, Gall said to the audience, "Watch this!" He turned and laid the dagger down on the table. He picked up a phony-looking gun with a long barrel. It was chromed to within an inch of its life. He handed the gun to the man who stood up with his eyes closed.

"Your ears are closed. You can hear nothing I say!"

Owden's body seemed to sway. Otherwise nothing happened. Gall waved the chromed gun around so that the audience could see it. He said, "Here we have another prop. I am going to give this to him as though it were a real gun. Then, just after he pulls the trigger I am going to bring him out of his trance. He will find himself holding a prop gun. The barrel opens and a silk banner drops out with "Bang" lettered on it in big letters. Wait till you see how foolish the man will look... and remember... he said he could not be hypnotized!"

Handing the gun to Owden, Gall said, "Your ears can again hear. I am giving you a gun. I want you to place the opening of the barrel to your forehead and send a bullet crashing into your brain!"

Owden, motions slow as one in a trance, raised the gun carefully to his head. The hot spots picked up glinting reflections from the long shiny barrel.

"NOW! Pull the trigger!" Gall's voice was loud, sneering and commanding.

The trigger finger illuminated by a pin spotlight was the only thing that anyone in the audience looked at. The finger slowly tightened.

There was no sound at all. Then there seemed to be nothing but sound. The explosion, happening next to the mike, amplified by the public address system, reverberated through the house like an atomic bomb.

Owden crumpled slowly to the floor as though all his bones had turned to water. He seemed to fall in on himself. The bullet speeding on after smashing his brains to pulp landed in one of the flats. The scenery quivered.

Gall looked down at the cadaver at his feet. He shook his head. He said stupidly in a whisper that was broadcast all over the house by the mike, "But a bang gun doesn't have any bullets in it... this is impossible."

Completely impossible, but a body lay on the stage.

In the balcony, Andy Ager sat. He drained the pleasure of the moment. It ran through him like some ultimate thrill. This was it. The culmination of fifteen years. He smiled. He thought of his diary. Murder committed with eight thousand eyes watching. The perfect murder!

On stage a big hulking man with a curious face ran out to stage center. He looked at the body on the stage and whimpered. His face looked like that of a midget blown up too big. It had that same curious midget-like rubbery look.

He said, "I killed him! It was my fault."

Ager listening, thought, dear God... I forgot. I have to kill him, too!

CHAPTER III

GALL grabbed the big man by the shoulders and said in a whisper, "What the hell do you mean you killed him? Speak up Billy Boy!"

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"Sure," the big man was almost crying, "sure I kilt him. It wuz me that told him to pick up the gun, wasn't it? It was me that told him to pull the trigger? No?"

Turning the mike away, Gall said, "Stupid! Get off the stage, lay low. Stay out of sight. They'll grab you for this! They won't understand what you meant when you told the world at large that you killed him!"

"But Mr. Gall... I did kill him. I did! It wuz all my fault!"

"I have no more time to talk. Do as I say!" Gall stared straight into the hulking brute's eyes as he did when he was pretending to hypnotize on stage and said slowly and quietly, "Do as I tell you, stay out of sight!"

"Yes, boss." The big man turned on his heel and was lost in the wilderness of painted flats backstage.

Upstairs in the balcony, the murderer sat with his brain spinning in dizzy whirls. How could he have been so stupid as to overlook the obvious? Maybe that was why he had... because it had been so obvious.

Billy Boy could put his neck right back in the loop of rope which he had thought his cleverness would save him from. Therefore, of course, Billy Boy must die. But this second killing must be as secret and clever as the first. There would be no point in having committed a perfect murder to then be caught for an imperfect one.

The big oaf was a horse; that should help. A mirror, a flashlight... something shiny... maybe that would do it.

Gall looked out at the audience, not a soul had moved. He wondered how long it would take before it occurred to anyone to call the cops. There was a sort of stasis that gripped one and all. Offstage in the wings, Gall could see the fireman who had the theatre detail. He stood quietly with his face blank. It seemed as though the murder had happened too fast for anyone to react.

He supposed it behooved him to get to work. He stepped offstage. There was a phone somewhere back there. He'd call the police. It was gradually dawning on him that to all intents and purposes he was the pigeon whom the cops would go for. It would certainly look to anyone as though he had committed the murder.

The fact that he didn't know the dead man from a hole in the ground might help. He racked his memory to see if there was any way he could be connected.

On the phone he spoke calmly. "You'd better send the Homicide Squad to the Apollo Theatre. Murder."

The man on the other end of the phone spluttered but finally managed to get out, "A killing at the theatre?" He pronounced it theeayter. "Where?"

"On stage."

"If this is a practical joke or a publicity stunt I'll run you out of town on a rail."

"I wish it were." Gall sighed; how much he wished it were. "However if you get on your velocipede and hurry over you'll find a D.O.A."

"Okay." There was a pause while some obvious cerebation went on. "See if you can hold the audience from leaving."

"How?" But the connection was broken. Gall turned. Offstage he could see some of the stage hands looking out at the people in the theatre. Their faces showed surprise.

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Gall passed them and looked out. No wonder! There was a small sized panic going on. Slowly the realization that they had been witnesses to a murder had sunk in. Gradually what that meant had been borne in on them.

The ones with something on their conscience, and there were quite a few, decided that it would be a good idea to beat it.

These, the ones who feared any police questioning, ranged from errant husbands accompanied by their friends, to those who might really fear having the police interrogate them too thoroughly.

Standing in stage center, Gall raised his hands. He spoke harshly into the microphone. His voice came out guttural and commanding. "I beseech you, don't move. Any further panic may cause havoc. There is no reason to stampede.

"I wish that all of you would sit tight. The police would want it that way.

"If, however, there are some of you who feel that you must leave, won't you make your way slowly to the fire exits that have been designed for such an emergency?"

The milling crowd milled less and less as more and more people paid attention to Gall's plea. There came a moment, simultaneous with the fall of the curtain on-stage which hid the cadaver from view, when the panic was definitely no longer a panic. There were still people leaving, coat collars turned up, faces averted from the staring eyes of the audience which sat secure in the knowledge that they had nothing to fear from the police.

Gall sighed with relief as he saw things quiet down. It wasn't that he loved humanity very much but if there had been a panic his name would always have been tied up with it. People would speak of the Gall panic in which so and so many people died.

This way he might even get a few lines of publicity about how he averted near catastrophe. He cleared his throat and spoke to the audience reassuringly telling them that there was nothing to fear, the police would appear at any moment.

Even while he was speaking the killer had made his way through the crowds to the side door. The near panic had interfered gravely with his plans for Billy Boy. He looked around trying to make sure that he had attracted no attention. That no one would remember that he had come down from the balcony... not that he wouldn't have a good reason if he were questioned about it.

He was backstage now. Where the bloody hell was Billy Boy? Search as hard as he had, there had been no sign of the big stupid man. He stood stock still. This theatre was laid out like so many others that he could have found his way around through the maze of ropes and electrical cable, the stage flats, the drapes, the drops, with his eyes closed.

If Billy Boy were hiding, where would he go? Feeling like the Indian who had the perfect system for finding lost horses, because he imagined where he'd go if he were a horse, Ager tried to imagine where an oaf with a low I.Q. would think it safe to hide.

The dressing room! Gall's room. He hadn't looked there. Walking quietly Agar proceeded to the room. So far no one had seen him. There were too many black shadows cast across the wooden floor of the stage. Too many nooks and crannies into which to dart. No, he was safe so far. If he could only connect up with Billy.

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Easing the door open, Ager looked through a narrow crack. No sign. Straining his ears he finally smiled. He could hear gasping breaths being drawn. They were coming from behind the door which he was inching open. The oaf had thought he could hide behind the door.

Stepping into the little room, Ager said, "C'mon out Billy Boy, you've seen too many cowboy pictures."

Abashed as a twelve year old caught in the jam jar, the big man blushed. "Aw... I didn't know it was you."

The man's size made the tiny dressing room seem even tinier. Ager looked around. The mirror... the make up table... there were bright lights there so that Gall could do his face up properly.

"Billy Boy, sit down there."

"Aw... why?"

"Shut up. I don't want any arguments. Sit there and look in the mirror."

Sullenly seating himself in the chair, the big man looked at himself in the mirror as he had been ordered to. "Whatcha gonna do?"

"Save your life."

Ager flipped the lights on. The whole mirror was framed in raw bulbs. The bright light made Billy Boy wince.

"Stare at your eyes in the mirror."

"But... gee... I..."

"Look at your own eyes, and do it fast or..."

"I'm doin' it... gee whiz... I... I..."

The murderer went to work on the preliminaries to his second killing. This would be a thing of beauty, a work of art like the first one. There must be no slip-ups. If only he'd had a little more time to think it out. It seemed water-tight, but if there were any flaws... There mustn't be any!

CHAPTER IV

PERHAPS if Cranston had been called in at this point, there would have been no second killing... but he wasn't. It was two days after the first killing before he heard even the slightest detail about the murder.

"I just can't see how that dope could have enough brains for that kind of a kill, that's all." Joe Cardona said.

"Huh?" Cranston ran the muddler around in his drink. He realized that he'd been wool-gathering while his friend Cardona was talking. He shook his head a trifle. The bar they were in was one of those welcome surprises you find occasionally in New York, a dark old room with deep masculine chairs, walnut paneled rooms, real liquor, decent sized glasses...

"You haven't heard a word I've been saying, have you?" Cardona grinned.

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"Well, honestly, no." Cranston smiled back. They'd been having one of their typical bull sessions. They'd wandered from the Lizzie Borden case, on which Cardona had his own theories, to the Irwin murder, on which Cranston had his own ideas, from the Heirens boy, on which they were both in rare agreement, to this latest kill which the newspaper had dubbed the Svengali murder.

At about that point Cranston had become involved in his own thoughts and lost the thread. "Backtrack for me."

"Like I said before," Cardona drank the last of his drink, "this jerk of a guy that they call Billy Boy hasn't the brains to come in out of the rain... so I can't see him pulling a murder like this.

"Gall, the guy that does the hyp act is too shrewd, I think, to have committed such a smart murder and left himself with his pants down with no other red herring around."

"I have rarely heard such a mixed metaphor, but I get the drift. You said someone had been arrested, however?" Cranston asked.

"Oh sure, those farm cops out there put the cuffs right on Gall. They figured real smart—like that since Gall is a hypnotist, he must be the killer... on the surface I must say they got right on their side."

"Whoa," Cranston leaned forward, elbows on the big oak table. "It comes back to me. I read a bit about the case in the papers. This is the case where a man was killed on stage in the middle of a hypnotic act."

"At last," Cardona said. "It sinks in on the great mind. Some gaff, a faked pistol turned out to be a real gun and the gag went sour. The sucker that came up on stage blew his ever-loving brains out."

"What connection is there between this Gall person and the man who was killed?"

"That's what's been driving the cops wacky! They can't find that Gall ever saw this Owden character before in his life. Motiveless murder don't go with me."

"How far have they dug in?"

"Back about twenty years ago from what I hear. They know very well they won't be able to get a D.A. into action unless they can find some motive no matter how little. To date they have found exactly nothing and I must say they are not liking it."

"How come some lawyer hasn't gotten this Gall out on a habeas corpus?"

"Gall's playing it real smart. He says he's willing to stay in jail till it's been proved that he's in the clear. He claims he knows that it looks suspicious, knows that it looks as if he's the killer and he's said that he wants to help in any way he can."

"Sounds good."

"He's a smart one. If he is the killer, he's making like he isn't and it'll look real good in court."

"Now, the man you were talking about when I came out of my fog..."

"Oh... Billy Boy. There's a dilly for you. Here the cops have Gall in jail, positive that he's the one, and along comes this big jerk and confesses!"

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"Whew," Cranston whistled. "This does sound neat."

"You're blasted right. A motiveless murder, a phony confession, a weird murder method... this has wiped out every other thing in the papers. You don't even read about the atom bomb now."

Cranston leaned back, folded his arms and looked at the low beamed ceiling. This was interesting. On the other hand he had more or less promised a writer he knew that he'd take a week or so off and go on a vacation with him. The idea was that the writer was to get background dope on Cranston in order to do a publicity series on him.

But then there was no good reason why the writer couldn't come along in this case... might be a good idea...

Cardona said, "Hey! You're off again!"

"Not really. I must say you've intrigued me. Waiter!"

Paying the check, the two men, man hunters both, left the dark quiet of the bar and their eyes were assaulted by the bright sun. "I'd forgotten it was still early in the day."

"Me too." Cardona said, "Kinda hate to get back to work after relaxing this way. Been nice seeing you, Lamont."

If it hadn't been for that completely accidental meeting of the two friends, the killer of Barry Owden might have gotten off scot free. As it was...

Cranston dropped a nickel into the phone. He was in a drug store. He got his connection and said. "Jerry?"

The answering voice was pleasant and low, "Yeah, Lamont?"

"Right."

"You all set to go off to the wilds and just sit and talk for a while?"

"Umm, that's why I called you. How'd you like to see me in action?"

"You kidding? I'd love it."

"Meet me at the Pennsylvania Station in an hour and a half. I'm going to take a whack at that hypnotic case that's got the police in Branton so upset."

"Okay, Lamont. I appreciate this."

On the street, Cranston hopped into the taxi that was waiting. The driver said, "What's new, boss; you look like the cat what swallowed the boid."

"Shrevvie you are a mind reader. I've been a little bored lately."

"You're tellin' me! Ya been barking like a seal the last couple weeks."

"Sorry, I didn't know it showed."

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"Oh that's all right, boss, I don't carry no grudges."

"That's big of you, Shrevvie." Cranston smothered a smile. "Head for home, I want to pick up some things and then I'm leaving town for a while."

"Kin I go wid ya boss? Kin I?"

"Umm... I don't quite know what function you'd fulfill, but if it'll make you happy, you can meet me in Branton. I don't know what hotel I'll be at, but you can check when you get there."

"Thanks, boss." Shrevvie drove on through the maddening traffic of New York with a seraphic grin on his face. He was so happy that he didn't even swear at another cab driver who cut him off at a corner.

At the railroad station, Cranston saw his friend waiting in front of the information booth. He waved at him. "Hey, Jerry! Here!"

Jerry Vale, rotund, chipper, slow moving, grinned at Cranston. "This is a real break."

"I don't know how much of a break it'll be really. I was rather looking forward to taking some time off and just bumming around for a bit."

"G'wan, you know you're never really happy unless you're in harness."

"I guess you're right." They made their way to the reserved Pullman chairs. Once there, Vale called the porter and had him bring a table which fitted into a slot in the side of the train under the window. Cranston watched with a tilted eyebrow.

Vale reached into his breast pocket and took out a messy sheaf of papers. He took out a stub of pencil and poising it over the top sheet of paper, said, "Shoot."

Cranston did a double take. "Shoot?"

"Sure... let's have more background data about yourself... and don't think I'm going to let you keep on being so hush-mouthed about this weird character The Shadow whom you know 'slightly'..."

"Well, where were we the other day?"

"You had given me a great deal of not very interesting stuff about your youth..."

Cranston grinned. "You mean you didn't find that bit about the time we stole the Dean's pants and put them on the flagpole exciting?"

"Sure, it'd be fine if I were writing a lethargic biography of some so-called great man, but you're news, everything about you is strictly headline. School days are not going to sell this article... or the book if I ever get it done."

Finding it a little difficult to decide what things it was safe to tell the avid writer, Cranston took it easy, weeded carefully through his memoirs.

It did make the train trip pass fast. They were in Branton before Cranston realized it. They left the station and Cranston signaled for a cab.

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They got in and for once Cranston was surprised. Reflected in the rear view mirror was, of all things, Shrevvie's face.

Chortling, Shrevvie said, "Where to, boss?"

"The nearest big hotel." Cranston smiled, for all the times he as The Shadow had appeared in Shrevvie's cab without Shrevvie even knowing it, this shock was certainly allowable. He asked, "How in the world did you get here so fast?"

"That's my secret, boss." Shrevvie grinned; let the boss figure it out. He had hitched a lift on a big interstate truck and then bribed a lackadaisical cabbie to lease his cab to him. Even in the cab, Vale kept on pounding at Cranston for more information. And the things Cranston told Vale covered many times and as many climes. There was one little incident that intrigued Vale more than a lot of other things. The incident was to appear at a later date under the ambiguous title of "The Magic Bamboo Shoot".

As Cranston told it, it ran like this. It was at a time when Cranston had flown half way around the world in pursuit of a master criminal. In the middle of Cranston's plans for catching the man he was after; in the middle, too, of a scorching hot Indian afternoon at a bazaar, Cranston was wiping the inside of his topee out. He wondered about two things. One, if he was ever going to catch the man he was after and two, if he was ever going to be cool again.

The little weazened old man who owned the store in which Cranston was taking refuge from the sun looked out of old, wicked eyes that seemed to have looked on all the world's evil.

The old man said, "Would it be asking too much of thee to ask that thy knowledge apply itself to a deadly puzzle?"

"I'll try to help in any way that I can." At least this would keep him out of the sun, Cranston thought. It was comparatively cool under the ragged awning.

Gesturing at five sturdily-built, well-armed Ghurkas standing in the store, the old man told a puzzling tale.

"Know that these five men were six when they left this humble town to go out on a tour of the jungle which encroaches so close on us. The six were to make their tour and return. Except for wild animals, untamed native folk, heat and no water, they expected no more trouble from this tour than any other that they ordinarily undertake.

"To them such a tour is like ordering whiskey for a white man."

Cranston grinned at the needle. Leave it to the native to get that in. He waited while the old man went on. While the oldster talked, the five Ghurkas waited with their rifles at parade rest.

"I will leave out the trials and tribulations of such a trip. Suffice it to say that as they were nearing the end of their tour, with but four days remaining between them and their wives, they ran out of water.

"It was, how shall I say, uncomfortable? They were in the middle of ravaging jungle. There was just enough water among them to pool the contents of all their canteens and have one full canteen."

'Uncomfortable,' Cranston thought was understating it neatly. He'd seen some of the jungle and it was like being thrown back to primeval days when man was the interloper in a society that did not welcome him. Everything was against man in that wild environment. The moist heat tore the liquid out of a man's body and

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left him weak and helpless.

"However," the old man continued, "although such a fate would have horrified a white man, these men saw nothing particularly upsetting in it. With care the water would last them till they got to a watering hole.

"They proceeded with care, doled out the water with a cautious eye to see that no man got more than his share, and yet, on the second day, after all had drunk tiny sips from the canteen – suddenly with no warning, Ahim, one of the men, drank and died – died in agony! Poisoned!"

Cranston wondered why the seemingly unemotional old man's face twisted with pain when he mentioned the name of the man who had died. He found out when the old man went on:

"Ahim, Sahib, was my son, my first born..."

The Ghurkas looked at the old man. Obviously the name was the only word in all that the old man had said that they understood.

"That left these men with no water for another forty–eight hours. The water in the canteen, it was clear, had been poisoned. They dared not drink it. They have made their return, that is obvious. Understand, Sahib, they do not feel any particular emotion about the death of my son, that to them is understandable. If one man has a feud with another, that is out of their province and they do not feel that it is their business. What is their business is to find out who ruined their water!"

Cranston thought, a neat problem. Aloud he said, "Don't they remember whose hands went near the mouth of the canteen?"

The old man spoke rapidly to the men. He turned back from them. "They swear that no man's hands went near the mouth of the canteen. There was no reason for such an action. And remember that because the water was rationed, every eye was on that canteen when sips were taken from it.

"How about the man who carried the canteen?"

"Rastur, the leader carried it. He swears that he had nothing against my son. But all evidence would seem to point to him. If no man's hand went near the mouth of the canteen and if Rastur was the one who carried it, it would seem that he would have to be the one who poisoned the water... But the men did not kill him in the jungle for they felt that since he killed my son, it should be up to me to have my say about Rastur's guilt.

"Do you think the evidence is conclusive against him?"

Cranston thought if the canteen had a secret compartment in it it would solve things nicely. He asked, "May I see the canteen?"

The men had beaten him to it. They handed him a canteen but the sides had been peeled away as though by a can opener. The canteen was simply that, a canteen. There were no compartments in it.

"There is," Cranston said, looking at the opened canteen, "one other secret compartment. Who drank from the canteen before your son?"

The old man asked the men and they pointed to one of their members. The old man said, "Sohrab was the last to drink. He handed the canteen to my son..." The old man thought then said, "How could that be? Why did not Sohrab die?"

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That was a question. Cranston said slowly, "I would say that only two men can be guilty, the leader or Sohrab!"

The old man communicated what Cranston had said. Three of the men stepped away from the two who had been named. The three men fingered edged knives that hung from their cummerbunds.

"How," the old man asked, "shall we choose between them?"

Cranston looked around the bazaar. On the floor near the street lay some refuse. There were some bamboo shoots there. He walked over and picked up some of them.

He picked up three and stood with his back to his audience. He broke them off so all three were the same length. He put one of the shoots in his pocket and turned around holding the two. He walked to the old man and said, "Did you know that I am a conjuror?"

"Thou must be if the stories I hear of thy acumen are the truth," the old man smiled.

"Tell the two men that I am going to conjure with these bamboo shoots. They are to take the magic shoots, one to each, and then they are to sleep with the shoots on them."

The old man must have told it effectively for all five of the men stepped back from Cranston in dismay. Cranston handed the leader of the men one of the shoots. The leader took it with a look of distaste on his savage, noble face.

The other shoot, Cranston gave to Sohrab. Cranston said to the old man, "On the morrow, at sun up, have these men back here and my magic will tell me which of these men killed thy son. You see, one of the shoots, the one that is in possession of the killer will grow shorter! The man who has the shorter shoot, therefore, will be the man we want!"

The old man smiled again and told the men what Cranston had said. "Be assured," the old man said to Cranston, "that they will be back here! The other three will keep vigil on them!"

The sun was readying itself for that astounding descent which in the tropics brings nightfall with no intervening twilight. Cranston returned to his hotel and spent most of the night worrying about his initial problem, the one that had brought him to India. How was he to catch up again with the man he was hunting?

When he returned to the bazaar the following morning, his mind was still more on his own problem than on the one that was bringing him to the native section.

He was brought out of his introspection when he saw the five Ghurkas waiting patiently in the store that belonged to the old man.

Cranston watched as the old man bade the two men to produce the magic bamboo shoots. All eyes were on the shoots. One was definitely longer than the other. The long one belonged to Sohrab. The short one belonged to the leader.

The old man said, "Behold! The white conjurer has made real magic! The guilty man's shoot is grown shorter! The leader is the man who killed my son! Aie!"

Cranston said, "No, I am sorry I told an untruth! The killer is revealed, but he is revealed by the length of his shoot. You see, I said the shoot would shorten, so that the guilty man would not run away in fear. Really, my

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magic has made the guilty man's bamboo grow longer! Sohrab is the man who poisoned the water, Sohrab is the man who killed your son!"

Cranston reached in his pocket and took out the third shoot. He held it up. He said, "This shoot was the same length as the other's yesterday." Cranston took the leader's shoot and held it up next to his own. They were the same length.

"You see," Cranston held them up, "they are still the same size. It is Sohrab's which has grown!"

Four irate men with death in their eyes, stood in a ring around Sohrab. Their hands were, with gruesome unanimity, on the handles of their knives.

The old man said in their tongue. "Do with him as he deserves. But do it where no white eye will see."

The four men walked off with their victim.

The old man watched them go and said slowly to Cranston, "This is just."

Cranston nodded. The old man asked, "White man, I know a little more than..." He gestured at the retreating backs of the men, "How did you make the shoot grow longer?"

"I didn't. The guilty man's guilt made it grow. Remember you convinced them that I was a magician and I had said that the shoot in the possession of the guilty man would grow short. The guilty man therefore substituted a longer bamboo shoot, thinking that this would conceal his guilt!"

The old man leaned forward, his face shone with enjoyment. "Thou art as astute as an Indian!"

Cranston was pleased. This was surely the highest praise he could get. The old man had one other question. "Thou said that there was one more secret compartment... how can that be when the canteen was mute proof that there was no secret hiding place that the poison could be hidden?"

Pointing to his mouth, Cranston smiled. "Have you forgotten this most secret of all hiding places?"

"The mouth! So that is how one can never put one's hands to the canteen and still put poison in it..."

"Surely," Cranston said. "All he had to do was have the poison in a gelatin capsule and then, while taking his drink let it drop into the canteen from his mouth and hand it to his victim, your son. The capsule dissolved and..."

The old man nodded. "I see. All my humble thanks are thine."

That was where the story ended when it came out. However, Vale asked Cranston, "Were his thanks of any help?"

Looking out of the train window at the landscape that flew by Cranston remembered back to that time when he'd been in India. The thanks had certainly been real.

Aloud, Cranston said, "The old man was responsible for my catching the man I had been following. The man could hide from my eyes, but not from the myriad eyes of the old man's people. The following day after I had solved the canteen murder, some natives delivered my man to me at my hotel."

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"You probably never would have caught him otherwise." Vale said thoughtfully.

"I know I wouldn't have. However," Cranston said, "is that enough for this afternoon?"

"Sure, more than enough." They sat back and watched the world go by. Their destination was up ahead.

A newsboy hawking the papers waved one under Cranston's nose. "Readallaboutit!"

The screaming headline read, "Incompetent Cops Release Svengali Killer!"

Cranston bought a paper and read, "D.A. Demands Help from Public, Claims Police Fail in Duty!"

The follow-up story wasn't that strongly worded... they never are. In essence, the district attorney was angry because the police had released Gall, the hypnotist, without conferring with the district attorney's office.

The carry over on the inside of the paper, hidden in among the want ads, said that the police were sure that Gall was not involved; that they had been able to find no trace of a connection between Owden, the dead man, and Gall. They felt that as clever a murder as this must have some motivation. They also said, as they usually do, that they were following a hot clue, that new developments were expected hourly. Cranston sighed. That part was run off in a mimeographing machine, he was sure. There were always hot developments in every murder case.

He was surprised that there was no mention of the ever-present 'drag net'. He rumbled up the paper and walked on into the hotel. He could not know it, but on the way, he rubbed elbows with the real murderer.

Ager was coming out of the hotel as Cranston and Vale came in. The killer was deep in thought. Was it, or was it not, time to kill Billy Boy? He had to come to some decision and fast...

CHAPTER V

THEY registered at the desk and got adjoining rooms. Vale looked around the lobby and said, "Not bad."

The desk clerk raised his eyebrows. "Not bad? Really, sir, we think very highly of our hotel. I think you will find that it compares favorably with any hotel in..." he looked down at what Cranston and Vale had written. "New York."

"We'll see." Vale looked unconvinced.

While they were going upstairs to their room two things happened. The desk clerk called up a friend of his who was a reporter and told him that Cranston was in the hotel, and the murderer made up his mind.

Ager walked down the street with death in his eyes. Now that Gall had been released it was high time Billy Boy shuffled off the mortal coil. He'd been keeping Billy alive for just such an eventually. He'd made Billy confess but that was just a stop gap.

The question was whether or not Billy had been released at the same time Gall was. That should be easy to check on. He went to a phone.

In the hotel, Cranston and Vale had barely had time to open their suitcases, not, Vale noticed, that Cranston opened that blasted briefcase he always carried with him, when the bell rang.

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Answering the door, Vale was pushed to one side by an impetuous youngster who said, "Who's Cranston?"

"I am."

"Good. First, how do you like our town? Pretty good, huh?"

"Oh, no," Vale muttered, "not an interview by a demon reporter. I'm getting too old to have these things happen to me!"

"How could I have any idea of your town? I just got off the train." Cranston was amused.

"I didn't really want to know what you thought of the burg, but honest, Mr. Cranston, you got any ideas about our Svengali murder?"

"Inasmuch as he just got here, hasn't even seen the site of the crime, hasn't met either Gall or the other one they have in jail, how could he have any ideas?" Vale asked.

"But he's Lamont Cranston!"

"I see. That means he uses crystal ball, is that it?" Vale asked. He was getting over being annoyed. The kid's enthusiasm was infectious.

"Do you have any ideas, Mr. Cranston? The city editor doesn't know I came here. I'm supposed to be covering a dog show. A... friend called to let me know you were here."

"I haven't but one idea and that seems to be in reference to something that hasn't come up."

The young reporter leaned forward, his face set with excitement. He was so obviously trying to be the pokerfaced newsman that Vale had trouble in keeping from laughing.

Cranston said, "Hasn't it struck anyone as rather peculiar that Owden, the man who was killed on stage, obeyed? Obeyed to the death the commands he was given by Gall?"

"Huh?" The boy cocked his head on one side like an alert cocker spaniel. "But gee, Mr. Cranston, that's no problem... Gall's a hypnotist. You musta forgot about that... his name's Sven Gall... that's why they're calling it the Svengali kill..."

The boy was so crestfallen, so obvious did he make it that Cranston, his idol, had let him down, that Vale was moved to say, "Hold on, son, why don't you wait and see if Lamont has anything to add?"

"Why sure, but..."

"Look," Cranston said, and he was very serious, "let's clear away some of the rubbish that's been obscuring this murder. Gall may pretend to be a hypnotist. Under certain ideal conditions he may well be able to hypnotize... there's nothing very difficult to it... you could if you knew how..."

"Me? I could make people do anything I wanted to..." The boy gulped. It was quite obvious what he was thinking. He turned scarlet as Vale spoke.

"Now, now... how do you know she'd like it." Vale grinned. "Maybe she wouldn't want to be kissed by you!"

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"That is, of course, the crux of the matter." Cranston said. "Gall, even if he could hypnotize one, could not make them do anything that they wouldn't do themselves ordinarily..."

"That's what Gall said the night of the show... I was there," the reporter said.

"And he was telling the truth. Now, as I get it from the papers, Owden was a skeptic. He didn't believe that Gall could hypnotize him."

"I'll say he was a skeptic. He said when he got on stage that he thought Gall was a faker. Said it right to his face!"

"Then, I think we can safely say that Owden was not hypnotized!" Cranston said. This matter was what had really brought him to the scene of the crime. It gnawed at the back of his mind. It didn't make sense.

The reporter whistled. "Then what made him act as if he was under Gall's control?"

"I cannot imagine." Cranston scowled with concentration. "The obvious answer would be that he was a stooge."

"Owden? Fat chance!" The boy was incredulous. "Owden was a town character; everyone knew he was a free thinker. He kept giving long lectures about what nonsense nine tenths of mankind believed in." The reporter shook his head. "He was no stooge. Not after all the things he's said."

"There's the lead for your story, son," Cranston said. "Tell me why a man like Owden would pretend to be hypnotized in front of a big audience and I think we'd be a lot closer to the solution of this murder."

The boy walked towards the door deep in thought. With hand on door knob, he paused and said, "You're sure about that; a person can't be hypnotized against their will?"

"Positive. Every book on the subject, every expert psychiatrist who uses hypnotism will back me up."

"I see." He grinned. "Gee, thanks a million, Mr. Cranston. See you around!"

The door closed.

Vale turned to his friend. "Okay, my fine feathered friend, why did you turn all that data loose?"

"Because, if Gall and the other man are innocent, as they may or may not be, the real killer must be feeling very cocksure right about now. Seems to me it might help to muss things up a little for the murderer."

"Dynamiting, eh?"

"If you want to call it that."

Vale scribbled busily for a while on his nondescript slips of paper. When he was done, he asked, "What's next, sahib?"

"A bite to eat and a fast look—see at what's jokingly called the scene of the crime. Not that there'll be a thing left after forty—eight hours. I just want to get the feel of the place."

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The room was at the most eight feet long. With charity it was six feet wide. To one side was an unmade army cot. Facing it was a dirty window. There wasn't much point in cleaning the window since it looked out on a brick wall. Clothes, big clothes, were draped in mussy disarray all around the room. Not that it took more than two suits to mess up the tiny room.

There was one jet gas burner on a rickety stand. A throw rug crumpled up, dirty and worn into a swiss cheese pattern of holes covered a tiny fragment of the splintered wooden floor.

Two old big shoes lying on their sides, discarded, gaping, tongues crumpled, laces broken and tied, completed the inventory of the room.

Ager twisted his mouth in disgust. And he'd thought his room in the hotel was a rat hole! He closed the thin warped door behind him. There was a dead and dusty smell to the cubicle. Of course the door or window hadn't been opened since Billy Boy went to jail. That would explain the smell.

Stepping forward carefully, Ager made his way to the cot. The blankets, there were no sheets, had once been navy blankets. Time had worn them to the point where they were exactly the color of mouse hide. He sat on the very edge of the cot and looked up at the dirty old yellow, unshaded twenty-five watt bulb that hung from a cable from the ceiling. It cut across his eyes.

He looked at his watch. Billy Boy had been released an hour ago. He'd been afraid that the big lug had gone straight home. Not that it would have interfered with the plan, but it was better this way.

The paper! He reached in his pocket and looked at a blank sheet of paper... was it too good for a man who lived in such a room? It certainly was too clean, that was a sure thing.

Picking up one of the huge shoes, Ager wiped the paper back and forth across the sole a couple of times. That done, he crumpled the paper in his hands, then spit on it so it would look as though it had been rolled between sweaty hands for a long time.

He opened the paper up and looked from it to the room. That was better. It was more in character with the hovel. There was a lot more to the gentle art of murder than occurred to one on first thought.

He wiped some sweat off his forehead. Leave it to some smart aleck to comment on the disparity of the room and the paper, and boom... suspicion. If there was anything he wanted none of in this murder, it was suspicion.

There were heavy sounds coming from the hall. Stumbling, awkward sounds... they came closer... closer... Ager realized with a start that his hands were trembling. He had a heavy sick feeling in the pit of his stomach... this was a little different from Owden's murder... there was personal contact here... he didn't like it.

The door slammed open. All of Billy Boy's actions were like that, sudden, uncoordinated. He looked into the room, dull surprise written on his heavy face that the light should be on. It took a second longer for Ager's presence to register.

He gulped and his mouth moved for a moment before any sound came out. "Uh... hello..."

Staring him straight in the eyes, lowering his normal pleasant voice until it was didactic and harsh, Ager said, "What do you have to say for yourself? Why are you not in jail?"

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"Huh huh... them dopes, they don't think I done it! They laughed at me! I... I wanted to strangle them!" His face lowered, blood pounded up to his temples. There was no doubting his sincerity.

"Did you tell them how the murder was committed?"

"Sure, I told 'em I swapped the guns just like I did... or did I?" He beetled his brows in a fury of concentration. "I don't seem to remember nothin'..."

"You fool!" Ager's voice was a bark. "Of course you switched the guns. I told you to, didn't I?"

"Oh, sure." The anger faded from Billy's face and he again sounded like an even more dim-witted Mortimer Snerd.

"You remember it, don't you?"

"Sure, I remember, don't get mad... know I done it and I deserve to die for it." Billy's face lighted up from within. "I want to die for it. That's the only way I kin repay my sin."

"Here." Ager handed Billy the crumpled paper. "Got a pencil?"

"I dunno, wait..." The huge bulk went to the rickety closet under the gas range. He ran his hand around in a mass of junk.

His big body went over in a bow. One hand was stretched out and hidden inside the closet. He didn't move. Seconds turned into minutes. He still did not move.

Frowning, Ager said, "Billy, straighten up... bring me the pencil. Billy!" There was no answering move.

Ager rose to his feet swearing between tight clenched teeth. "You baboon! Don't freeze up on me now! Why did it have to be now? Billy!"

He stood next to the hulking body of the man he had to kill. He slashed out with his palm at the big rubbery face. The sound was like two boards slamming together.

Billy Boy didn't move. His expression didn't change in the slightest. Ager said, "Why now, of all times... why not after he wrote the note? Billy... I'm going to..."

Ager kicked the big man as hard as he could in the delicate part of the back where the kidneys are. It hurt his foot, but that was about all. The sound was hollow like a cask.

Raging, Ager looked around the room... aromatic spirits of ammonia... no... that would be too much good luck... how long could this last? There was that time in Altoona when Billy stayed frozen for two days.

Ager ran his hands through his hair and then took a deep breath. This would get nothing accomplished. He sat down on the edge of the cot and looked at his victim.

Billy Boy, frozen stock still like a child playing 'statues' was barely breathing. Ager sat and looked at him. What had the doctor said it was, the doctor they called in in Altoona? Cat- something... Catatonia. Remembering the word helped Ager remember something the doctor had done. He went over to Billy Boy and reaching down, picked up Billy's arms.

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They went straight up in the air like a rag doll's. But, once he released them they stayed there, perpendicular. It would have hurt an ordinary person to hold any limb that rigid for a minute, but Billy could do it for days and days...

Gasping for breath from the strain, Ager got his arms around Billy's barrel-like chest and heaved. He managed to get the man to his feet.

Now Billy stood in the middle of the tiny room, with his arms pointed at the ceiling. His dull face was even duller than usual. It looked more like a midget, too.

What had he accomplished by this, Ager thought stupidly? No matter what angle he set Billy at, that wouldn't solve this stasis that was interfering with murder.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, it ended. It was like a snowman dissolving. The arms fell slowly to Billy's sides. Then he shook his head slowly as though he were under water. Finally he looked around the room and said, "I'm sure I have a pencil in here."

It was as though nothing had ever happened. He found a scruffy little stub of a pencil. The end of it was all chewed. He handed the object to Ager. Ager shook his head.

"You keep it. I want you to write something as I dictate it."

"Sure. Whatcha want me to say?"

Face screwed up with fierce concentration, Billy bent to the task. He put the end of the pencil on the paper.

"I cannot stand it any longer" Ager said slowly.

"Somethin' botherin' ya Andy?" Billy looked concerned.

"No, you idiot, that's what I want you to write." Ager said strongly. He glared at Billy. "Now, write, 'I cannot stand it...'"

"Oh, ye mean I write, I can't stand it... Okay. What can't I stand?"

"Shut up and write, 'any longer... I killed Owden and I must suffer for it. I am going to kill myself... it's better this way. The cops won't hold me for what I did...'"

It took a long time with much scratching out of words and rewriting them back in. Ager was content for this meant it would be real. It would have true verisimilitude.

"Should I sign my real name or Billy Boy?" the pathetic big man asked like a sick puppy.

"Your real name? It never occurred to me that you had any other. What is it?"

"William Bart Boyy."

"Sign that and then in parenthesis put Billy Boy."

Of course that meant that Ager had to explain what a parenthesis was. But at least it was done. At long last it was done. Ager felt as if he had worked for twenty hours straight. He had had no idea it was going to be as

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hard as it was.

Billy looked up from his composition and held it out timidly to Ager. Looking at the crumpled dirty paper, written in Billy's almost illegible handwriting, Ager was content. There could be no doubt that this was Billy's farewell note.

"Stand up."

"We goin' some place, huh? Gee, I could do wit' some excitement. I ain't done nothing all the time I was in the jail."

"Yeah, we're going some place. Come on."

They left the nightmarish boarding house and Ager was thinking, certainly death is better than life in a place like this... why does Gall let the poor slob live this way I wonder... or maybe... maybe Billy likes it this way.

Out on the street, Ager kept an eagle eye open. No one paid any attention to them. Even if any one had noticed, it wouldn't have meant very much. Why shouldn't Ager be seen with the big creep? They worked together, didn't they?

The big jerkily moving man with the face of a stupid midget walked along with rapid inefficient movements that almost outdistanced Ager's more seemly stride.

"Where we goin', huh?"

"For a walk." For a walk with death.

CHAPTER VI

"OUTSIDE of what you pointed out to that kid reporter, you don't know anything more about this mess than I do, do you?" Vale asked Cranston.

"Truthfully, not for publication, for after all, we can't destroy my legend, I don't know a bit more than you do."

They had eaten and were at the theatre. The lights were dark. The theatre had been sealed by the police till some future date. It was eerie. Theatres seem to demand lights, life, some degree of action to save them from looking like a huge funeral parlor.

The policeman who had been detailed to keep a weather eye open was following them down the aisle of the pitch black theatre. He was stating querulously, "I don't see why the chief called me and said to show you around. You ain't a cop."

"How true. Maybe that's why your chief extended the courtesies to Mr. Cranston that he did." Vale said stuffily. The cop was getting on his nerves, or, he tried to be a bit more honest. The dismal darkness split only by the weak ray of the policeman's flashlight was getting him edgy. Cranston seemed as cool as a cucumber. He strode along down the aisle, briefcase under his arm as though he were keeping an appointment at the barber's.

Up ahead of them was the stage looking high and cavernous. They were about at the fifteenth row of the orchestra. It was then that it happened. Then that Ager's second murder began.

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A single spotlight splashed across the huge empty stage. It stopped them cold in their tracks. The sudden brightness of the light acted to paralyze them.

Out into the limelight of the spot strode, jerked, would be a better word, the huge hulk that was Billy Boy. He looked into the glare of the light and was blinded by it.

There was something pathetic about the big man. He fumbled so. His ugliness instead of being frightening was rather like the ugliness of a Saint Bernard.

His voice when he spoke was a croak. It was low and they had to strain their ears to hear. He said, "This is the on'y way... if on'y them dumb cops hadda held me, if they'da hung me, then it woulda been better... but they wouldn't, the jerks.

"I killed Owden! Me... Billy Boy! I done it... I'm sorry now, but I wasn't when I done it..."

Cranston moved forward. This was ungodly. The man alone in the world as far as he knew, standing up in an empty theatre and delivering what? A suicide farewell?

Vale and the cop didn't move. They were too fascinated by what was happening on stage. Billy Boy had taken a straight edged razor out of his pocket.

Ager had told him not to do it for a couple of minutes. Far away his dull brain heard a door slam. He knew that meant that Ager was out of the theatre. The door slamming was the rear fire door. Now was the time for him to make up for killing Owden. As he lifted the fiendishly sharp razor to his throat he thought slowly that it was too bad that he couldn't remember switching the guns better... that would have made it more fun to cut his throat. This way he felt that he was paying back for all his sins, not just for killing Owden.

Fast as Cranston moved, once he had realized what Billy was doing, it was too late. But by the time he had run down to the stage and vaulted up onto the stage proper, Billy was a crumpled mass on the stage center.

His body had fallen a little up-stage. The razor was still in his fingers as Cranston got to his side. But even as Cranston watched, the fingers relaxed and the razor fell to the stage.

It made a dull little sound, a period to the end of the life of Billy Boy. He had kept his appointment with Death.

His body rolled a trifle as Vale and the policeman came up on the stage. Vale gulped and wished it hadn't, for now he could see the new mouth, a ragged ugly mouth that had come into being under Billy's chin.

The cop said, "Boy is that a relief! Now the whole thing is all taped up good and proper and you fancy Dans can take it on the lam. The chief'll be glad to get the papers out of his hair on this little number! One customer for the meat wagon and that ends the Svengali kill."

The stain was spreading as Cranston turned and walked off stage. He went off to stage left. That is the audience's right, if there had been one for this murder as there had for the first.

Standing in the wings, Cranston looked out onto the stage. He rubbed his forehead irritably. He looked all around. Nothing. No clue. He didn't even know what he was looking for, he thought, and damned himself. The whole thing had been too pat. He didn't believe it for a second, but...

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He walked across stage to the other wing. Vale followed Cranston's gaze and saw, in the wood of the flat, the part that held the painted canvas to the frame, a series of tiny holes. He looked closer. So they were holes perhaps the size of a pin, so what?

His eyes held the "so what" look as he turned around.

"I don't get it," Cranston said. "What's the significance of some pinholes in a flat that makes a box set?"

"Since I don't even know what a box set is," Vale said.

"This," Cranston gestured about him. "The whole set is a complete unit. Obviously Gall carried it with him. I don't think any other performer has used a box set, one that cuts off the stage from the stage hands as well as from above, for twenty years."

"Does it have some significance?"

"I don't know. I won't know till I speak to someone who was in the show, or someone who saw Gall's performance."

The cop looked up from the body he had been looking at. "Hey!"

"Get him! What's with you?" Vale asked.

"Call the chief will ye? Do somethin' around here... don't make like master minds!" The cop grinned. "Be sure and tell the chief to send a meat wagon for a D.O.A. That'll make him real happy."

As Cranston and Vale made their way to the back of the pitch black stage, Vale asked, "I hate to expose my colossal ignorance, but what is a D.O.A.?"

"Dead on arrival." Cranston said shortly. There was the phone up ahead. He had his fountain pen flashlight out, and was sorry that Vale was there to see the tiny beam of light that spilled from the adhesive taped flashlight.

He dropped a nickel in the pay phone and spoke to the chief of police. The chief was delighted at his message.

Cranston said, "The man you have on duty here is very happy about the whole thing. He seems to think this ends the case."

The chief groaned. "Oh no, don't tell me... let me guess... you don't agree!"

"Correct. If I may abuse your hospitality, I'd like to continue my investigation as long as I am here."

"I can't stop you, but you're not going to get much help from me." The chief slammed the phone down.

Cranston could understand his position. The papers had been making life unhappy for him, but until Cranston had the bee out of his bonnet there would be no sleep.

"Where now?" Vale asked.

"I want to speak to someone in the show. We have that list of names and addresses. Suppose we check now."

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"Let's go."

Out on the street, Shrevvie waited, leaning forward over the wheel of the hired cab. He looked up interestedly as a morgue wagon came slewing up the street. He thought, leave it to the boss to kick up a fuss. He could even cause some excitement on a Sunday afternoon in Philly.

Vale and Cranston got into the cab as two men bearing a long brown basket got out of the morgue wagon and entered the theatre.

Cranston said, "Hotel Arras, Shrevvie. And don't try to make like Barney Oldfield. There's no rush."

"What do we do now?" Vale asked. The call at the hotel had been futile. Gall, whom they had wanted to see, was not at his hotel.

"There's a girl in the show," Cranston looked at his list. "Betty Cummins. Try the Grand Hotel this time, Shrevvie."

"Okay."

This call was more promising. The desk clerk said, "Room 453," and he said it with a sly smile. Vale felt like pushing the clerk's pug nose in, but thought better of it as he looked around the hotel.

On the fourth floor Cranston knocked on door number 453. It had the number made of tin and tacked on rather haphazardly. He knocked again louder.

A sweet low-pitched voice answered, "Yes? Be right there, Andy."

Vale looked at Cranston. "Andy? Isn't that guy Ager named Andrew?"

Cranston nodded as the door opened. Vale thought, wow, wrap that up and I'll take it home for Christmas. She was lovely.

She said, "Perhaps you have the wrong door?"

"Not if you're Betty Cummings," Cranston said. He smiled. She had that kind of a face. You smiled at it instinctively. It was the kind of face you couldn't bear to have look anyway but happy.

"Andy! Has something happened to him?" She looked unhappy. Vale wanted to pat her shoulder and say there, there.

"No, it has nothing to do with Mr. Ager." Mentally, Cranston added the footnote, not as far as I know, anyway. Aloud, "May we come in?"

"Of course." She stepped back, and now that she knew their visit had nothing to do with Andy, she was radiant again.

CHAPTER VII

BY some magic, some transmutation, she had managed to make the crummy, ordinary hotel room look like a room in a nice home. There were little touches like a bowl full of dahlias, her own ash trays, tiny things, but somehow they took the curse off the room.

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She seated them, and then, leaning against a bureau she asked, "In what way can I help you?"

"First." Cranston said. "I want you to know we are investigating the death of Owden and the 'suicide' of Billy Boy."

"Oh no... he didn't..." She grimaced. "Poor Billy... maybe it's better this way."

"What is your role in the show?" Cranston asked.

"Not a very important one, I'm afraid. I'm just stage dressing. I bring the table on with the props on, stand to one side, let the wolves get an eye full, and that's about all. Gall likes to be able to say that he carries, or carried, four people with him."

"Four?"

She smiled a wry smile. "He had to exaggerate even there. Really there was just Billy, Andy and me. But he added himself."

"Reminds me," Vale said, to get some attention, "of the old story about the ham who starred in a show that was so lousy they only took in twelve dollars one night. Later when he went to the Lamb's Club he said, 'Would you believe it we only took in twenty-five dollars tonight?'"

She smiled. "That was it exactly. Gall is nothing if not a ham and he's not even a good ham."

"Don't care for him?" Vale asked. Brother, was she a dish!

"Not very much. He's terribly domineering and really, the act isn't too good, it's based so much on the fact that most people have a basic will to believe in things like hypnotism. They think of it like telepathy, as some occult science."

Cranston asked the important question. "Can you tell me why you traveled with a box set?"

"Uh..." She looked flustered. "Well, I could but when I went with the show Gall made me sign a contract that I would be fired if I ever said anything about...well, he swore me to secrecy as to his methods..."

"I see." Cranston leaned forward. "Can you tell me this? There was a very good reason why you have the box set. Some reason why Gall thought it important to cut off the vision of the stagehands and the theatre manager as well as the people in the top balcony."

She nodded. "I can say yes to that without breaking my trust."

Vale scratched his head. He couldn't see where this line of questioning was going to get Cranston. He said so.

"I think that if Miss Cummins were not bound by an oath she could explain something that would show us the modus operandi of the murder!"

Before Betty Cummins could say anything, and Vale was sure that she was about to, there was a knock at the door. She got to her feet, all thought of them gone, and literally flew to the door. She opened it.

"Andy! How nice that you could get here. Won't you come in and meet my company?"

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"Company?" Ager looked from Vale's round pleasant face to the hawk-like profile of Cranston and then said, "To what are we indebted for the dubious pleasure of their company?"

"Oh, Andy, don't be that way. They're looking into the murder... and Andy... did you hear? Billy committed suicide!"

"My name is Vale, and this is Lamont Cranston, the criminologist. You may have heard of him."

"I have..." Ager seemed to make up his mind. He turned on the charm the way you'd turn on a water faucet. "Nice to see you. Any way Betty or I can help, why just speak up."

On the surface his face was composed. Inside him his mind was skittering like a frightened horse. What, why, how come? Cranston, of all people... what evil fate had brought the man here? Had he slipped in any way? He racked his addled brain... this was no time to worry about slips. Insouciance was the order of the day.

Four people in the room. The killer and the man-hunter, the girl and a man who was interested in the girl. Vale as a matter of fact was quite bored with the murder, all he was trying to dope out was how to cut in on Betty. Was it a thing between her and this Ager character?

Probably because of the strain that Ager was under, he bubbled over with enthusiasm. He asked questions about Cranston's doings, showed from the questions that he had kept up to date with the papers as regards to Cranston's exploits.

Vale squirmed and tried to get the girl's attention. He made with bright repartee which was disregarded as Betty sat forward on the edge of her chair drinking in the conversation between Ager and Cranston.

Cranston asked, "I suppose you are bound by the same oath that Miss Cummins is not to divulge anything about Gall's business?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm sorry... why, do you think that might have something to do with the murder?"

Nodding, Cranston said, "I keep being irked by the business of Gall hypnotizing Owden who was a skeptic."

Yipe!... thought Ager, he's warm... he's smelled something in the wind. If he talks to Gall he may be able to pry the truth out of him. My God... do I have to kill Gall, too? Does this never end?

"There's no way," Vale asked, "that you can help Lamont without..."

"No, I'm afraid not," Ager said rather rapidly. It seemed, then, that Betty hadn't said anything. So far so good.

Cranston stood up. "Sorry you can't be of any help. The news of Billy Boy's death will probably be in the papers by now."

"Poor Billy." Ager looked sad.

"The police," Vale said, "think that Billy's suicide ends the case."

"I see. What do you think, Mr. Cranston?" Ager waited holding his breath.

"I think the case is just beginning to open out." On that Cranston made his exit. Vale hollowed, taking a last look at Betty, who smiled at him politely, much too politely.

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Shrevvie was still waiting in the cab when they came out of the hotel. Cranston said, "Let's try Gall again. He may be back at his hotel by now."

Sitting back in the cab, Vale said, "Dynamiting again?"

"Guess so. This is irritating. There is so little to go on. Just my feeling, my knowing that you can't hypnotize someone against his will, some pin holes in a flat, and the fact that Gall uses a box set. It certainly is not what I'd call a solid foundation for a case." Cranston was edgy.

The traffic was easing up now. They made good time to Gall's hotel. Shrevvie said, "Here y'are, boss."

They entered the hotel. This time luck was with them. Gall was in. On the house phone he seemed politely curious. When they went to his room he had the latest editions of the papers spread out on his bed. His suite was handsome. His cape was thrown over the back of a big chair. His clothes were jet black. His eyebrows and mustache were as made up as though he were ready to go on stage at any second. His white face was even whiter than usual.

He said, "Mr. Cranston?"

"How do you do. I'd like to have you meet a friend of mine, a writer, Mr. Vale."

They shook hands all around, and Gall made a gesture that invited them to be seated. "What'll you drink?"

They said they would be all right, and, sitting with the drinks in their hands, Cranston looked at Gall. S. for Sven... last name Gall. Sven Gall... it was too much. Of course it was a stage name, but...

"What is your real name, Mr. Gall?"

"Strangely enough, it's very close to my assumed one. The first name is Sven, my last name was Gale, I just substituted an l for the e."

"I see. It was just idle curiosity."

Vale asked, "Been in this business for a long time, Mr. Gall?"

"Twenty years."

Vale wondered how long it would take before Cranston asked any leading questions. He didn't have to wonder long.

"Mr. Gall, would it be possible for you to let us in on your secret?"

Gall looked nervous. "I don't know what you mean."

"Would you tell us why you carry a box set?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I'd like to help in any way I can, but that must remain my secret." Gall twisted one of his Mephistophelian eyebrows way up in a quirk. Let him or anyone know the secret that had carried him all the way from the carnies up to where he was now? Not much of a chance.

"You know about the suicide of your assistant, I suppose?"

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Gall pointed to the papers spread on his bed. "Yes, I do. It's a pity... although, I can't see why there was much reason for him to continue living... the asylum was always waiting for him."

Vale did a double take. Asylum?

Cranston said, "What was wrong?"

"Hysteric... catatonic. Not dangerous in any way... and as matter of fact a big help in my business."

"Of course. Ultra-suggestible." Cranston said.

Vale wondered what the hell they were talking about but resigned himself to patience.

Cranston continued, "Of course modern psychiatry rather avoids the use of the word hysteric. Covers too much ground."

"I know, but most of my reading was in the Charcot period."

"The Salpetriere Institute." Cranston agreed. "Wonderful for its time."

"You understand," Gall said, "that I just read for what I could find that was apposite to my work."

"Of course. Charcot went in for mesmerism on a big scale."

"Mesmerism, hypnotism, ouidic force, so many words for the same thing." Gall agreed.

Finishing their drinks, Cranston nodded to Vale, "We may as well get on our way."

"Must you?" Gall asked. "So rarely do I meet a man with whom I can talk about my specialty."

"Well, one last question then." Cranston phrased it carefully. "What percentage of suggestibles do you find in an audience of say a thousand?"

"At least ten in a thousand. I only carried Billy Boy for the infrequent times when the law of averages did not work."

"Thank you. By the way, I understand the reason for your reticence about the gimmick for your act."

"Thanks." Gall smiled a grin of real pleasure. "I hoped you would."

"I understand it even while I wish it didn't exist, for you may be allowing a murderer to walk the streets." Cranston nodded good night.

They left. Gall sat and looked at the wall. Was Cranston right? Was he allowing a murderer to run loose? But no... it couldn't be... the whole thing was a nightmare.

The nightmare might become more real, for at that moment the killer was brooding about the advisability of killing Gall!

CHAPTER VIII

CRANSTON looked at Vale; they were back in the cab. Cranston was wondering how he could ditch the writer for it certainly was time for Lamont Cranston to fade from the scene and that other darker side of his persona, The Shadow, to appear. Perhaps that black figure of dread might succeed where Cranston had failed. He felt as though he were in a tub of jello trying to fight his way out. On no side was there any resistance, nothing appeared on which to get a grip.

"Well?" Vale grinned at his friend. What a rotten break for Lamont. Here he had come along on what was probably going to be the first failure that the man hunter had had in a long time.

"Not well. As you have gathered, I am lost; I can't get a grip on anything."

"Maybe a good night's sleep will straighten things a bit."

"Good idea." Cranston agreed. "You know, I am loath to go on hunches, but I am sure we met the killer tonight, mortally sure."

"If you agree with the cops we saw him kill himself."

"Nah!" Shrevvie butted in. "That would be too easy."

"I'm afraid I agree with you Shrevvie." Cranston said.

In their adjoining rooms, Cranston grunted a good night. He waited until he heard the writer's breathing get slow and even, then rising, he opened his briefcase. The black cape that was the symbol of his anonymity as The Shadow fluffed up out of confinement. He shrugged his shoulders so that the .45's in their holsters rested comfortably.

The sweeping black hat finished the dressing. The tall lean dark figure moved from the hotel room like a figment from a madman's dream.

Out on the street, The Shadow smiled grimly. Shrevvie had been sure of what was to transpire. The cab was still parked near the curb. Shrevvie was slumped forward over the wheel grabbing forty winks.

From the back of the cab Shrevvie heard, "Come, come, sleeping beauty, we don't have all night!"

"Yes, boss." The car was in gear before Shrevvie was really awake.

"The theatre, please, Shrevvie."

"Comin' up."

They raced through the dark streets like the last two men alive on a dying planet. An occasional parked car was the only sign that the city wasn't a deserted mausoleum.

"Wait for me." The Shadow eased out of the cab. The theatre was completely blank and deserted. There were probably police on guard but they certainly were not in evidence.

The Shadow stood perfectly still once he was inside the theatre. He had to. It was black as few places are. There just seemed to never have been any light there. The Shadow closed his eyes and held them shut. He

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knew that letting his pupils diminish might help to see any light if there were any.

A black spot in a blacker area, that was The Shadow. It was then, while he stood immobile, eyes closed, mind almost a complete blank, that he heard a whisper of sound, a vague implication of sound, rather than noise itself.

He sharpened his ears as he had been trying to improve his night vision. He listened... there, the sound was repeated. Somewhere in the theatre, someone was moving.

It might be one of the police guards, but if it were, why all the silence? Why all the darkness? The Shadow opened his eyes wide... there, he could sense a bit of light somewhere up on the stage. His eyes before he had become accustomed to the pitch black could not see it.

He traced the sound, stepping forward down the incline of the theatre orchestra. The sounds were a little clearer now. A snip? Some sound that was like a metal shears at work.

The inky splotch that was The Shadow moved on silent feet till he was just below the lip of the stage proper. He looked up at the stage. The sound wasn't coming from there. It seemed to come from the side of the stage in the wings. Without hesitation The Shadow vaulted up on stage. Still the all encompassing darkness pressed on him like a blanket.

He made his slow, careful, quiet way to the wing. No one. But the sound was a bit louder now. What little light there had been when he was in the orchestra was gone now. He stepped forward as though into dark velvet. He heard a succussion but could not tell where the sound was from.

Lifting his foot carefully, he stepped forward. That did it. His foot came down into something soft and giving. He withdrew his foot quickly. He bent over and ran his hands over that which he had just stepped into.

It was a man. He bent closer. The man was breathing stertorously. The Shadow ran his hands over the man's chest. He felt metal buttons. One of the police who had been left to guard the theatre.

Bent over as he was, he could hear the sounds more clearly than before. They seemed to be coming up through the stage. Then, this meant whoever had slugged the cop was now below the stage...

Moving more recklessly now, The Shadow walked from the wings. He took out his pen flashlight and the tiny beam of light, all that filtered through the adhesive tape that was over the lens, flickered like a steady firefly.

He could see an iron railing ahead. Stairs were behind the rail. Steps going down. He went down them. The sound got louder as he went lower.

In the basement, on the last step, The Shadow flicked his light off. Now there was light up ahead. Not much, but in comparison with the light he had just extinguished, the light was almost blinding. It came from a big three cell flashlight that lay on a table. Just outside the perimeter of light a man was working like mad. He had a pair of wire cutters in his hand and was cutting and ripping a cloth covered wire that seemed to come down from what must be the stage above.

It was the killer, Ager, but The Shadow could not see that. All he could see was a man's silhouette and an arm that showed in the light. The cutters were going now. Wire which had been cut lay on the floor like a huge spider web.

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Ager was thinking, if only Cranston hadn't shown up none of this would have been necessary. If anyone finds me in here I am a dead duck and no nonsense about it.

He thought too, if it were not for Cranston the whole thing would have come to an end when I made Billy kill himself. Now it is starting all over again. With all sign of the wire gone, even Cranston will have a hell of a time figuring out Gall's gimmick. I wonder if Gall will keep his mouth shut? If I only knew, then I wouldn't have to kill him... and Betty, but she'll keep her lip buttoned, all I have to do is spin her a tale and she'll fall for it... but Gall... what about him?

All thought was blasted from his brain when a quiet voice said "I wouldn't move if I were you."

Ager's heart skipped a beat. Had the cop he had clouted come to? But if... there was no time for thinking. He slashed his arm out in a big arc and slapped the flashlight so that it spun through the air like a pin wheel. And like a pinwheel the light flashed over random parts of the basement room.

He was able to see, just for a split second as he was throwing himself to the floor that there was a man in the room but that it was not a policeman. It was just a man-sized black thing that stood as ominously as death and did not move.

He saw too in that split second that lasted for two lifetimes that the big barrel of a .45 was pointed directly at where he had been. He was flat on his belly on the floor. If he could have he would have burrowed down into the concrete.

The flashlight coming to the end of its fantastic flight landed across the room with a thud that broke the delicate filaments of the bulb. There was darkness.

Ager held his breath for fear that that would be enough to signal where he was.

The Shadow was equally quiet. He had not been as lucky as the killer. The flashing light had not given him any more clue to the identity of the man in the room with him.

While The Shadow waited with sudden death in his hand, he wondered about the operation he had interrupted. What was the point of removing a wire that came down from the stage... there could only be one point. The wire somehow must be tied with the murder on stage of Barry Owden. He couldn't see how, couldn't see even yet what the thread was that fastened this act to the kill, but he was sure that this was his first break.

And still the stasis remained.

It could not continue and yet it did. Neither man moved. Both controlled their breathing. The Shadow could not know whether or not the anonymous man in the room was armed or not. He was, but as yet had feared to move enough to get it out of the belly band of his trousers. He could feel it as the weight of his body against the concrete made the gun gouge into his stomach.

If he could only get at it then this silent duel might have another end. It would be idiocy to go for it with a gun trained on him. He knew that, yet what other alternative was there?

He spread his arms out slowly, carefully, knowing that each move might be his last. He thought the flashlight had ended its fall somewhere near him... if he could reach it... there. His fingers felt the cold metal of the flash and it was like money from home.

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He had half a chance now. He picked the flash up, delicately. Poising it in his hand, he suddenly threw it at where he had last seen The Shadow.

It curved through the air and while it flew, his body made a half turn. His hand went to the band of his trousers and then his hand was heavy with the weight of his gun.

Of course The Shadow was not where he had been, but even so, when the flash landed near him with a heavy metallic crash, his conditioned reflexes almost made him tighten his hold on the trigger of his gun. He caught himself just in time. A wild shot would just reveal his position to the other man.

Ager decided, hell, nobody lives forever, and shot.

There were two blinding flashes of light in the room. The sound of the shots was heavy and mournful. The Shadow laughed and it was a dreadful sound. It rolled around the room until it was dissipated in the echoes.

CHAPTER IX

AGER'S shot had missed. But The Shadow, sighting by the gun flash of his attacker, had fired directly at the hand with the gun. The gun fell to the concrete floor with a kind of dull finality.

The bullet from The Shadow's gun had pierced directly through Ager's hand. He writhed on the floor, biting his lips to keep from yelping with the pain.

The darkness was again complete. Ager thought wildly, if I can play possum, and he comes over close to me to see what damage his shot has done, maybe I can...

The Shadow sure-footedly walked closer to the man he had shot. His toe touched the gun the man dropped. He kicked it and the sound was shocking in the quiet of the room.

It rolled across the floor and came to rest against the wall. The Shadow was closer now. There was no sound from the other man. Could he have killed him? It didn't seem likely. The Shadow was not one to shoot wildly. He knew where his shot went. Then, just when The Shadow had decided that the man was trying to trick him, a foot shot out and connected with The Shadow's shin. It was agonizing. The pain lanced up his leg and made him grit his teeth.

Ager, feeling his foot connect with something human, launched himself from the floor in a flat leap that caught The Shadow in the middle.

The Shadow brought his gun hand down in a swipe that glanced off Ager's head. It hurt but Ager held on. A human head is a much more solid piece of equipment than the movies would lead you to believe.

It is a rare freak chance when a single blow with either a fist or a blackjack will knock a man out. Ager held on, grimly hoping that he could do some damage before the gun smashed into his aching head again. Not that his head ached too much. It had been too painful for that. There was a sort of anesthetic value from too great a pain Ager thought dully as he fought.

His hand, his uninjured one, crept up The Shadow's body till it got hold of The Shadow's collar. Then, holding on for his life, Ager clenched his fist in the cloth of The Shadow's collar and used it as a garrote. He tightened as much as he could while with his injured hand he tried to restrain The Shadow from bringing the gun hand up again.

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Ager turned his hand on The Shadow's collar again. It cut off his wind. It hurt. Then Ager played his trump card. He let his body go limp and just hung onto the collar while he continued to twist.

His hard knuckles were pressing against The Shadow's adam's apple. It could not last long, something had to happen or The Shadow would strangle.

The Shadow turned his arm loose from the feeble clawing wounded hand that tried to hold it. He raised his hand and brought the gun down on the temple of the man who clung like a limpet. That did it.

Gasping for breath, The Shadow yanked at the hand which still, even in unconsciousness, held its garroting hold on his collar.

Prying each finger loose, The Shadow let the man fall to the floor. Air raced in and out of his aching throat, bringing oxygen to his tortured lungs. He stood there like that for minutes letting the air restore him.

His throat hurt as it would continue to for a while, but no longer did red skyrockets flare in his brain. He was dizzy, he realized, as he moved away from the man who lay on the floor.

Running his fingers along the door sill, The Shadow found the light switch and flicked it on. The raw light cascaded down making his eyes ache. It illumined the slumped body which lay on its face on the floor.

Before The Shadow could make his way to the man and turn him over so he could see his face, he heard heavy footsteps coming down the iron stairs.

The police? The Shadow looked around. There was a small door to one side of the room past the cut wire that lay all over the floor. He made his way to it and was through the little door as a red faced cop, hair mussed, uniform cap in hand, came into the room from the stairs. The cop was feeling a lump the size of an egg on his head.

He saw the man on the floor and drew his gun as he came further into the room. The Shadow could see the policeman's eyes go from the body to the cut wire.

The cop didn't hesitate. Almost like a reflex action he bent over and used his nightstick to bang on the floor. It racketed out a call to any other cop within earshot. The cop grimaced. The sound was making his sore head sorer.

Nevertheless he rapped out a tattoo. The hard wood bouncing on the concrete made the floor act like a sounding board. It wouldn't be long before the cop would have reinforcements.

The Shadow faded into the darkness of the ante room he was in without ever having seen the face of the man he had fought within the darkness.

"Eight o'clock in the morning is late enough for a growing boy to sleep," Vale said to the sleeper in the bed.

Cranston grunted and squinting his eyes looked up into his friend's smiling face. "Is it that late?" He'd rolled in only a couple of hours before.

"What's wrong with your voice?"

"Umm... must have a touch of laryngitis." His voice did sound peculiar. Hushed, whispering, the attack on The Shadow's throat hadn't done Lamont Cranston's vocal chords any good.

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"The papers have a wild story today. Or should I wait until you get some coffee in you?"

"Let's do both," Cranston croaked.

"Right, I'll get room service to hustle us some breakfast."

While waiting, Cranston looked over the headlines. Staring from the front page was Andrew Ager's face. The heading ran, "Svengali's Assistant Assailed!"

While the bellhop pushed the tray with their food on it into the room, Vale said, "Wonder who in the world shot Ager in the hand?"

"Can't imagine," Cranston said.

"Ager was down in the basement of the theatre checking on some of Gall's props when someone came along, popped a cop on the conk and attacked Ager. Strange, isn't it?" Vale asked as he poured coffee.

"Very," Cranston said.

"In a way this is good because it makes the cops look silly for claiming that the suicide of Billy Boy ended the case. It all bears out your contention."

Cranston nodded while he sipped his coffee.

"What's the schedule today?" Vale was busy buttering toast.

"We'll tie the case up and then perhaps we can get away for that trip we've been trying to take."

Vale spluttered through a mouthful of coffee, "What? You mean... whoa... you go to bed last night baffled and wake up this morning with the solution?"

"With laryngitis and the solution, yes."

"This I have to see to believe. The stories I've heard about you are certainly understatement if anything."

"Don't run wild. I know who the killer is, finally, but I must confess that there are still some elements of the case which baffle me."

"I'm glad of that. Otherwise I'd be beginning to feel like an idiot."

"Where does Shrevvie take us today?" Vale asked as they left the hotel.

"To any radio store."

Vale thought, what the...? Why a radio store? But he asked no questions, instead he stood to one side as Cranston spoke to the man who owned the radio store they were in.

"Suppose I wanted to have a dummy wire going from a mike to some earphones, how would I do it?"

"Simple." The man behind the counter was puzzled, but he got lots of peculiar questions in the course of a day. "All you do is not connect one of the connections on the phones."

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"That's what I imagined. Now, how could I branch off somewhere in the wire from the earphones to another location?"

The man drew a simple wiring diagram. Vale looked at it, but it looked to him like some spaghetti gone mad, so he shrugged and followed his friend as Cranston added some lines to the diagram.

"Could you rig me up such a device in an hour or two?" Cranston asked. He handed the slightly changed diagram to the man.

"Sure, but I'd want some money on account," the man said. "On account of some of the nuts never did come back."

"Very well." Cranston flipped a twenty on the counter and said, "I'll check with you. Can you have a man set it up at my hotel room for when I call?"

"I certainly can," the man said as he put the money in the cash register. This was found money. Even with the additions that Cranston had made it was a simple thing to set up.

Cranston and Vale left the shop. "Do you want to make a call for me?" Cranston asked.

"Your throat is bothering you, isn't it?"

Cranston nodded. "Yes. I'd like to save it for some talking I'll have to do later on. Call the chief of police and tell him to get over to our hotel room in two hours. Tell him he'll be able to sleep tonight. The case is ending."

Vale went to a cigar store and made the call. The chief was not overjoyed about the summons until he was told that Cranston was finishing things up that day. He said, "Good. The papers really scalped me today. To have this attack on Ager come right on top of me saying that the death of Billy Boy was the end of the thing didn't help me much."

"You can't say Cranston didn't warn you." Vale said chuckling, and hung up.

Out on the street Cranston was standing looking off into space and rubbing his throat. Vale said, "Has been executed, sir."

"Better make some more calls then. The chief said he'd come? I didn't want to make any other arrangements until I knew."

"He'll be there with bells on."

"Good, call Ager, Gall, and the girl, Miss Cummins."

"The last part of the assignment is the best."

"Have them all get to our hotel room right after the chief gets there."

"Fine."

While Vale made the calls, Cranston got his thoughts in order. If only he knew the motive. Here he had the whole case in the palm of his hand and the most important thing still defeated him. There was just no clue on

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which to go. When in doubt, bluff would have to be the order of the day.

Back at the hotel room the radio man had been and gone. Lying on a desk was a microphone. Near it was a pair of ear phones.

Vale watched in puzzlement as Cranston went to the writer's typewriter and began to type.

"What makes?" Vale asked.

Cranston went on typing and said as he worked, "You're not going to be in the room at the denouement; I'm sorry, but you can be of much more help in the next room, your room."

Vale was, if anything, more puzzled. He waited.

"This little bit of business I am writing is not, of course, in your province. However, you can oblige me, if, at the proper time, you read what I have written into the microphone in your room."

"How will I know when?"

"I am sure that your ear can be glued to the door between our rooms..."

"I am sure it will..." Vale grinned. He'd be in at the kill, even if it was one room removed.

CHAPTER X

VALE saw the microphone and amplifier lying on his bed. He placed the script which Cranston had prepared next to the mike, and then pulled a chair over next to the door that connected the rooms.

Nothing like comfort, he thought, as he edged the door open just enough so that he could get a clear view of the majority of the room. He was pleased when the first person to come into the room was the chief of police. This was the way Cranston had wanted it.

He listened with half an ear as the chief wailed and moaned about how sorry his job was. Vale thought a policeman's lot is not a happy one... he almost hummed the tune until he caught himself.

Cranston said, "The others will be along in a matter of moments. I want you to know who the killer is, so that you will not be caught unprepared."

"That's highly unethical, isn't it?" The chief grinned. He was a big beefy man with a red face and a ready smile which did not go up to his eyes, Vale noticed.

"Unethical?" Cranston asked.

"Sure. Isn't the private shamus in the movies and the books always holding out on the cops till the last second so as to milk more suspense?"

Cranston grinned. Vale thought, one for you, chief. I didn't think cops had a sense of humor about their business.

The chief was saying, "What's all this hocus pocus about mikes and hypnotism?"

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"I am going to be forced to give you a bit of data about hypnotism so you will know what I am going to do. You know, I suppose, that no one can be hypnotized against his will?"

"I know it now that the smart aleck kid on the newspaper wrote an article pointing out what dopes the cops were for not seeing the flaw in the original murder!"

"Oh," Cranston smiled. The boy reporter had done a bang up job. He had even gone to the library and done some research on hypnotism before he wrote the article.

"Then since you know that, you know why I could not see why Owden was hypnotized into doing the things he did on the stage."

The chief's meaty face nodded in assent.

"Do you know anything about the function of the hysteric in the business of the stage or fake hypnotist?"

As though on cue, Vale thought, the door opened and Gall, looking taller even than usual because of the weight he had lost in worrying about his future, walked in, black cape trailing off his high thin shoulders. He doffed his sombrero like black hat and said, "How do you do?"

"We're doin' just fine. Draw up a chair and relax," the chief said jovially.

Gall barely got seated before Ager and Betty Cummins knocked on the door, entered and were made comfortable. Vale perked up, looking through his slit of door. Now that she was here, he was going to enjoy the view if nothing else. Her pretty, rather pert face was a trifle on the anxious side as she looked up adoringly at Ager's face.

Vale changed his mind about how pleasant it was going to be to watch. Cranston stood up and dangled a pair of earphones in his hands. He played with them while he spoke.

The chief drew the corners of his mouth down and said, "Well, at least you're living up to the movies, Cranston. You didn't tell me the name of the killer, after all. Holding out?"

"Oh no. Mr. Andrew Ager is the murderer."

The chief jolted upright in his chair. His hands jumped. He restrained them, but even from where Vale was, he could see the bulge that the gun made on the chief's chest.

Ager didn't move a muscle. His eyes slowly moved till he could see Betty's expression. It was one of shock. The smile was gone, but nothing had taken the place of the smile. Her face devoid of any emotion. It looked like a doll's face. A rather stupefied doll.

Gall said, "Andy is the one who murdered Owden?"

"Indirectly, yes. In one way all three of you, Gall, Ager, and Billy Boy were involved in the killing. However, it was Ager who set the other two in motion."

"You mean I gotta arrest the hypnotist again?"

"No. He didn't even know he was committing murder. You'd better..." Cranston picked up the ear phones and looked at them while he spoke, "listen carefully while I run through the modus operandi of the most bizarre

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killing I think I have ever heard of." Cranston paused a second, and then said, "The most bizarre two murders I have ever heard of."

"Whoa!" The chief moved restlessly in his chair. His hand wasn't far from his gun, and his eyes were on Ager constantly. "What is all this about two murders? You gonna stand there and tell me that Billy Boy was killed?"

Cranston nodded. "I don't quite know what the legal feeling would be, but to me Ager killed Billy even though it was Billy's hand that sliced his throat."

The girl winced. Cranston didn't notice it, but Vale did.

"Suppose you tell me how a man can commit suicide and still have it be a murder," the chief said.

"First, let's have no nonsense about this being a murder by hypnotism," Cranston said, and his face was set. "You must bear in mind that Billy had been in an insane asylum. It was because of what was wrong with him that Ager was able to make him kill himself. Don't get any idea that Ager hypnotized Billy. He didn't. You don't have to hypnotize a hysteric. All you have to do is speak to them commandingly and they will obey. They are very highly suggestible.

"Now remember that a person can be suggestible with nothing at all wrong with them. It is the suggestible who responds to advertising that says commandingly, 'Run right down to your neighborhood drug store and buy an ample supply of Blotz's Corn Remover.'"

"The suggestible person," Gall interposed as he ran his hands through his black hair, "is much more common than you would think."

"Of course," Cranston agreed. "That's how you stage hypnotists can manage to fool as many people as you do."

Gall made a grimace. Cranston went on, "Chief, if you've ever seen a stage 'hyp' act in progress, you will remember that at one point, the hypnotist looks at the audience sternly and says, I want you..."

Gall took over, pitching his voice down low, "I want you to clasp your hands together... clasp them tight... Now!" Gall waved his eyebrows. "Now, try to unclasp them. No matter how hard you try, you will not be able to release them!"

The chief casually unclasped his hands. He had followed the first direction docilely. "I didn't have any trouble unclasping them."

Gall and Cranston exchanged a secret grin. Cranston said, "Of course not. However, why did you obey the first command to clasp them?"

"I dunno."

"You're suggestible, a trifle... however, if you were much more suggestible, you would not have been able to unclasp them."

"I see..." The chief looked down at his hands accusingly.

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"The stage hypnotist watches while the audience is trying to unclasp its hands. Ninety–nine percent unclasp them with no trouble. That last one per cent are the ones that the hypnotist then invites up on the stage! They are natural suggestibles. From then on the hypnotist does his regular act!"

"I see," the chief said, "he does that monkey business just to weed out the people whom he knows he's not going to be able to put the old hyp on!"

"Now," Cranston said, "that you have that concept in mind, imagine Billy Boy, who was psychopathically suggestible, and on top of that, catatonic!"

Vale had taken the trouble to look the term up and therefore felt quite superior to the chief who was manifestly all puzzled again.

"Simply," Cranston said, "a catatonic is a person who goes off into a trance. They leave all contact with the world behind and get completely immersed within themselves. To the extent that if they go into the trance state holding a glass of water, they will remain that way sometimes for days... when they come out they still hold the glass!"

The chief looked accusingly at Gall. "What the hell were you carting a creep like that around with you for?"

Gall nodded at Cranston. "I'm sure Mr. Cranston can tell you why." Gall did not look happy.

"Horrible as it may sound to us, chief, Gall had a use for this pathetic person. You see, if no one else came up on stage, or if once in a thousand times there was no suggestible in the audience, Gall used Billy Boy as a horse."

"Huh?"

"A horse is a stage assistant, a stooge for the hypnotist. Billy was perfect for Gall who could throw him into a trance and put him in a coffin, let's say, in a shop window for advertising... or have him up on stage and throw him into the trance while he was in some excruciatingly painful position that the audience could see no one could hold, and then make Billy hold the position as long as the trance lasted."

"He could snap him out of it?"

"Sure," Cranston said, "Billy was conditioned to responding to anything from Gall."

Vale saw a flicker of expression go over Ager's face. Ager was thinking about how horrible it had been in Billy's room when Billy had frozen into one position.

The chief said slowly, "Then this character," he jerked a thumb at Ager, "just told that creep Billy to go slice his throat and Billy did?"

"I'm afraid so. I think, however, that Ager must have played on some fear in Billy's mind and, driven the catatonic to suicide."

"I see."

"I don't know, as I have said, what the position of a court of law would be about commanding a man to kill himself... but I think..." Cranston looked at Ager.

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The chief looked at the killer and his expression mirrored Cranston's. "I think the same thing you do, Cranston!"

Gall said, "What about the death of Owden, Mr. Cranston, do you know about that, too?"

"Yes indeed. I am going to demonstrate how it worked!"

That did it. Ager could restrain himself no longer. He flew to his feet and ran for the door. The chief drew his gun and aimed at Ager's legs.

Betty screamed, "Andy, don't... he'll kill you!"

She shrieked as the bullet slammed through the room.

CHAPTER XI

BLOOD streaming from his leg, Ager tried to continue running down the hall. The pain hadn't really bitten in yet. He was thinking, wise guy, the perfect murder, fool-proof... that Cranston guy can read minds, how could he know... the elevator... the door...

Hoping, gritting his teeth through his bottom lip with pain, he tried to get to the slowly closing elevator door. The chief was out in the hall now, with his gun ready. Betty was behind.

Everything had started to go to pieces with that fight last night down in the basement of the theatre... who had his antagonist been? Somehow it would have been easier to go out if he had only known that.

The people in the elevator looked down at the floor of the car as a curving, straining, bandaged hand tried to wedge its way into the car. The door closed on it.

Through the heavy door they could hear the second shot. It was a trifle muffled.

The chief hammered on the door of the car. "Open the door! He's finished."

The elevator operator pressed the lever that opened the door. The people in the car pressed against the back wall as the door opened. The chief was framed in the door. He looked down at the man on the floor.

Ager looked up at him. He grinned. "You jerk! You did just what I wanted you to! Better this, than a long drawn out business in court!"

The chief swore. He'd lost his temper. He'd meant to shoot Ager in the legs again. Instead he'd sent a bullet into his lungs. The grin on Ager's face was getting weaker.

Betty bent over the dying man. She didn't say anything. She was spent. She had no reserve left.

She was like a fighter who's been hit on the button so often that he waits for the knockout impatiently.

Cranston stood in the doorway of his room and his mouth was turned down. His lips were a bitter thin line. This was probably the best way, but it was rather unpleasant.

They got Ager back into the room. They laid him on Cranston's bed. "No point in calling an ambulance," the chief said.

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"None at all." Cranston looked down at the dying man. "Why did you kill Owden?"

Ager managed another grin. "So you can't read minds after all! I wouldn't tell you if..." A wracking gust of pain dashed into his brain. His body curled with pain and he managed to say, "Correction please, I may as well get this out... it's corny... it's one of those things that can't happen... it's one of those situations that would be laughed off a stage today, and yet it did happen..." He coughed.

Vale stuck his head in the room. He stayed put even during the shooting, but this he had to hear. Besides, no one even noticed him.

Ager said, "Owden was my old man."

The chief said, "You killed your father?"

He nodded. His voice was getting weaker. "The cream of the jest to me was that the old... well, the old man didn't even know I was alive. As far as he knew, I died when my mother did."

"What's so corny about that?" the chief asked.

"They were not married... I thought about that all the way through each orphanage I was in. I thought about it every time I thought of my mother dying for want of a couple of bucks... I thought of it every time the clipping service I subscribed to sent me anything on how well old man Owden was doing in business... I thought about..."

"You thought about it till you went nuts," the chief said.

"If you want to put it that way. I'm in no condition to argue the point," Ager said wryly. "Get this straight, though. I'm not sorry I killed him... it was too bad I had to knock off Billy that way... but the old man had it coming! I'm just sorry he didn't know who it was that..."

He died that way with the words on his lips. His lips curled up bitterly with a thin line of blood running down his face from his mouth.

And still the girl didn't cry. Her expression was still blank. She sat next to her man on the bed and looked at him.

The chief said, "I'll call for the wagon."

"You'd better get your story straight for the reporters. They'll be here any second now. The shots should have brought them already," said Cranston.

As soon as the chief hung up, Cranston said, "Here. Put these on and I'll speak to you through the microphone."

Gall watched with a set face as the chief put the headphones on.

Cranston said, "One, two, three, four, seven, three, five, six." He spoke right into the microphone. He went on calling numbers till Gall wanted to scream or break something.

All the time that Cranston was reciting numbers into the mike that seemed to go to the earphones, Vale was reading what Cranston had written. Vale read the script into the mike in his room.

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"Chief, you are now listening to the method by which a man can seem to be hypnotized against his will despite the fact that it seems to be impossible. This is the gimmick that is the basis of Gall's act. It was this gimmick that let Ager kill Owden."

The chief, with the ear phones on, looked at Cranston and wondered what was going on. This wasn't Cranston's voice.

Vale said, "It's simple when you get down to it. The mike that Cranston is talking into is dead. Really you are hearing me from the other room. My mike is cut into your ear phones. When Gall was on the stage and pretending to be hypnotizing someone, he went through the act for the benefit of the audience.

"Off stage, generally, Ager stood and read from a prepared script that held cues about the person who was on the stage. He would jolly the person along, kid him about his friends and then say something about, be a good guy and help us, will you? This'll get some laughs. You'll be putting it over on your friends'."

"Owden, being the skeptic that he was, probably went along with the gag so as to be able to tell the world how the gimmick worked."

The chief ripped the head phones off. "I get it. So all Ager did was have an imitation of the faked gun made that was really lethal and switch it for the gimmick gun that Gall generally used."

Cranston nodded. In the other room, Vale was still reading into the mike. Cranston called in, "Take it easy and come on in, Jerry."

Gall said, "Ager wasn't even in the theatre the night of the murder. He had Billy Boy fill in as the off stage voice."

"He played it safe right straight through," the chief said and looked at the body on the bed. "Real safe. Except it didn't work."

The door crashed open and the kid reporter struck his face in. "What cooks?"

"You!" the chief said and made a threatening gesture with his arm. The face disappeared like a figure in a Punch and Judy show.

"Got it all straight in your mind now?" Cranston asked.

"Yep." The chief nodded.

Vale thought, the chief should know that all Cranston had to deduce on was some pinholes in a piece of scenery and the fact that Gall had a box set.

Cranston grabbed his briefcase and his satchel and said, "We may as well be on our way, Jerry."

"Right. Be with you in two shakes." Now, Vale thought, now maybe they could get away and he could learn a little more about the elusive man who was Lamont Cranston.

Gall sat like a broken man with his head in his hands. The act was ruined. The papers would spread his gimmick from coast to coast... as nothing else had been exposed since sawing a lady in half. He was cooked. Back to the carnies and the ten shows a day...

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As Vale came back into the room with his suitcase he thought, looking at the girl if this were only one of his stories... At this point the girl would forget all about the dead man and come along with him. Instead, he thought looking at her blank shocked face, instead, it may take her years to get over this... or she may never recover... people blow their tops over a deal like this. He sighed and waved good bye to the chief who was busy on the phone. The chief didn't even look up.

In the cab, after having peeled the young reporter off them by main force, the two friends sat back and relaxed a bit. Vale said, "Just to wipe the slate clean, those pin holes in the flat in the theatre were where Billy or Ager stuck their cue sheets while the act was going on>"

Cranston nodded tiredly.

"And the box set?"

"To keep even the stage hands, or anyone backstage from seeing Ager or Billy reading into the mike. That would have blown the gaff sky high," Cranston said with finality in his voice. He moved the briefcase on his lap off onto the seat, but even then, Vale noticed, he kept one hand on it.

"In a story," Vale said thoughtfully, "illegitimacy wouldn't sound like a good murder motive."

"Maybe not. It's just one of the oldest in the world. It probably wasn't just that. More likely it was the abandonment of the mother that ate and gnawed at Ager's brain till there was a canker there that could not be wiped out but with blood."

"Wonder why Ager didn't kill S. Gall, too?"

"That's pretty clear. Did you see Gall when he realized that his secret gaff was going to become public knowledge? He would have guarded that secret as zealously as the murderer. Ager must have wondered and then decided that it was safe to allow Gall to live."

Shrevvie said, "Hey boss, you look pooped. Whyncha take a couple days off?"

Vale said smiling, "Precisely why I am here. Let's go, Lamont, shall we?"

"By all means." Cranston stretched, took a deep breath, sighed and then looked out the cab window as the car drove down the street towards the railroad station. This had been a depressing case. He would be glad to get the taste out of his mouth. Give him a good clean bank robbery any time. He smiled at himself.

The cab drove up to the railroad station and the two men, rather ordinary looking men, got out and went into the station. Of course one was tall and spare, and the other shorter and round, but they could have been two traveling salesmen starting on a selling trip. Shrevvie watched till the revolving doors spun them out of sight.

Then he put the cab in gear and drove off. The case was ended.

But the case was only ended as far as Shrevvie was concerned. For, on the train, the two men who might have been traveling salesmen but were not, sat in their comfortable Pullman chairs and looked out the window.

Vale broke the silence. "You know, I can't blame Ager too much. He had a very real motive for killing his father. Not too long ago, right here is this country, Ager would have been considered to have done a rather heroic deed."

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"Really." Cranston's voice was dry. He took an envelope from his pocket and tapped it on his hand. "I should have shown you this before."

"What is it?"

"It contains proof of Ager's paternity. Canceled checks, that sort of thing." Cranston paused then said parenthetically, "I found it among Ager's effects at the hotel."

"Well? What's that got to do with..."

"Plenty." Cranston's voice was harsh. "Look, on the surface Ager's motive was revenge, to pay back his father for what the father had done. But that was only on the surface. Underneath, the real motive was the same as in nine out of ten murders! Money!"

"How so?"

"This proof of paternity. Ager figured that his perfect crime would never be discovered. I presume he meant to wait a year or so and then return and claim his share of his father's estate!"

"I see." Vale looked thoughtful. This certainly put a different complexion on the whole case.

"Ah, but you don't," said Cranston and his smile was wry. "This state, unfortunately for Ager's murderous plans, puts a spike in his whole ideal"

"In what way?"

"The laws of this state do not allow an illegitimate child to inherit!"

"And Ager did not know that! The whole thing was fruitless." Vale said.

"Precisely," said Cranston – and the words were his last in regard to the case. "Murder for naught..."

THE END