

TEAR-DROPS OF BUDDHA

Maxwell Grant

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TEAR-DROPS OF BUDDHA

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

THE clerk at the Hotel Argonne shook his head.

"Sorry, no more rooms."

Ted Trent turned and looked at the triple line of bags that flooded the center of the lobby. Then he took another look for Cecil Grenshaw. No matter how much the clerk might mean it, Grenshaw was the sort who could make him change his mind.

Fixing such matters had been Grenshaw's specialty in the Orient; he certainly shouldn't have lost his touch in New York.

Just then Ted saw Grenshaw, turning from the hat-check room just outside the entrance to the cafe lounge – Grenshaw, with his florid face, his pince-nez glasses with their gold chain, and the gray hat and coat that Ted had last seen him wearing in Sydney, Australia.

Grenshaw – except that his manner was hasty and nervous, which didn't fit with Grenshaw at all. He was

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sliding something into an envelope, which he sealed as he came toward Ted, and with every step, the florid man darted quick, furtive glances back and forth across the lobby.

In fact, Grenshaw didn't see Ted at all until he bumped right into him; then, in response to the shoulder-clap that Ted gave him, Grenshaw almost caved. His face took on an apoplectic expression that caused Ted to grab him with a pair of brawny, steadying hands.

"You're all right, Mr. Grenshaw?"

Then, as the man steadied, Ted added:

"You remember me, don't you? Ted Trent, the second mate on the Bohemia? I'm the fellow who helped get the crew together and unload that shipment, down in Sydney."

Grenshaw's wits were coming back. He recognized Ted's broad, tanned face with the friendly grin that made those features rugged rather than rough; handsome in a weatherbeaten way. Ted's eyes, too, had an honest look that Grenshaw recalled.

"Yes, I remember you," said Grenshaw. "Only you were in the merchant marine when I saw you last. Now that you aren't in uniform –"

He hesitated, only to see Ted's smile remain.

"I'm only waiting my chance for a skipper's berth," explained Ted. "Things broke my way faster than I expected, including my getting back to old New York. Remember how I laughed when you said I'd find you at the Hotel Argonne – and I said when, about five years from now?"

It was Grenshaw's turn to smile.

"Well, here I am," continued Ted, "all inside a couple of months. But there's something else" – Ted's face went serious, but with a dash of pretence – "and that's the promise you made. You said if there was anything I really needed, I could always call on you."

Holding the letter in one hand, Grenshaw reached for his wallet with the other. Ted smiled and shook his head.

"I have money," Ted said. "I want something it won't buy. I want a hotel room, if your influence can get one for me."

A strangely calculating expression crept over Grenshaw's face. He began to chuckle in that rich, but easy style which had made Ted like him when they first met. Drawing Ted aside, Grenshaw gave another quick look around. Then:

"They won't let you transfer rooms," confided Grenshaw. "Not with all the reservations they've taken. It happens, though, that I've been called out of town. This letter" – he gestured the envelope – "is to a friend of mine, explaining it. Now if you'd like my room –"

"Would I!"

"Only you'll have to keep it in my name," continued Grenshaw, riding over Ted's interruption. "Don't let the hotel know the difference. Now here's the key –"

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Producing the key, Grenshaw started toward the elevator with Ted; then he apparently decided that the subterfuge might be detected if he and his substitute appeared too openly together. Again, those furtive glances that Ted didn't quite understand. Then Grenshaw looked eagerly at the mail-chute which was too conspicuously near the elevator.

Like a man making a momentous decision, Grenshaw thrust the letter into Ted's hand with the room key, and put urgency into his tone:

"Be sure to mail this letter immediately when you get off at the fourth floor. You'll find the mail-chute right by the elevator. It's highly important, so don't neglect it. By the way, I'm leaving most of my luggage in 408 but don't worry; I'll let you know where to send it."

With that, Grenshaw was on his way out through the lobby, dodging the stacked suitcases as he hurried toward the door. Puzzling over Grenshaw's haste, Ted entered a waiting elevator and rode up to the fourth floor. There he remembered to mail the letter and in looking to see if Grenshaw had applied a stamp Ted saw that the envelope was addressed to one Niles Naseby, Valdemar Apartments, New York City.

Who Naseby was, Ted neither knew or cared. He was more interested in the rare gift he had received, a hotel room in visitor-packed Manhattan. When he put the key in the lock it wouldn't turn the proper direction.

It was unlocked.

So quickly did Ted open the door that he caught the girl flat-footed on the threshold. Evidently she'd intended to hurry from the room; then hearing a key in the lock, had turned to hide somewhere. At least that was Ted's first impression. Then the girl smiled.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she exclaimed. Then, her eyes large and frank with inquiry: "You're Mr. Grenshaw?"

Ted nodded slowly, so the girl wouldn't grasp the fact that he had hesitated.

"I knocked, but no one answered," the girl continued. "So I came in, thinking I could leave these tickets on the writing desk." Fumbling, the girl brought a small envelope from her hand-bag. "They're for the Masked Ball down in the Village. A friend of yours sent them."

The girl stepped back into the lights of the room. She changed the subject with a quick gesture.

"When I saw the room," she added, "I was afraid you might blame me. So I just thought I'd leave –"

Ted had forgotten the room because of the girl. He found that he liked blondes, though he hadn't known it. This one was different, because of her eyes. Like most blondes, and like Ted himself, she had blue eyes. Probably it was the way blondes stared that had caused Ted's prejudice against them. Blue eyes didn't have the soulful touch that tapped Ted's responsive chord. They needed something else – like the frankness of Ted's own gaze – and this girl's eyes had it.

"About the room." Still gesturing, the girl was watching Ted. "It was like this when I found it. Who disturbed it, I don't know! Only they – well, I'd say they –"

"I'd say they did a good job," supplied Ted coolly, as he studied the room for the first time. The luggage that Grenshaw had mentioned was plentiful, and its contents strewn everywhere. "Yes," added Ted, "a very good job."

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Shirts, suits, socks and shoes weren't all that had been tossed around. Papers were flung all over the floor; books were lying about wide open, with no regard for their expensive bindings. Nor had they stopped with Grenshaw's belongings; cushions were missing from chairs; drawers had been yanked from bureaus; sheets, blankets, pillows ripped off the bed where they belonged.

Ted looked at the girl, who had stepped between him and the door. She placed the little ticket envelope in his hand, watching him with those same frank eyes. With the light still on her face, Ted was liking it still more. It was a round face, with the slightly saucy upturn of the nose discounted by the earnest lips above the firm chin.

"Honestly, Mr. Grenshaw –"

"Honestly, I'm not Mr. Grenshaw," interposed Ted, deciding that one dash of truth might lead to more. "I'm Ted Trent, a friend of his. And your name is –"

Ted put a questioning rise to his tone in hope it would bring a spontaneous result. It did, though not the sort he expected. Clutching Ted's arm suddenly, the girl pointed past him and exclaimed:

"Look out, behind you, Mr. Trent!"

Wheeling, Ted saw a rustle of window curtains in the far corner of the room. Though the light wasn't too strong there, he could have sworn he caught the glint of a revolver muzzle pulling instantly from sight.

Ted circled the room, following a wall that the muzzle couldn't cover. He picked up a light chair that the ransackers had carelessly left undisturbed and flipped it so the legs extended in front of him. It was an old animal tamer's stunt, but it could be used for repelling boarders as Ted proved when he stabbed the chair-legs through the curtain.

Any hapless gunner would have found his hands full keeping himself from going out the open window; but there wasn't any gunner. A warm, drizzly breeze swept Ted's face as he lurched half through the window, chair first.

Ted hauled back and looked along the outside ledge. It was very dark at the corner, enough to have hidden anyone who might be rounding it. Only a floor below was a roof to which an intruder could have dropped and with a chimney and some ventilators forming dim but huddled objects in the gloom, Ted realized it would be impossible to pick out a human figure.

And from the way the wind flipped the drapes as Ted drew back, he began to think the whole thing might have been imagination. The wind blew draftily. Ted heard a door slam behind him and turned quickly.

The blonde, who had started Ted after an imaginary intruder, was gone. So neat and prompt was her departure that Ted was sure she'd completely hoaxed him.

But it was the wind, not the girl who had slammed the door, for when Ted Trent reached the corridor, he heard the distant clang of a closing elevator.

CHAPTER II

IF Ted Trent had wanted to take up an adventurous trail, he should have followed Cecil Grenshaw, who was unquestionably the focal factor in the whole situation.

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How far Ted could have carried such a trail was another question. Others were already having trouble with it.

Two muffled men, dressed in turned-up raincoats and dark hats, were hard on Grenshaw's heels as soon as he left the Hotel Argonne. All the while that things were happening up in room 408, Grenshaw and those unwanted hangers-on were skirting the adjacent blocks.

Grenshaw was looking for a cab, but on a night like this, they were almost as scarce as hotel rooms.

A cab would have been a boon to Grenshaw, for with quick work and a clean take-off, he could have shaken his trailers.

Bundling his coat, the hunted man tightened his grip on a walking stick and took to an alleyway. With surprising agility, he made a sharp turn to the left and ducked into the shelter of some old-fashioned steps where he waited with lifted cane.

The two men arrived on the quick, took a look toward the nearby corner and headed that direction. Out from the steps, Grenshaw reversed his course through the alley and reached the original street. By then his pursuers were coming back along their street, searching without success. After a brief conference held in low, guttural tones, they took a route leading to a building in back of the Hotel Argonne.

There, a figure dropped suddenly to meet them. He was a man in a dark jersey, a cap pulled down over his eyes; a type of character who many years ago was the reason why people never went to the Bowery. But from his talk, it was plain that far from being a throw-back to the bad old days, this individual's appearance was purely coincidental.

His garb, in a sense, had more of the Alpine touch, considering that he had just completed a descent from a hotel ledge to a roof and thence downward by windows. His accent, too, was European, though its exact nationality was smothered.

"Grenshaw is gone," the man reported. "He has given the room to a friend named Trent."

"You searched the room?"

"I did not have to. A girl was there – she did not name herself and I watched her look all."

The other men took it that she hadn't found anything. They muttered some unkind words about Grenshaw, then separated and went their way, after the man in the jersey slipped a revolver to one of his less suspicious-looking friends.

That gun muzzle at the window curtain hadn't been a product of Ted Trent's imagination!

A few blocks away, Cecil Grenshaw had luckily found a cab. Riding to another part of town, he alighted in front of a small restaurant that included a dozen tables, a bar, and a large back room where Grenshaw didn't go.

This place, called The Cave, was a front for a horse parlor which occupied the back room. Nodding to the bartender, he casually ordered a drink and glanced around as though he knew the place quite well.

There were very few customers, so few that the one waiter took time out to make a phone call from a booth at the rear. After the booth was vacated, Grenshaw went there and pondered a few moments; then he let his florid face relax into a smile.

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Grenshaw's own experience with Ted; the chance meeting with a former acquaintance who had looked him up, gave him the idea that he could do the same.

Dialing the number of the exclusive Cobalt Club, Grenshaw asked for a member named Lamont Cranston and soon had him on the phone.

"Hello, Mr. Cranston," drawled Grenshaw. "I don't suppose you'd remember Cecil Grenshaw, from Calcutta... What's that? You recognize my voice? Well, well..."

Going off into his most affable chuckle, Grenshaw finally rallied and became serious.

"I'm finding a bit of trouble, you know," Grenshaw confided. "A silly notion, perhaps, but I fancy I'm being followed... What's that? No, no... I've gotten all over those jitters I had at the time of the Calcutta riots..."

"Been through worse things since... Burma... Singapore... What's that?" In the peculiar light of the phone booth, Grenshaw's face became a distinct purple. Then, forced through his teeth, came that indulgent chuckle of his: "Did you say Bildapore? No, I've been staying quite away from those troublesome native states..."

"Yes, quite a mess, the death of the ex-rajah... If he could be called the rajah at all... No, I was down in Ceylon when it happened... Gem-trading?" Again that chuckle, but less forced. "Impossible in these times, old chap..."

With that dismissal, Grenshaw again lowered his voice in confidential style, reverting to his original theme:

"About this bit of trouble... I'm in a little pub called The Cave... Hate to leave here alone, you know" – Grenshaw gave a tap with his heavy-headed walking stick – "even though I'm carrying my Penang Lawyer... The police? Well, yes, I might inform them, only –"

Halting with a trace of reticence over what might merely be a false alarm, Grenshaw immediately registered pleasure. His old acquaintance Cranston was announcing in calm style, that he would drop by at The Cave within the next quarter hour. Ebullient with thanks, Grenshaw finished the call and hung up.

Scarcely out of the phone booth, Grenshaw became a changed man. Swelling with fresh bombast, he gazed contemptuously at the few seedy customers, rapped the bar with his big-headed cane, and called for another double brandy. Immediately after swallowing the drink, Grenshaw's expression became shrewd, and he revealed his full mood with an artful glance toward the phone booth.

Grenshaw was wondering now why he had told so much to Cranston; or rather, why he had let Cranston put those leading questions to which answers would be expected in return for coming favors.

Grenshaw was cunning at playing a game two ways. He'd demonstrated it with Ted Trent; he could do the same with Lamont Cranston, more conservatively of course. Things looked safe here at The Cave, with no followers in sight. Since he expected Cranston shortly, why couldn't he use this obliging friend as a sort of rear guard against possible trouble?

Such was the question obviously in Grenshaw's mind when he scrawled something on a slip of paper, summoned the sad looking waiter and gave him the message along with a dollar bill.

"If somebody asks for Mr. Grenshaw, give him this," ordered Grenshaw. "Only first make sure his name is Mr. Cranston. Keep an eye for him."

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The waiter nodded as he watched Grenshaw stride pompously from the little cafe. He kept watching in case the man came hurrying back. But Grenshaw evidently found the drizzle to his liking, for he didn't return and when a few minutes had passed, the waiter sidled into the phone booth, as he had when Grenshaw first arrived.

From his pocket the waiter drew two slips of paper; one bore the phone number that he had called before; he was using the slip for reference again. By the time a gruff voice answered, the waiter had Grenshaw's slip open and ready.

"It's Johnny," the waiter informed, "Over at The Cave. The guy just went out."

"Yeah?" The gruff voice became sharp. "Where?"

"To the Black Star Pier," informed Johnny, reading from Grenshaw's slip. "Entrance D."

"He told you?"

"Gave me a note for a friend who's coming here –"

"How soon?"

"In about ten minutes."

A laugh as confident as it was ugly, was the only response to Johnny's words. It terminated the conversation for there was a sharp click of the other receiver. Johnny's sad eyes went blank; then turned troubled. He resolved to say nothing further, as his tight lips indicated.

Johnny the waiter hadn't yet seen the man who was going to make him talk.

At ten minutes to the dot, a tall stranger sauntered into The Cave and glanced casually about. Johnny guessed that this was Mr. Cranston and immediately busied himself at clearing off a corner table, hoping the arrival would sit down elsewhere or patronize the bar.

It happened that Grenshaw's absence was something demanding immediate explanation where Cranston was concerned. Though placid in their gaze, Cranston's eyes were the sort that looked for clues automatically and Johnny's turn-away was therefore comparable to the hiding tactics of an ostrich.

Before the waiter could sidle toward the kitchen, a hand tapped his shoulder; turning, Johnny was face to face with the impassive features of Cranston.

Those masklike features accentuated the steady eyes that covered the waiter with a hypnotic punch. As calm as Cranston's face was the even tone that came from his straight lips:

"You have a message for me –"

Gulping, Johnny fished for it, found the wrong pocket, and made a quick shift to give Cranston Grenshaw's paper. Unfolding the sheet with one hand, lifting it to eye level, Cranston read it without apparently taking his eyes from Johnny. Then:

"The other paper."

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Johnny gave. He'd betrayed himself by that fumble. An odd burn came to Cranston's eyes as he read the phone number. He spoke again, his words accusing, even though they showed no change of tone.

"You called this number –"

"Yeah." Johnny gave a nervous nod. "They said the guy owed money, that was all. He'd been here and I was to pass the word if he showed again. They didn't say nothing more –"

Wrenching his eyes from the terrifying gaze, Johnny spilled dishes with his nervous hands. Trying to gather his wits as he fumbled with the tableware, the waiter protested hoarsely:

"I wouldn't have told them where Grenshaw was going if I'd figured it meant trouble for him. I said he'd left a message, only I didn't say who for. The guy at the other end hung up on me and I didn't like the way he did it. I won't say no more, not to nobody –"

The few patrons in the place were staring at Johnny, wondering why the waiter was talking to himself. Johnny looked up, met their stares with blinking eyes. It wasn't that Johnny was talking to himself; he was simply talking to thin air. Johnny's listener had gone.

Outside The Cave, Lamont Cranston slid his arms into a black cloak; then he pulled a flexible slouch hat on his head and merged with the darkness of the drizzle.

Lamont Cranston had become his other self, The Shadow!

CHAPTER III

IF that old feeling of confidence hadn't so stirred Cecil Grenshaw, he wouldn't have walked head on into disaster.

Picking the Black Star Pier as a place for a meeting that he didn't intend to keep, was Grenshaw's notion of an inspiration. Fundamentally, Grenshaw shouldn't even have heard of the Black Star Pier, let alone know where it was located.

It happened, however, that Grenshaw did know about this pier; that he'd seen it from a cab while riding the express highway. He'd also noted its dilapidated condition, the deserted status of the neighborhood, which wasn't surprising since only a few ships had used this pier in the last half-dozen years.

One ship in particular that wasn't named the Bohemia, a fact that brought another short laugh from Grenshaw's scoffing lips.

It was just another example of this man's liking for the double twist; never just a single arrow for the bow, nor a lone wing for the bird.

Here, in sheltering darkness, Grenshaw could watch the patchy, gray, pier front. If figures appeared there, which was totally unlikely, he'd simply stay where he was and let Cranston walk into trouble.

Not too much trouble, of course, because Grenshaw wasn't entirely the cad. He'd just love to strike about with the big head of his cane, provided the opposition wasn't too formidable. Memories of places like Rangoon, Macao and Madras were sweeping Grenshaw's mind as he weighed the big stick that he'd bought in Penang where it was termed a 'lawyer' because it was used for settling all arguments.

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Yes, Grenshaw had been in tougher spots than any New York could furnish – or so he thought.

Ten minutes more and Grenshaw would drift away from this forlorn pier, letting Cranston arrive to survey so vacant a scene that he'd think he had been hoaxed. That would be all the better, because it would cover up Grenshaw's brief indiscretion in mentioning certain facts over the telephone.

Fear could loose men's tongues, and Grenshaw, egotist though he was, reluctantly admitted that he was no exception. Fear, he assured himself, was the twin of caution, and with that bit of philosophy, Grenshaw stepped back deeper into the sheltering doorway he had chosen as a temporary observation post.

There, Grenshaw's terrors were realized beyond his imagination.

An arm crooked savagely around his neck; hands snatched the Penang lawyer from his grip. He was pulled roughly through a creaking door and planted in a chair so hard that it cracked under him. The door slammed sharply, a rusted bolt grated, and Grenshaw was isolated in an office of the old pier, under the control of three captors who meant business.

They were the same three who had lost Grenshaw's trail before he headed for The Cave!

From behind the flashlight that locked Grenshaw's face and showed every detail that registered there, there came a raspy voice that summarized the prisoner's plight.

"You walked into it, Grenshaw," the voice said. "You couldn't have picked a better spot. The boss gets two calls and we check in right after the second. We were nearer to this pier than you were. Get it?"

Grenshaw got it and nodded as far as the choking arm would allow him.

"They aren't in your hotel room," the voice continued. "So either you've got them or you gave them to somebody. Which?"

The arm relaxed so that Grenshaw could answer. His words came in gulps:

"Gave – what?"

A snarl accompanied the arm that tightened cruelly at Grenshaw's efforts to stall. Then other hands were digging into Grenshaw's pockets, probing the lining of his coat, tapping the heels of his shoes to see if they were solid. One hand came into the light, carrying Grenshaw's thick, old-fashioned watch. A smash and the time-piece broke apart, scattering its works. Grenshaw's purple face paled. These fellows knew what they were after.

"Big enough to hold the jewels," a voice sneered, referring to the watch case. "Only they aren't in it. Who has them, Grenshaw?"

"Has – what?"

This time the stall didn't even bring a laugh. A finger moved forward in the light, reached Grenshaw's forehead and began to flick away the beads of sweat that were swelling on Grenshaw's brow.

"Kind of like tear-drops, Grenshaw," scoffed the voice. "That's what we're looking for: tear-drops, twelve of them. That's all. We're not hurting anybody, provided that we get them."

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So pointed was the statement that Grenshaw took it at face value. He glanced shrewdly at his captors. If they'd known his proclivity for playing a game within a game, these men might have doubted Grenshaw's spontaneous response. Instead, they took him at his word.

"Naseby has them," Grenshaw gulped. "Niles Naseby has the teardrops. If you don't know who Naseby is —"

"We know, all right," came the sharp interruption, "and if you didn't mean it, you wouldn't have mentioned Naseby. Or would you?"

Before Grenshaw could reply, he was interrupted. At a gesture of one man's hand, another swung Grenshaw's own cane against the base of the prisoner's skull. The power of the Penang Lawyer demonstrated itself with that impact. Prosecutor, judge, jury, all in one, it decreed death and executed the sentence simultaneously.

Forward, backward, then Grenshaw's head was flopping from side to side as the three men gathered their lifeless burden and lugged it out through another door, leading to the pier itself.

Nor did they stop when they reached the pier end.

Three men of murder shoved off in a clumsy row-boat that was waiting there, taking their victim with them. There were muffled, clanky sounds of lead and iron weights, as they were hitched to Grenshaw's body. Then, from somewhere past the pier end came a splash that was barely louder than that of an oar.

Silence after that. The boat was drifting, not down stream but up, for the tide was coming in from the bay. Out in the drizzly blackness, the boat and its load of killers was blotted as effectively as the corpse that they had consigned to the Hudson.

It was fortunate for that ghoulish crew that the night was pitch-black and that the tide was carrying them. Grenshaw's time limit had passed, the difference that he had allotted for Cranston's arrival at the pier. If Grenshaw had either stalled longer or doubted the word of the men who claimed they were seeking twelve mysterious tear-drops, but without intent to kill!

Neither by sight nor sound could a cloaked arrival called The Shadow gain an immediate clue to those departing slayers, but his technique at picking up leads was rapid. Smudges on a grimy pane indicated that someone had used the office door as a peephole; a flashlight, which The Shadow pointed through the glass, produced a glitter from the scattered works of Grenshaw's smashed watch.

The door on the far side, unbolted, gave the route by which Grenshaw's assassins had left the office. By simply breaking the grimy pane of the near door, The Shadow could have drawn the bolt and found a clear course through; but that wasn't necessary. Gliding away, the cloaked figure made a rapid detour around the bulky building and out on the pier itself.

It was The Shadow's foresight that caused him to leave certain evidence as it was, on the chance that such evidence would be proper for the police to investigate. His foresight was proved when The Shadow reached the pier end. There, the slap-slap from the incoming tide was broken only by a rattly scrape, so slight that it would have escaped ears less tuned to trifling sounds.

Licking downward, The Shadow's flashlight found the offending object that was clattering against the pilings. It was the very object that The Shadow expected to see and from his unseen lips came a solemn, whispered laugh; mirthless in its regret for a man whose death was his own fault, yet whose life The Shadow had hoped to save: Cecil Grenshaw.

The thing that was bobbing in the water was a bulbous-headed cane, the type termed a Penang Lawyer.

CHAPTER IV

TED TRENT signed his name to the fancy guest card that bore the title "Casino Monaco" and decided it would do. The card was about the only thing that Ted had found that might prove a lead to Cecil Grenshaw, the man who hadn't returned.

Not that Ted expected Grenshaw to return – as yet.

It was only about twenty-four hours since Grenshaw had invited Ted to take over his room and the man from Sydney and other points East had specified that he might not be back for a while. But considering how Grenshaw's room had been ransacked and adding to that the presence – and departure – of the very mysterious blonde, Ted felt definitely that he ought to have some sort of a report for his benefactor.

Besides, Ted hadn't forgotten the waving curtain and the distinct impression of a gun muzzle sliding behind it. If enemies were gunning for Grenshaw, it might be Ted's general business to find out who they were.

So the blank card, all numbered but lacking a name, seemed like a good bet for Ted's initial quest. If it didn't work out, he could use the tickets to the Masked Ball. Ted still had the envelope that the girl had given him and on it was a printed advertisement of the Kit-Kat Costume Shop, offering suitable outfits for the Bal Masque, with the added information that the shop stayed open until eight o'clock.

And besides, there was that letter that Ted had mailed. He remembered the name of the addressee: Niles Naseby, Valdemar Apartments. If it became too tough, pinch-hitting for Grenshaw, Ted could take up the matter with Mr. Naseby.

At the present, which was six o'clock, a trip to the Casino Monaco was in order.

Finding the Casino Monaco proved easy. The place was simply another joint along Night Club Row, but apparently something of a newcomer. From the moment that he entered its rococo preserves, Ted sensed that the place was aptly named. It reminded him of a place he'd visited while in the merchant marine: the casino at Monte Carlo.

Not that the Casino Monaco looked like a gambling hall, but neither had the preserves at Monte Carlo, until you entered the gaming room. They looked like a "front" and so did this, with a peculiar and almost nostalgic similarity.

The people helped the analogy, not just in the polite way that they bowed around the bar, but by their foreign appearance. The waiters were really too polite, giving that hush-hush effect of something upstairs that everyone was supposed to know about and visit before departure.

Here, however, people didn't chat about their wins and losses, whereas at Monte Carlo, they did.

There was a little talk, though, about a certain gentleman known as Count Zurich. At intervals, Ted caught the first name 'Bela' and took it to be the Count's. Not that Ted was any master at the art of deduction; he was simply checking the signature on his guest card, a very imposing scrawl with elaborately exaggerated letters that under repeated study and the aid of a few brandies, writhed themselves into something that could be spelled 'Bela Zurich'.

Meeting Count Bela Zurich was the next step. How to manage it was the problem.

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Ted's guest card had stood the test so far, but it might not do to strain it. If you rendered yourself too conspicuous about the gaudy Casino Monaco, with its gilt walls and lavish dining rooms, you might get bounced without benefit of meeting the proprietor.

Count Zurich was probably on the second floor, somewhere past the doorway that barred the top of the imposing marble stairs that Ted kept watching until he began to fear that he might be attracting notice by that very process.

Ted went to a table and ordered dinner, forgetting the stairway except at those occasional intervals when somebody went up or down.

Ted would have profited by looking elsewhere.

Straight across from Ted's table was a man with a calm, steady face that scarcely flickered a change of expression. He happened to be an acquaintance of Greshaw, but one who knew far more than Ted, regarding what might have happened to their mutual friend.

The man at the other table was Lamont Cranston.

Somehow, Cranston had a way of not being noticed when he so chose. This was one of those times; for in gazing at Cranston, Ted practically looked right through him.

Of course, Ted had other matters on his mind. But when they dispelled, it wasn't Cranston who scattered them.

It happened when the door opened at the head of the stairs and a suave man, powerful for all his sleek appearance, came bowing into sight in a fashion which caused Ted to identify him immediately as Count Zurich. Then, before Ted had an opportunity to really size the sophisticated proprietor, Zurich was put in the background.

The lady in red took over.

Specifically, the color was a rich maroon, with the deep tint of a fine wine. Her dress was one of those remarkable creations that ranked with a court costume. It curved inward to give the mere suggestion of a waspish waist; then, spreading most remarkably, the skirt formed a trailing wealth of velvet that eddied like a mild ocean current, as its occupant came down the stairs, with the lavish hem trailing behind her.

Ted had only one criticism; the gown should have been spotted, black and yellow. If it had, this creature would have been the perfect leopard lady. Her hair, dark as jet, gave the proper contrast to a complexion which matched the delicate tint of old ivory and such a combination was beautifully in keeping with the lithe figure that actually stalked its course down the marble stairs.

If gentlemen preferred blondes, Ted was suddenly convinced that he was no gentleman.

Anything could happen at the Casino Monaco – and did.

Opposite Ted's table, the lady in red paused; her dark eyes lighted as though actuated by the lips that were pressed apart by perfect teeth that seemed to smile all on their own. Then, addressing the young man who thought the merchant marine had been going to take him to adventure instead of bringing him back to it, this ravishing number wig-wagged a cigarette with its accompanying holder and inquired:

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"A light, m'sieu?"

Ted's hands came from his pockets full of match packs. By the time he had the necessary light, the exotic brunette was seated across from him, looking over the flame with those same sparkling eyes, and asking, from a drift of cigarette smoke:

"We have met before – have we not?"

"Why, I" – Ted caught himself. You couldn't say 'suppose so' to a realized dream like this. "Why, yes – of course. I remember you – but not the place."

"I am complimented." The brunette gave a trifling nod. "Then you remember my name. Of course, everyone does, because it is unusual." Here, her bare shoulders furnished a depreciating shrug. "In this country, a name like Mata Safi is odd."

She was leaning back now, letting the cigarette smoke curl tantalizingly toward Ted. Then, in that same soft contralto:

"Where we have met does not matter. I seem to remember a friend of ours, however. Was it" – the eyes became reflective with the pause – "could it have been Niles Naseby?"

The name didn't register with Ted. If it had, the spotless leopard lady would have spotted it. She had that way of looking for answers when she put questions, though Ted hadn't learned the fact – not yet.

Quite unnoticed, as he preferred to be, a gentleman named Cranston was taking in all phases of this scene, since the sound of voices reached him plainly. He almost anticipated the next words that came.

"No, we couldn't have met here in New York." Again, Mata Safi supplied a delightful shrug that reduced Manhattan to absolute unimportance. "You have traveled" – she rolled the 'l' instead of the 'r' – "as I can very easily observe. Perhaps in India – or Australia?"

Marvelous technique, that pause between India and Australia. Mata Safi had covered a few thousand miles in the space of a single second and within that interval learned what she wanted. Ted's face, remaining blank on 'India', showed interest with the mention of 'Australia' which was quite enough. All Mata Safi had to do was press home the name that she connected with both, to make sure that Ted only linked it with the latter.

"Our mutual friend!" exclaimed Mata Safi. "I remember now! Cecil Grenshaw!" Then, her eyes displaying a coquettish twinkle, she added: "But why have you not brought him along this evening? Is it that he is not in town?"

"It is not," returned Ted, "or he is not, if that explains it better. Were you expecting Gren – I mean Cecil?"

"I do not know." Again the shoulders shrugged. "He was always the wicked disappointer. It was tonight that we were to go to the masquerade –"

"And that's why I'm here," put in Ted, fishing in his pockets for the envelope that held the tickets. "Cecil couldn't make it, so I came along instead."

Mata's eyes became dubious.

"But you are not in costume."

"Neither are you," parried Ted, as he found the envelope.

"All but except the mask," returned Mata, making a hand-sweep toward her shimmery gown, and finishing by drawing her hands across her eyes. "With this" – she spread the skirt of the red gown – "I can be Queen Isabella."

"Which makes me King Ferdinand," laughed Ted, "if I can get to the costume shop before it closes." He passed the envelope to Mata, so she could read the advertisement printed there. "Of course you must have dinner first –"

"I have already dined," interposed Mata. "With my friend the Count, upstairs in the private dining room. Ah, Conte Zurich" – she gave another meaning shrug – "he is a bore, so frightful!"

Finishing her cigarette, or all she wanted of it, Mata Safi tamped the rest daintily in an ash-tray as she looked around and inquired:

"And what is keeping us here?"

Nothing was keeping them at the Casino Monaco, not even Ted's fleeting recollection of another girl who had plunged him into this alluring adventure, the blonde of undeclared identity who had been at the Hotel Argonne.

So Ted was on his way from the Casino Monaco, with Mata Safi sweeping along beside him, her shoulders buried in a fur evening wrap that a waiter hurriedly produced the moment that she waved her finger.

Only Lamont Cranston could have stopped the departure, but he didn't. This double link to Grenshaw's past would wait until later. Finding this couple at the Village Masquerade would be quite simple at the proper time.

Cranston had another call before then.

CHAPTER V

NILES NASEBY lived in the penthouse at the Valdemar Apartments and prided himself on the fact that he could be reached only by search warrant or helicopter.

Great, therefore, was the surprise of Naseby when he looked up from his overstuffed chair to see a calm-faced gentleman facing him from the other side of the living room.

Naseby was as overstuffed as his chair. Shoving himself to his feet he lunged his unwieldy bulk toward the unwelcome visitor, bellowing an angry challenge. Naseby stopped when the intruder brought a gun in sight from behind the back of an undersized secretary named Homer and let the muzzle yawn in Naseby's own face.

Sliding his weak chin down into his collar, Naseby looked upward under his dominating brow and inquired rather weakly:

"Who are you?"

"Lamont Cranston is the name," announced the visitor. "Don't blame your secretary because I'm here. I met him down in the lobby and persuaded him to bring me up."

TEAR-DROPS OF BUDDHA

Cranston's gesture with the gun defined the persuader that had influenced Homer. Naseby decided not to blame the secretary. Still uneasy, Naseby inquired:

"What do you want?"

"Perhaps we shouldn't discuss matters with Homer here," returned Cranston. "He may not know about the tear-drops."

"So that's it!" Naseby blurted. "Then Homer told you –"

"Only Homer didn't tell me," supplied Cranston as Naseby halted. "Thanks for doing so yourself, Naseby."

Big pudgy fists writhed as though they would have liked to wrap themselves around Cranston's neck. That being quite impossible, Naseby subsided.

"The tear-drops," said Naseby, uneasily. "What should I know about tear-drops?"

"I am asking you," reminded Cranston. "To narrow the subject, let me state that I refer to the Twelve Tear-drops of Buddha, formerly owned by the former Rajah of Bildapore."

Naseby's hope of bluffing on the question faded when he looked at Homer, who was obviously qualified to give some details on the subject that interested Cranston. Still, Naseby was just nasty enough to hope that he could blame his plight on someone else.

"So Welk told you," Naseby sneered. "I should have known I couldn't trust the fellow. Like all artists, Sheridan Welk is too conceited to know how dumb he is."

"We're piecing this nicely, Naseby," observed Cranston, in his casual tone. "Since Welk was in the deal, it obviously concerns 'Bombay Moon' which is another interesting point."

The writhe of Naseby's hands indicated that more than ever he would like to lay them around Cranston's neck.

"A smart producer doesn't lose his shirt on a single flop like Bombay Moon," continued Cranston. "Certainly not a big producer like yourself" – he paused, gave an appraising eye to Naseby's towering bulk – "or should I say a very big producer?"

It was just the right way to bait Naseby, as the glowering man proved.

"All right, I lost somebody else's shirt," stormed Naseby. "So what does that prove?"

"It proves that sending a show to Australia is the best way to lose some more money," returned Cranston, "especially in these times."

"We wanted the show to play the army camps," argued Naseby. "There was a call for talent in Burma –"

"But not a whole musical show," interposed Cranston, "with enough stage sets for a dozen scenes. The company couldn't stand the trip, as they proved by the time they reached Australia."

"So we brought the show back," retorted Naseby, "and took the loss ourselves. We were being patriotic, all of us."

TEAR-DROPS OF BUDDHA

"Including Sheridan Welk?"

"Leave Welk out of this. All he did was design the stage sets. He knows nothing about –"

"Nothing about Cecil Grenshaw?"

Cranston's interruption was as timely as the others but by now, Naseby was taking things more coolly. Folding his arms the big man stood erect, lifted his abbreviated chin defiantly and demanded:

"What do you know about Grenshaw?"

Just to deflate Naseby, Cranston told him.

"Grenshaw operated from Calcutta," reviewed Cranston. "He handled various transactions – let us say of a highly speculative sort – with the rulers of certain native states, including Bildapore."

Naseby's lip twisted.

"Of course Grenshaw did very little business in Bildapore," resumed Cranston, "which was why he was chosen for big business when it came along. You probably remember when Thangra, the self-styled Rajah of Bildapore, was denounced as an imposter."

"Everybody remembers it," argued Naseby, "but they didn't believe it at the time."

"Thangra must have believed it," said Cranston. "because the real rajah, Abdullah, eventually won his throne."

"Only because Thangra committed suicide –"

"Which was the only way out," completed Cranston. "But there is still the question of what happened to the Twelve Tear-drops of Buddha, the finest gems in all India."

"They never belonged to the Rajah of Bildapore," insisted Naseby. "You can't produce a scrap of evidence to prove it."

"Twelve Tear-drops." The gun muzzle was moving closer, Cranston with it. "Four rubies, four emeralds, and four diamonds – any single gem in the lot worth the ransom of a legitimate ruler, which leaves out Thangra."

"There's nothing to prove –"

"Nothing to prove the existence of those tear-drops? Nothing except the gems themselves. I want them, Naseby."

The gun muzzle moved mere inches from Naseby's chest. The big man cowered. Naseby's final argument was hoarse with fear.

"You'd murder me to get those gems, wouldn't you?"

"Somebody murdered Grenshaw to get them," was Cranston's calm reply. "I would prefer to take them out of circulation and place them where they rightfully belong – for your protection, Naseby."

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That point went home. Mention of murder brought a horrified, goggle-eyed stare from Naseby. However, Cranston was neither deceived nor convinced by the expression. Among other things, Naseby fancied himself an actor and would be apt to register an artificial mood. At least he was trying to hide certain traces of guilt, but how deep they went was another question.

Perhaps Naseby could only blame himself for oversight where Grenshaw's affairs were concerned. Yet with a stake like Buddha's Twelve Tear-drops, this man of greed could readily have fancied himself a master of murder.

Possibly Naseby sensed that Cranston thought just that. Under the persuasion of the gun muzzle, the bulky man showed symptoms like those of Johnny the waiter. Right or wrong, Naseby was anxious to alibi himself with this cool, calm-mannered gentleman who acted like a self-appointed instrument of vengeance working in behalf of Grenshaw. Then, with a nervous wrench, Naseby halted the hand that he was moving toward his inside pocket.

"Grenshaw isn't dead," argued Naseby, "or if he is, maybe you're the man to blame. Of course that's your business" – Naseby was hasty to curb any show of animosity – "and where business is concerned, I always mind my own and let others do the same."

Cranston's gun point nudged toward Naseby's pocket. With a grimace at his own stupidity, Naseby shoved his hand into the pocket, produced the envelope and handed it to Cranston. With one deft hand, the tall visitor drew out the contents, which proved to be a coat check from the cloak room of the Hotel Argonne.

Cranston gave the slightest of nods.

"From Grenshaw, of course."

"I suppose so," gruffed Naseby. "Grenshaw was staying at the Argonne. Maybe it has something to do with those gems you mentioned. Never having heard of Buddha's Tear-drops before tonight, I naturally wouldn't know."

Cranston's appraising eye surveyed the penthouse windows. Their very structure proved that this living room was a citadel. Small panes, divided by heavy metal frames, were definitely bullet proof, judging from the color and thickness of their glass. The clamps that held those casements shut, were as strong as the bars on prison cells.

The question of Naseby's protection was thereby settled. He needed none where Cranston was concerned; at least none beyond the lowering of Cranston's gun, in case it should go off accidentally. Cranston obligingly put the automatic in one pocket, the coat check in the other.

Hands still in his pockets, Cranston strolled to the door and paused there.

"A trifle theatrical, all this," conceded Cranston, calmly, "but you seem to prefer the dramatic. Suppose we drop the curtain until the next act, when I return, bringing the package that Grenshaw expected you to collect.

"It wouldn't do for you to go to the Argonne yourself. Like Grenshaw, you bear the mark of a hunted man. Those windows for instance" – with one hand, Cranston gestured, but that hand came from the pocket with the coat check – "could be your insurance against enemies. Or they might be just part of the false front that goes with your personality."

At Cranston's gesture, Naseby had turned to fake a horrified look in the direction of the windows. Now, he was swinging around again to challenge his visitor's concluding statement. This time, Naseby's glare was completely wasted.

Only the closed door faced Naseby. Lamont Cranston had departed on the next stage of his self-appointed mission.

CHAPTER VI

THE anger that swept Niles Naseby stirred him to immediate action. Pouncing across the room, the big man reached a corner table, snatched open the drawer, scattered papers right and left, and brought out a revolver.

Brandishing the gun, Naseby started for the door, brushing Homer aside. Yanking the door open, he halted in a little ante room. In front of him was the closed door of the elevator shaft; from it came the rumble of a descending car.

Naseby now realized that Cranston had listened all the while he was here; that hearing no sound of the elevator, the calm visitor had known it awaited him. Savagely, Naseby slammed the penthouse door, charged back across the living room and reached the telephone.

There would be a way to intercept Cranston yet! The night watchman was on the switchboard and Naseby intended to have him flag the passenger from the automatic elevator.

A few joggles of the phone hook and the watchman's voice responded.

"Listen, Dorgan," snarled Naseby. "There's a man named Cranston coming down the elevator. You know what he looks like, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Dorgan. "I saw him go upstairs with Homer."

"All right," continued Naseby. "Now whatever you do, don't let him leave here. Understand? Cranston has a gun, so it may be difficult to stop him, but –"

Odd clicks interrupted Naseby. Then:

"It's all right, Naseby." The calm tone was Cranston's. "Dorgan has a gun, too, so you can depend on both of us."

"Why, you –"

The rest of Naseby's utterances were lost in furious incoherence, which Cranston calmly interpreted for Dorgan's benefit.

"Nice of you, Naseby," Cranston continued, "to call the switchboard and tell Dorgan to look out for me. I'm glad I arrived in time to take over for him. But really, Naseby, you shouldn't be so disturbed on my account."

Naseby was doing everything to the telephone except bite it. Cranston's tone, though still even, became a trifle louder so that Dorgan, standing by the switchboard, wouldn't hear the disturbances across the wire.

"I'll stay right here," added Cranston, "watching the switchboard while Dorgan goes around the block and hunts those enemies of yours – if any. It's really his job you know, since he's the watchman here. Meanwhile

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keep your door and windows locked and you won't have any trouble. I'll call my friend the police commissioner and have him send over some detectives to work with Dorgan."

Naseby heard most of it, even though Cranston intended the words for Dorgan. The finish was the yank of Naseby's line from the downstairs switchboard. Flinging the telephone aside, Naseby turned vehemently to Homer:

"He's blocked us! He's too smart, this Cranston. He talked Dorgan into looking for somebody lurking around the neighborhood and the fool fell for it!"

The worried expression that came over Homer's weak face produced a snort from Naseby.

"You're as bad a fool as Dorgan, Homer. You look as though you suspected trouble yourself" – Naseby's eyes narrowed – "or do you?"

"No, no," replied Homer, hastily. "I'm sorry, sir. If I hadn't gone out, well, Cranston wouldn't have met up with me –"

"Just why did you go out, Homer?"

"Only to get some cigarettes. That was all. But if Cranston sent Dorgan around the block, who's on the switchboard now?"

"Cranston says he is." Angrily, Naseby clicked the phone hook with no response. "But it's obvious he isn't. He's on his way to the Hotel Argonne and he'll be there before Dorgan gets back to the switchboard."

"Perhaps if I went downstairs, sir –"

Homer was on the way to the door as he spoke, only to be recalled by Naseby's snarl.

"And walk into another trap?" demanded Naseby. "How do we know Cranston hasn't posted someone else on the switchboard – or even cut the wires? A man would do anything with those gems at stake –"

Pausing, Naseby noted an unusual glint in Homer's eye. It was easy to understand.

"I didn't tell you about Grenshaw's letter," observed Naseby. "Did I, Homer?"

A head-shake from Homer.

"You've been opening too much of my mail lately," continued Naseby, his voice becoming smooth. "That's why I didn't let you see it. Tell me, Homer, how much do you know about the Twelve Tear-drops of Buddha?"

"Not very much, sir. Only –"

"Only what, Homer?"

Naseby's handling of his revolver was as smooth as his tone. Perhaps he'd learned some of that technique by watching Cranston, for his manner was deft as he pressed the gun toward Homer's chest, stopping it a few inches short.

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"Maybe you've been talking out of turn. Perhaps you met Cranston purposely and helped him frame his game _"

What interrupted Naseby wasn't anything from Homer, for the frail secretary was too disturbed to speak. What Naseby heard was a clatter from the window; with it, he felt a sweep of incoming air. Turning, he found himself covered by a dark-faced man who was swinging across the sill.

In contrast to Cranston's easy calm, this intruder had a certain dash. His gray hat was rakish, tilted at a slant, so that he gave Naseby a one-eyed glance. About all that Naseby could tell of the man's face was that it was darkish and mustached.

More important was the man's gun as he came through the window. The gleaming revolver pointed squarely at Naseby. Naseby didn't understand the epithet the man delivered, for it came in a foreign tongue, but it evidently meant that Naseby was to drop his gun, which he did with very ill grace.

The man with the gray hat waved for Homer to pick up Naseby's weapon, which Homer did. Then:

"You have learned about the Tear-drops?" inquired the man, his tone foreign in accent. "Where Naseby has put them?"

"Naseby didn't even get them," blurted Homer. "All Grenshaw sent him was a package check."

"A package check?"

"Yes. From the cloak room at the Argonne."

"Very good. The gems must be in the package."

"I'm afraid they are, boss," admitted Homer. "Only it won't do us much good. A man named Cranston made Naseby give over the check."

Hope was flushing Naseby's puffy face as he darted glances from Homer to the man who answered to the title of "boss." Even in his present stress, Naseby found it easy to piece the details of Homer's treachery. He'd gone out tonight, Homer had, to meet this chief of his; in fact he'd probably steered him upstairs, while Dorgan was busy at the switchboard. Only Homer had then met Cranston, who had taken over pro tem without knowing about the other intruder in the house.

But that Gray Hat wasn't exactly in the house. He'd stationed himself on the roof to await a signal from Homer, a simple signal, the opening of one of those formidable casement windows. Homer's chance to give both the signal and means of entry had been delayed until after Cranston's departure. He'd managed it while Naseby was shouting over the telephone with Cranston at the switchboard.

And the reason that Naseby hoped was this:

However angry Naseby himself had felt toward Homer, the rage of Gray Hat should be far greater. Naseby expected the man to raise his gun with Homer the target, which would force the traitor to hasty self-defense. Then would be Naseby's chance for a break.

Only it didn't happen that way.

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The mustached man's chuckle was suave. He seemed quite pleased by the turn of events. Naseby couldn't understand why until the fellow produced a flashlight and proffered it to Homer in exchange for Naseby's gun.

"Use this, Homer," ordered Gray Hat. "Signal to our friend Rouge, who is across the way. He will then telephone to Noir, who is at the Hotel Argonne."

"You mean waiting for Grenshaw?"

"Waiting for anyone who may be looking for Grenshaw." The reply was suave; the speaker fingered his mustache. "Grenshaw has gone away, you know. But send the signal, Homer. There will still be time."

Homer leaned from the window and coded the necessary blinks which were tallied back by tiny flashes from the street. By then, the suave man had seated himself in Naseby's most comfortable chair, to watch the bulky man from under the tilt of the gray hat.

So idly was Gray Hat toying with his gun, that Naseby felt he could storm some more.

"You'll gain nothing from those Tear-drops," insisted Naseby, boldly. "You won't even be able to sell them. They're worth far more to me than they are to you."

Gray Hat shrugged.

"You think so?"

"I know it," retorted Naseby. "If you're going on what Welk told you, you're taking the word of a worse double-crosser than Homer."

"You may be right about Welk." The man with the gun lifted his face to study Naseby closer, but at the same time, he pressed his mustache with thumb and forefinger, thus hiding much of his face. "Yes, you may be very right. We must call on Welk, Rouge and I."

Naseby was straining forward, hoping to learn his visitor's identity. That thumb and forefinger kept baiting him, drawing him closer. The other hand, which now held Naseby's gun, the intruder having pocketed his own, was idle, almost limp in the way it held the weapon.

Naseby lunged.

Like a snake's head, the gun muzzle reared. The flame that spurted from it had the sharp dart of a poison fang. Naseby took the stab right in the heart and his body slumped to the floor heavily. Rising, Gray Hat pushed the sprawled form aside with his foot and turned to Homer.

The traitor was standing horrified.

"Don't worry, Homer." The murderer's tone had all its former suavity. "Naseby knew too much, like Grenshaw."

"Like Grenshaw?" Homer's horror increased. "Then you mean –"

"Soon they will be dragging the river for Grenshaw's body, and they will find it. But it does not matter now."

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There were clicking sounds from the telephone receiver which was lying off its hook. Dorgan was back at the switchboard.

"Answer it," ordered the murderer. "Say that Cranston has just killed Naseby – with Naseby's own gun."

Picking up the telephone, Homer gulped that very information to Dorgan; then clattered the receiver on the hook. His dilemma at that moment was complete.

"Dorgan is coming up," expressed Homer. "Coming right up. I've got to think of something to tell him. Maybe you can help."

Gray Hat helped, with Naseby's gun.

This time the revolver coughed twice, both stabs punching the center of Homer's back at close range. As the traitor coiled with a sinking groan, the double murderer wiped the gun handle with a handkerchief and tossed the weapon between the two bodies.

Swinging across the sill, the man with the gray hat used his handkerchief to push the casement shut. Then he was gone, leaving the scene in the living room to tell its own false story!

CHAPTER VII

ENTERING the lobby of the Argonne, Lamont Cranston heard the distant wail of an approaching siren and smiled. Coincidences of this sort were common in Manhattan.

There wasn't one chance in a million or more that Niles Naseby would despatch the police to this scene. All Cranston had needed was enough leeway to reach the Argonne first and the Tear-drops of Buddha would be his.

People like Naseby didn't publicize their claim on stolen gems. They usually tried other ways to get back something that someone else had lost.

Over his arm, Cranston was carrying a cloak and hat that he didn't intend to check. Being black, they were inconspicuous against Cranston's evening clothes, those regalia that formed the habit of The Shadow. That arm was turned away when Cranston stopped at the cloak room counter and tapped with a coin that he held together with Grenshaw's package check.

Service was very poor, here at the Argonne cloak room. Nobody answered Cranston's summons and looking for the reason, he saw it.

It was seldom that people checked shoes in a hotel cloak room. When they did, they didn't leave them with their toes pointed upward in a corner under some coats.

Unhitching the hinged counter, Cranston slapped it upward and stepped through, letting it fall behind him. Brushing coats aside, he saw the man who served the check room, sitting with his hands tied behind him. The fellow's face was pale, what little Cranston could see of it. The man was heavily gagged with a muffler.

Pulling the gag free, Cranston flourished the package check in front of the man's eyes. With sirens howling outside and police whistles blowing in the lobby, it was evident that something was amiss at the Hotel Argonne. It would be much better to explain things to this attendant and learn his story, here in the solitude of the cloak room, than to get mixed in the hubbub of the lobby.

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Apparently the bound man couldn't see the check number in the gloom, so Cranston pulled him to his feet. Without waiting to be unbound, the fellow lowered his head and butted forward, letting out a wild howl:

"Help – police – there's a thief here –"

Two brawny cops came charging through where the counter should have been. They too were shouting.

"It's the murderer!"

"That fellow Cranston!"

This was no time for that fellow Cranston to hesitate. How or why the police were on his trail could be discussed later with the proper parties. Right now the cops were thinking that to shoot first and ask questions later would be their best policy. Their only trouble was that they had to spread in order to avoid the bound attendant who came toppling between them.

With one hand, then the other, Cranston swept packages from the shelves at each side of the cloak room. A few of those packages were the size of suitcases and as heavy. The two patrolmen took the miniature avalanche and ducked while Cranston was twirling back among the coats.

Odd how a minor detail could impress a photographic mind in the midst of all that action.

This was the detail:

On the shelf at the left, where packages were neatly arranged in numerical order, there had been a small but noticeable gap corresponding with the number of the check that Cranston had acquired from Naseby!

Somebody had come and gone, within the past few minutes, taking the precious package and leaving the attendant bound and gagged in the process. The interval could not have been long, otherwise the attendant wouldn't have mistaken Cranston for the person who had grabbed him.

Mistaking Cranston for himself would be difficult right now. In that twist into the recesses of the cloak room, he had slid his arms into the black cloak and clamped the slouch hat on his head. Finding The Shadow would be difficult, visually speaking, but if the police began whacking around with canes – of which there were several in the cloak room – or shooting up coats at random, it wouldn't take them long.

What The Shadow wanted was a quick way out and he played a hunch to find one.

Whoever had waylaid the cloak room attendant must have maneuvered it from these depths. How the lurker had gotten in here was the question, particularly on what The Shadow was sure must have been very short notice. Shoving his hands high in the deepest darkness, The Shadow found what he hoped would be there, a small grating, which served as a ventilator.

The thing was clamped from above, that was the trouble, and to shove it loose The Shadow needed help. Fortunately, assistance came in the person of the attendant who was now free of his bonds and was shouting that he knew where the marauder had gone.

As the fellow lunged ahead to blaze the trail for the police, The Shadow hooked the grating and hauled himself up to it. Then, down came The Shadow's feet, squarely on the shoulders of the astonished man who arrived among the coats; using this improvised springboard, The Shadow drove his own shoulders hard upward, knocking the light clamps free. Then, with a spin of his feet, he turned his human springboard into a

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living missile that came reeling out from the coats to block the charging police.

By the time the blundering was over and guns were shooting up through the narrow shaft, The Shadow was out of it and out of the Hotel Argonne too. Dropping into an alley, he merged with the customary blackness that so often shrouded his rapid and mysterious departures.

It was some twenty-odd blocks from the Hotel Argonne to Greenwich Village. The Shadow was forced to make something of a detour in the waiting cab that took him there, because police cars were cluttering the Argonne's neighborhood. However, Shrevvy, The Shadow's practiced driver, was used to such vehicular obstacles and knew how to dodge them. Tonight, however, The Shadow made Shrevvy cut those tactics to a minimum.

There was no time to lose in reaching the next destination, the studio of an artist named Sheridan Welk.

It wouldn't have helped to stop and phone the police. The time lost would be enough for The Shadow to reach there first. Finding Welk's studio was easy, for it was well-known in the village. Nicely stocked with skylights, it reared a full floor above the adjacent buildings, with side windows toward the flat, chimneyed roofs of those older houses.

The entrance to Welk's studio was just two doors from a place called the Kit-Kat Costume Shop. Next to Welk's, on the other side, stood a similar studio, but older, vacant, and not so well equipped with skylights. However, the two formed the only twin job of their particular type, which made them all the easier to pick out.

Lights were visible from Welk's frosted windows when The Shadow literally twisted from the passing cab. It was amazing, the way his cloaked figure could whirl from a car door, skim the curb, and finish its spin into a designated doorway. Playing the side-pockets was what Shrevvy termed it, although the cabby never needed to look back to learn how his chief had made out.

This trip, The Shadow not only went straight through the doorway, but turned his drive into a climb up the steep stairs, two steps at a time. There were three such flights to go, each with a landing, and The Shadow was making such short work of them that it seemed certain that the precious seconds would add up in his favor.

Until The Shadow arrived at the last turn. At that point, he heard a hand give a final rap on the door of Welk's studio, and with it, the clattering of the opening door.

Another instant and a sharp-pitched voice told that Sheridan Welk had admitted the wrong visitors, just too soon!

CHAPTER VIII

THINGS happened as rapidly as The Shadow hoped they wouldn't.

Coming up the last stretch of stairs, The Shadow saw Welk's head and shoulders, a bearded face above an artist's smock, reeling back into the studio under the surge of two opponents, one a man with a gray hat; the other heavy, stoop-shouldered, and shaggy-haired.

A few steps more and The Shadow could have picked the right targets with his ready automatic, but by then, the trio had reeled into the studio. The Shadow saw Welk twist and fling a hand toward the wall; with it, the lights went out as Welk pressed the switch.

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Then, from the blackened studio came two sharp gun-shots; drowning their echoes, The Shadow heard a girl's wild scream. As he reached the top of the stairs, there was the clatter of a window, indicating that someone had escaped. Just to certify that question, The Shadow delivered a taunting laugh that invited Welk's murderers to come back and deal with him instead of some helpless fugitive.

The two men took the challenge.

Piling out into the path of The Shadow's gun, they were asking The Shadow for one of his mathematical demonstrations proving that odds of two to one always worked in strict reverse. But before they even showed their faces, let alone their guns, The Shadow heard footsteps come up to the landing just below him.

Flattening against the stairs, The Shadow let a knife sizzle past him. It buried itself in the top step, just a few inches above his head, and he was rolling over as it burrowed there. The old Kentucky riflemen used to have a trick of lying back against a tree and propping a long gun between their feet; and The Shadow could duplicate it very nicely with an automatic, taking care of course that his feet weren't where the imaginary barrel would have been.

He did the stunt right now, but the man on the landing had recoiled with the knife throw and was loping down the steps again, his cap pulled over his eyes. The Shadow's bullet just skimmed the fellow's sweated shoulder.

The sweater was black, worn by the same man who had looked into Grenshaw's hotel room, the time Ted Trent met the blonde. He was the man who answered to the name of Noir, a point on which The Shadow was not yet informed.

Upstairs, Noir's running mate, the shaggy-haired man called Rouge, was thrusting a big red face from Welk's studio. A quick snarl came from behind him and a man in a gray hat pulled Rouge back into the dark. The door slammed and its bolt clattered home as The Shadow completed his roll and pumped two shots from the head of the stairs.

The Shadow's shots splintered the door but not where it counted. He supplied that detail when he reached the door itself, shooting the bolt away with the woodwork. Wheeling into the room, The Shadow crossed to the dim light of the big side windows and let his automatic rove the next door roof.

If Rouge and Gray Hat had gone that direction, The Shadow could have stopped them before they reached the low roof door in the second house away. But there were no signs of the two fugitives, nor the one who had taken the roof route earlier.

Turning, The Shadow saw from this new angle that the lowest skylight in the studio was dangling. Reaching it, he thrust his head through and saw only the closed panes of the twin studio. Welk's murderers had gone that direction, clamping the next door skylight behind them. With the start that they had gained, tracing them by clues would be better than pursuit.

Besides, there might not be too much time to pick up clues around Welk's studio.

Turning on the lights, The Shadow studied Welk's body. They'd made quick work of the bearded artist, those murderers who had reached their goal so shortly ahead of The Shadow. The third man was obviously the one who had stolen Grenshaw's package from the Argonne cloak room and had evidently left it somewhere on the way here. At least The Shadow had outraced that member of the murder clan.

As for Welk's death, it mattered little more than Naseby's. Or than what had happened to Grenshaw.

TEAR-DROPS OF BUDDHA

Crooks to the core, all three had paid the penalty. It was important now to locate others whose concern was crime before they concentrated on undeserving victims.

Finding nothing more than a pack of cigarettes in the pockets of Welk's smock, The Shadow stepped to a rack that bore a coat and vest. In those he found a wallet containing some money and the usual identification papers. Nothing, though, that linked with Grenshaw or jewels.

There were other clothes hanging in a dressing room, among them a blue dress belonging to the girl who had fled with a scream. On a table rested a hand-bag; going through its contents, The Shadow found only one item of identification. It was a card that bore the name and address:

SUSAN BIGELOW

14 Mayhew Place

So far The Shadow had followed the practice of leaving all clues on each scene of crime.

Here, however, the policy was unwise.

Persons unknown were intent on murdering all persons known who had any inkling as to the presence in America of certain rare gems called the Twelve Tear-drops of Buddha. To attach an innocent party to that business might be the equivalent of signing a death warrant.

Though an old hand at stopping murder, The Shadow couldn't point with pride to his recent box-score. At least he could insure the future by covering the identity of potential victims. The less clues the better concerning Susan Bigelow, the model who had made a rapid escape while murderers were busy killing Welk.

So The Shadow bundled the blue dress and its accompanying garments into an old suitcase that was large enough to accommodate the purse as well. The suitcase bore Welk's initials, but it was unimportant.

Having learned the name of Susan Bigelow, The Shadow wanted to know what she looked like. Stepping out into the studio, he stopped at a canvas that had toppled face down from its easel when the model had run into it during her dash from the platform where she had been posing.

Sirens were howling outdoors as The Shadow lifted the large painting.

Whatever Welk's faults, he rated as an exacting artist and this painting, practically completed, formed as accurate a description of the missing model as the eye could demand. To The Shadow, the girl represented a newcomer in the case, but Ted Trent could have told him differently.

Those vivid blue eyes, peering from a rounded face beneath a wealth of fluffy hair, belonged to the very blonde who had met Ted in the doorway of Grenshaw's much mauled hotel room!

Maybe Ted wouldn't have recognized Susan with her hair down, but that was also outside The Shadow's present range of calculation, since he linked Ted with a brunette named Mata Safi. To The Shadow, the painting was just another clue that might divert the police from their quest of finding missing murderers, so he rolled the canvas and thrust it through the handle of the suitcase.

Then, hearing heavy laboring footsteps on the stairs below, The Shadow crossed the studio and stepped out through the window which had accepted Susan into the balmy night. Reaching the second roof, he found the open door and descended creaky stairs that led past some store rooms until it reached the door of the costume

shop on the ground floor.

There, The Shadow paused with his hand on the knob. Without even turning it, he could hear the sound, though faintly. It came from another door at the rear of the Kit-Kat Shop. Turning his own knob silently, The Shadow entered a grotesque place where devil masks, cat's heads and other weird contrivances could be seen on the high shelves that caught the light from a transom.

Swiftly, smoothly, The Shadow moved between the counters and reached the back door. As he opened it in his previous silent fashion, he heard muffled police whistles, rapping clubs, and other sounds relating to law and order. All were remote, because this door opened on a narrow rear passage, tucked between buildings, that led to a side street well away from the front of Welk's studio building.

Though the passage was pitch-dark, The Shadow could trace someone moving through it, for he caught the click of high heels that reached the street and turned there. Since Susan's own shoes were among the appurtenances of the suitcase, The Shadow could account for her stopover in the Kit-Kat Shop. She had simply supplied the deficiencies of costume that Welk required with his models, and since the Kit-Kat Shop specialized in masquerade costumes, Susan's next stop would logically be the Masked Ball that was being flung in this very neighborhood, according to the small talk that The Shadow, as Cranston, had heard between Ted Trent and Mata Safi.

Crashing that affair appealed to The Shadow too, since everyone else was going to be there.

Reaching the side street, The Shadow paused only to toss the suitcase and the rolled painting into Shrevvy's cab as it cruised past; then, striding boldly to the entrance of a lighted building, he became the last late-comer to buy the only remaining ticket to the Bal Masque.

The orchestra was stopping as The Shadow joined the fringe of masqueraders in the ground-floor dance hall. What stopped it was a whistle that the customers mistook for the start of an old-fashioned Paul Jones, until they saw that a uniformed patrolman was on the blowing end.

"Everybody stays indoors!" the policeman ordered. "Nobody on the street until further notice. There's been a serious crime committed in this neighborhood and we're looking for the culprits. We don't need help from nobody, and that means you!"

The cop gave a general gesture as he turned and it was by sheer coincidence that his hand finished its wave directly toward the last person who had entered: a man dressed in black cloak and slouch hat. Immediately a sweep of laughter stirred the ball room, accompanied by a round of jests.

"So the police don't need anyone – not even The Shadow!"

"Whoever that fellow is, he picked the right outfit for the right night."

"I'll bet the cops are passing up their best bet."

"Say, Mr. Shadow, what crime is this they're talking about?"

"Only The Shadow knows!"

The last statement was nearly right. Only The Shadow did know, with the exception of a masked blonde who had reached the Masked Ball just before him!

CHAPTER IX

If the demure girl in the Quaker costume hadn't raised her mask, Ted Trent wouldn't have recognized her. He'd been looking for her most of the evening, and maybe she knew it, for she was looking his way when she gave the mask a lift. Above the smile that was forced for the occasion, the girl showed those blue eyes that Ted had not forgotten; then he noticed that tendrils of blonde hair were peeking from the Quaker bonnet.

At that moment, the chap with the black cloak and hat cut in and relieved Ted of Mata Safi, his present partner. Equipped with a red mask that matched the maroon gown and wearing a tinsel crown, Mata was an excellent Isabella. As King Ferdinand, Ted hadn't made out so well at the Kit-Kat Shop. His costume was too big and the crown kept sliding down and pushing his mask below his eyes, which was why the Quaker Lady had recognized him.

"I thought you'd be here," the blonde said, sweetly, as Ted cut in and took her from an irate partner. "Only why didn't you phone me? You had two tickets."

"Phone you?" exclaimed Ted. "Why, I don't even know your name!"

"How stupid of me to forget to tell you. It's Susan Bigelow. You'll remember it, won't you?"

"And the phone number?"

"The address is easier to remember. Number Fourteen, Mayhew Place."

"Far from here?"

"Not very." Changing the subject abruptly, the blonde asked: "Why didn't you notice me when I smiled at you earlier?"

"Why – why, I guess I didn't –"

"Don't say you didn't see me! I looked your way at least a dozen times. I hope you haven't forgotten me because of that Lady in Red. Who is she, by the way?"

"Her name is Mata Safi. I'll introduce you to her later."

"How thoughtful of you!"

The blonde's sarcasm was purposely mild; since she was depending upon Ted for an alibi, she didn't want to antagonize him. Then, anxiously, she inquired:

"You haven't told anyone that you met me at Grenshaw's?"

"I'm not supposed to be at Grenshaw's," returned Ted, with a smile. "The room is still his and we don't want any argument with the hotel. So we can both consider this our first meeting."

That suited the blonde perfectly. But it wasn't quite to the liking of a lady in red, who was watching the conversation from a distance. Mata Safi was much more interested in the "first" meeting between Ferdinand and the Quaker lady than she was in talking to her black-cloaked dancing partner, who seemed to prefer silence.

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As the dance ended, Mata was quick to find a phone booth, where she hastily dialed a number. When a voice answered at the other end, she spoke quickly in French:

"Rouge et Noir."

Very apropos, those words, signifying "red and black." They could apply to Mata and her recent partner where the colors of their costumes were concerned; but that wasn't all.

The number that Mata had dialed was the same unlisted number that Johnny the waiter had called from The Cave. In tracing it, The Shadow had found that it was located in a house next door to the Casino Monaco.

Again, the passwords that Mata had spoken were appropriate. The terms "rouge" and "noir" applied specifically to the red and black numbers on a roulette wheel, the gaming device with which the name Casino Monaco was associated.

The Shadow had called that number today, but the receiver had hung up when he said "Hello." That was because he hadn't known the countersign, but he was learning it now, for in the darkness beside the corner phone booth the cloaked masquerader was listening to all that Mata Safi said.

Just to check on listeners, the Red Lady had left the booth door open, but she wasn't expecting an eavesdropper to be almost at her elbow. When she drifted glances from the phone booth, Mata directed them out to the dance floor.

"So, you are back already, Bela?" There was purred query in Mata's tone. Then: "You say you did not leave at all?... Good, that makes it much the better... I then have something to tell you. There has been crime here in the village, near the masquerade..."

"What sort of crime? I do not know... The young man, this Ted Trent? He knows nothing... But the girl, the blonde one, she may know... Yes, she is here too, but I did not see her until the police told us to stay..."

"About fifteen minutes ago, it was... The police? They are gone now... No, I do not suppose that they will worry about any of the masqueraders... Yes, Bela" – Mata's voice reduced to a hiss as she leaned close to the telephone and her eyes glittered through the mask slits – "whatever it is you wish to know, I think the girl can tell you... To find her? It is very easy; she is wearing plain gray, a Quaker lady costume."

As she spoke, Mata was watching the girl in question, who was just beginning the next dance with Ted. It was plain that the blonde inspired the snake's sparkle from Mata's eyes, as well as her verbal suggestions to Bela. And then:

"The pierrot and the cavalier," said Mata, repeating something that she heard from the telephone. "Good, I shall watch for them... Only remember, this Ted knows nothing... Should he be important, I will find out..."

There was something quite alluring in that final sentence, which might have intrigued Ted had he heard it. Apparently, Mata Safi believed that she could swing Ted's sentiments to the brunette side of the ledger when new occasion offered.

An hour after Mata made that phone call, the masquerade ended.

People were taking off their masks and getting their first full views of faces that had bothered them all evening, which applied particularly to Mata Safi and Susan Bigelow. Brunette and blonde were crossing swords with glances while Ted stood by, wondering why he was forgotten. In Ted's experience, people who

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liked him invariably liked each other, but the rule didn't hold tonight.

A growing buzz among the unmasked patrons suddenly ended the daggy looks that the two girls were tossing. Like Ted, the ladies in red and gray turned to learn the stir. The customers were annoyed because one of their number had departed without the courtesy of unmasking.

He happened to be the masquerader who had appeared in the costume of that famous crime hunter, The Shadow!

Maybe it was just part of his act, whoever he happened to be. But the rumors that were buzzing linked back to the talk of crime an hour earlier. Such talk worried another patron, the blonde who wore the Quaker costume. Then, sensing that The Shadow's departure had been a smart precedent, the girl called Susan Bigelow decided to copy it.

Spotting the blonde just before she reached the door, Mata Safi gripped Ted's arm and said:

"Come quickly!"

Mata gave a gesture as she spoke and it was meant for two new patrons who had shifted in from the door, their masks still covering their faces. Only Mata recognized them as newcomers who had joined the throng: one, heavy and stoop-shouldered, wore a harlequin costume that answered to the term of pierrot; the other, thin and limber, was in cavalier attire that fitted him worse than Ted's regal robes.

The finish of Mata's hand sweep indicated Susan, the girl in gray, while under her breath, Mata spoke, the phrase:

"Rouge et Noir!"

"What's that?" asked Ted. Then, a bit puzzled: "Why, where's Susan?"

"This way –"

There was firmness in the slender hand clamp that Mata laid on Ted's arm, but her fingernails, long, tigerish though they were, couldn't penetrate the thick velvet of the kingly costume. Mata was trying to draw Ted toward another exit, but by then, he saw Susan, pressing toward the door.

"There she goes! Come along!"

In the swirl of departing patrons things happened fast.

A badly matched pair of joymakers, pierrot and cavalier, suddenly gathered Susan from either side and started her into a waiting cab. Spreading a path through other masqueraders, Ted Trent came lunging fists first, in the fashion of a dock fighter. Ted's only trouble was he came too fast.

As he reached the pierrot and harlequin, they met him on the recoil, hurling Ted back involuntarily. The reason was that Susan was already in the grip of the missing masquerader, The Shadow!

He'd whirled in from nowhere, hooking Rouge and Noir with well-planted punches that would have laid them on their haunches if Ted hadn't stopped them by arriving too soon. But Ted, in his hot-headed effort to stage a rescue, thought that Rouge and Noir were attacking him by design, and at The Shadow's say-so.

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Ted made a break through and let his fist ride at the fighter in black.

Out of sight, out of mind were Rouge and Noir, but that was only Ted's opinion. Behind him flashed two weapons, a pierrot's revolver and a cavalier's dirk. They were aimed for Ted's back, to hew him down and clear the path to The Shadow.

Fortunately, The Shadow was swifter.

A gun-weighted fist ascended with a backhand uppercut that lifted Ted chin first, scaling him back between those converging weapons. The pierrot tripped across Ted's landing form and stumbled headlong into the cab, but the snarling cavalier turned to complete his knife thrust toward Ted's prone figure. Twisting in its gloved fist, The Shadow's gun released a well-aimed spurt.

Luck was Noir's this time.

The cavalier's scrawny knife-hand was literally wrenched from the bullet's path by a tigerish female clad in red, who had followed after Ted. The snarl that Mata Safi gave was venomous as her fingernails went for Noir's throat. Just ahead of The Shadow's gun-jab, Mata had saved Noir's knife-hand, if not his life.

Mata wasn't getting thanked for it. Noir was trying to fling this flaming hell-cat into the taxicab, so that he could get back at The Shadow, foolish though that was. Rouge, however, was smart enough to yank his comrade into the cab, which promptly whipped away with slamming door. Then came an engulfing horde of neutral masqueraders, suddenly imbued with the notion that something ought to be done about something.

Since they'd seen The Shadow use his gun, they took it that he was in the wrong, this mere masquerader who had usurped the title of crime's Nemesis. In the midst of disorganized brawlers, The Shadow disrupted them further, by a rapid whirl wherein every startled opponent could have sworn that the brandished gun was meant just for him.

The crowd stampeded so completely that the street was cleared like magic. Into a cab that halted with shrieking brakes, The Shadow shoved Ted's groggy form and followed. Shivery mirth halted costumed folk in their tracks, stunned by the conviction that this had really been The Shadow!

There were two persons, however, who hadn't waited for that denouement. Seeing that Ted was safe, they had streaked in opposite directions, rather than be questioned later. One streak was gray, the other red. The blonde and brunette who vied for Ted's favor, were postponing their rivalry until some future occasion.

At present, the blonde predominated; for when Ted woke up and found himself in a speeding cab, all he said was: "Susan!"

A voice spoke beside Ted, a calm voice from a man who introduced himself as Lamont Cranston. Disclaiming all heroism, Cranston simply stated that Ted had blundered into his cab, out of a free-for-all that was injuring the reputation of a dance hall known as the Village Mill.

Ted acknowledged all that with a nod; then, his recollections clearing, he exclaimed:

"But I've got to find her! Susan Bigelow! I know her address – Fourteen Mayhew Place."

Cranston repeated the address to the driver.

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A quiet street, Mayhew Place. Seeing the number twelve on a lighted entrance, Ted sprang from the cab expecting to find fourteen next door. It was, but it wasn't numbered because there wasn't any house.

There was merely a triangular landmark, wedged between two old-fashioned buildings, and fronted by a picket fence upon which Ted leaned as he stared at this quietest spot in a very quiet neighborhood.

Number Fourteen was an old Colonial cemetery, with a dull bronze plate stating that it had been preserved by the Society of Revolutionary Dames. But what Ted Trent stared at was the nearest tomb-stone, with its flat surface that caught the light from the house next door, revealing the inscription:

In Memory Of

Susan Bigelow

Who Passed to Glory

A. D. 1769

CHAPTER X

TED TRENT had to hand it to Lamont Cranston.

The best that Ted had managed in New York was to borrow a hotel room – and on a snide basis at that – whereas Lamont Cranston had promoted a whole suite and a large one.

Nor was this five-room job in a tourist-packed hostelry like the Argonne. Cranston had promoted it at the Hotel Ramorez, a swank spot that overlooked Central Park.

As a hide-out, the Ramorez suite was ultra de luxe. The term "hideout" applied, because Cranston was badly wanted by the law and could afford to take Ted into confidence only because his friend was close to the same dilemma.

The newspapers told it this way: Two nights ago, Lamont Cranston had entered the penthouse of one Niles Naseby, noted theatrical producer and recent sponsor of the quarter-million flop 'Bombay Moon.' Backing his threat with a lethal weapon in the form of an automatic pistol, Cranston had forced Naseby to yield a package check covering an item left in the cloak room at the Hotel Argonne.

Leaving the penthouse, Cranston had despatched Dorgan, the night watchman, on a fool's errand in order to nullify the switchboard. Returning to the penthouse, he had deprived Naseby of his own revolver; had then wantonly slain him with that same weapon, and had followed this crime by shooting one Homer Bellfinger, Naseby's secretary, in the back.

All this had been pieced from Dorgan's testimony, plus the accusation that Homer had made across the telephone, immediately following Naseby's murder.

There was another factor. Homer had lived long enough to talk – but not too much.

If the actual murderer had planned it that way, he couldn't have struck better luck. While coughing facts to Dorgan, Homer hadn't gotten past the Cranston theme before he succumbed.

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Or it might be – this notion was Cranston's – that Homer, not knowing he was through, had purposely shipped the burden onto Cranston on the chance that a murderous lurker was waiting with a few more shots for Homer and Dorgan both, in case the right tale wasn't told.

Anyway, it was Homer's dying testimony that had sent the police to the Hotel Argonne in time to discover Cranston in the very act of robbery for which he had allegedly gone there.

The cloak room attendant, one Elliott Bruce, was thoroughly reliable except in one particular. Having been throttled by hands emerging from the overcoats; then bound and gagged by those same hands, he supposed that the man who next came into sight was the criminal.

That man answered to the exact description of Lamont Cranston, wealthy club-man, friend of the police commissioner, noted world traveler, and a lot of other things that could make life such a bore that turning to crime would be the only way to relieve the distressing monotony.

Where Cranston had gone next, nobody knew, so the police traced things backward.

And what they found out!

The cloak room attendant remembered that the package had been checked by Cecil Grenshaw, an exporter from Calcutta, whose business of shipping Chutney and other products of India had fallen off because of the war. Grenshaw hadn't been seen since the night he left the package, but his room had been occupied by a younger man whose friendly habit of smiling innocently at chambermaids had caused them to remember him.

The description of the false Mr. Grenshaw tallied so perfectly with Ted Trent that he was afraid to look at himself in any of the mirrors in the Ramorez suite, on the chance that he would scream: "You're wanted!"

That wasn't all.

In checking on Grenshaw, the police had learned that he had left a note at his favorite bar, The Cave, advising Cranston to meet him at the Black Star Pier. The finding of Grenshaw's broken watch in the office of that pier had led to a dragging of the river. Too heavily weighted to be hauled far by the tide, Grenshaw's body had eventually been brought up with the grappling hooks.

This made it look all the worse for Cranston and certainly didn't favor Ted, the unknown, whose occupancy of Room 408 at the Argonne had all the ear-marks of an attempt to cover the facts, as well as the time, of Grenshaw's death.

How Cranston could smile about all this, Ted didn't know. He was smiling right now, as he showed a newspaper to Ted.

"Well, fellow accomplice," declared Cranston, "they haven't linked either of us with Welk's murder even though we were right in the vicinity."

Ted gave a grunt.

"At least that's a help."

"I'm not so sure." Folding his arms, Cranston gazed from the window. "Since every accusation has a flaw, the more flaws the better. Unfortunately, Welk knew so many eccentric characters who didn't like him, that the police will be a long time tying his case in where it belongs. It would be best to give them a tip-off, except –"

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"Except for Susan, or whoever she is?"

"That's one reason. The main reason, in fact, is she can only give us a lead to the Twelve Tear-drops of Buddha."

Another grunt from Ted.

"What about Mata Safi?" Ted demanded. "Or that phoney Count Zurich who runs the Casino Monaco?"

"They are being watched," assured Cranston, quietly, "but neither one has made a move. Zurich never leaves the Casino Monaco. Mata is there part of the time, the rest at her hotel."

"And what hotel is that?"

"The Ramorez."

"You mean – right here?"

"Two floors above," replied Cranston with a nod. "But she never makes phone calls except when she orders flowers – or drinks."

Ted was incredulous.

"How do you know all that?"

"My man is on the switchboard," smiled Cranston, "and his name isn't Dorgan. It's very easy to place competent help these days" – he paused as Ted gave a startled look when someone rapped at the door – "including waiters."

Cranston was right. It was a waiter, bringing dinner, and looking at the fellow, Ted realized that he was far more intelligent in appearance than the usual hotel servant. The waiter delivered a sizeable package along with the tray and Cranston gave him a similar bundle in return. This wasn't the first exchange of the sort, as Ted now remembered.

The flat package contained photographs, and Cranston began to study them as soon as the waiter had left. Cranston invariably glanced through such collections while he ate, but Ted hadn't inquired why. Now, he was to learn.

Cranston's eye stopped on one photograph, and he laid it aside. Stepping to the closet, he drew out a canvas and began to unroll it. The canvas revealed a rounded face with blue eyes, saucy nose and solemn lips, along with a wealth of blonde hair that streamed down over very lovely shoulders. Pausing there, Cranston turned the canvas into the light.

"Recognize her?"

"Why, it's –"

"A. D. 1769," said Cranston, with a nod. "But without the Quaker costume. Compare it with the modern version, the photograph."

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Ted looked at the photo. It was the portrait of a blonde wearing an evening gown cut to about the distance at which Cranston had stopped unrolling the painting. The two were identical; in fact, the photograph might have been a camera shot of the painting rather than the girl who had posed for both.

Rolling the canvas, Cranston pointed it toward the photograph.

"Turn it over," he told Ted. "Find out who she is."

On the other side, Ted found a typewritten paper pasted to the photograph. It gave the girl's name as Janice Moreland, daughter of Heywood Moreland, retired banker, who lived on Central Park West. It listed other data, including the college that Janice had attended, along with her favorite sports, which included tennis and yachting.

Ted's admiration of the photograph was exceeded by a kindred sentiment toward Cranston's ingenuity in acquiring the picture and its accompanying information. All Ted could say was:

"How did you ever manage it?"

"Simply enough," returned Cranston. "Nobody with all those looks could have been a regular fugitive from a photographer. So I sent people to the better photo studios, asking for pictures of stand-out blondes. It was to be an advertising contest and all that, requiring permission to use file photographs, of course. That meant including names with the pictures."

Looking at the other photographs, Ted saw that all were blondes. Recalling the other packages, Ted decided that Cranston must have looked over about five hundred before uncovering the proper candidate in this game of Find the Lady.

"Janice Moreland," mused Cranston. "I begin to understand why old Heywood Moreland had his last stroke."

"You mean his life was threatened?" asked Ted.

"No, I mean his fortune," replied Cranston. "I have an idea that he was one of the backers of Bombay Moon."

"I thought the show was Naseby's."

"It was, but Naseby never lost his own money on anything. An ex-banker is just the sort of backer he could take over. Now with Welk as the link –"

"Why Welk?"

"Somebody of his caliber must have done the elaborate stage sets that were used in Bombay Moon, even though the show folded so quickly that nobody took credit. But there is no use speculating, when we can probably get the right answer."

"From whom?"

Gazing from the window, Cranston studied the dusk that was settling over the Park, as though appraising its quality. The sky was cloudy, promising the sort of dark night when murderers – real or alleged – could safely be at large.

It was when he had finished that survey that Cranston answered Ted's query with the simple but conclusive statement:

"From Janice Moreland."

CHAPTER XI

Who could pass up a half-price chance to buy a yacht with a quick re-sale value?

Certainly not Janice Moreland, when she heard the offer over the telephone. But half an hour later, when the yacht-owners walked into the Moreland living room, Janice forgot all about boats.

Meeting Ted Trent, the girl began to stammer excuses that ended abruptly when he introduced Lamont Cranston.

Then the girl really froze.

Thinking of the murders, Janice was looking at the telephone, wondering how she could reach it, when Cranston calmly intervened:

"You should thank me, Miss Moreland, for saving you the trouble where Niles Naseby was concerned."

Those blue eyes showed indignation; then softened suddenly. But the girl's tone was cold and hard.

"You are right," Janice admitted. "I could have murdered Naseby."

"And Welk?"

"Not Welk." Janice shook her head. "He was only Naseby's tool. I think you should know, considering how close you were to the case."

Cranston's steady gaze said neither yes nor no. As if to prove her point, Janice produced a set of colored photographs from a cabinet and spread them on the table.

"The stage sets from Bombay Moon," she said. "Of course you recognize them."

"I didn't see the show," replied Cranston. "it closed too soon."

"Notice anything unusual about the stage sets?"

"Yes." Cranston nodded. "They aren't stage sets."

Staring over Cranston's shoulder, Ted began to understand. Somehow, the proportions were wrong. These magnificent contraptions: a Hindu throne, fine screens composed entirely of gold filigree; huge vases formed of precious mosaics; tapestries of woven silver adorned with jewelled hems – all gave the impression of an art collection rather than the trappings of a theatrical show.

Other photographs were similarly out of line. They showed suits of jewelled armor; decorative tables with inlaid tops; incense burners and decorative table-ware. No stage props needed the fine design that showed in these close-up photographs.

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"I found these at Welk's," explained Janice. "They are the originals; he made the copies that matched them."

Cranston nodded as though he understood. Janice went on:

"It was his loss on Bombay Moon that broke my father," explained Janice, "but he couldn't blame Niles Naseby. It had all been pure speculation, with all expenses accounted for. Backing a show takes money; dad knew that when he went into it.

"There was one thing, though, that kept preying on his mind before we sent him to the sanitarium. He kept muttering that he and Naseby never should have listened to Welk. He said artists never could be anything but extravagant. Somehow it impressed me that Naseby must have worked his crooked business through Welk.

"So I decided to find out what I could about Welk. I heard he needed a new model, so I applied, without telling him who I was. I needed a name and address" – the girl's frown lessened to a half smile – "so I found them. I took the job with Welk."

As Janice finished, Cranston gestured to the photographs.

"You found out why he copied these?"

"They had something to do with sending Bombay Moon on tour to the Orient," replied Janice. "That's all I know."

"But the stage sets matched them perfectly."

"Yes. I saw the show on its last night in New York. Everything was arranged differently, but the props were the same."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Cranston. "I can understand why Naseby wanted Welk to duplicate the private furnishings from the palace in Bildapore."

Ted stared at the name.

"Bildapore! Say, that's where those munitions came from!"

Cranston's inquiring eyes turned Ted's way.

"It was in Sydney," explained Ted. "There was a shipment from Bildapore, where they have a native munitions factory. Grenshaw was in charge of it and wanted it unloaded in a hurry. I helped him out."

"That's odd," put in Janice. "It was in Sydney that Bombay Moon couldn't even find a theater. They shipped the show back from there."

"Maybe it was Grenshaw's load that came instead," remarked Cranston. "His munitions or what-have-you."

"Could be," decided Ted. "One came into Sydney, just before the other went out."

"What happened to the scenery from the show?" inquired Cranston, turning to Janice. "Has it been heard from since?"

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"It was sold in San Francisco," replied Janice. "Not for much, but Naseby said an outright sale was better than paying an auctioneer's commission."

Cranston gave a casual nod. He was looking at other photographs that showed jewelled chests teeming with queerly shaped coins.

"It would have been a large commission," he agreed. "Twenty percent on something close to ten million dollars."

At mere mention of the sum, the others stared amazed. Then Ted forced a doubting laugh.

"Real treasures couldn't have come through the customs –"

"Why not?" inserted Cranston. "Everything was accounted for, probably to an exacting degree. Gilt screens, brass coins, plated ornaments, tinsel tapestries with glass bead trimmings. All those props went out of the country so they had a right to come back. Very probably the same customs men checked them going and coming. Grenshaw would have seen to that."

"Then you mean that Grenshaw swindled the new Rajah of Bildapore?"

"Grenshaw at least had a hand in it before the present rajah took over. But that in turn means that the false rajah, Thangra, arranged it all beforehand. Naseby's show, *Bombay Moon*, was designed to his order, through Grenshaw. Now I know why Naseby could expect a present as fine as the Twelve Tear-drops of Buddha. All he did was help Thangra loot the palace before Abdullah inherited what was left of it."

Ted offered an objection.

"But Abdullah would certainly have known –"

"In Bildapore," interposed Cranston, "the rajah is supreme. He renders no one an accounting of his personal belongings which technically includes everything. Thangra could have eradicated completely all records of the prized belongings that he secretly shipped from Bildapore."

"But what about those Twelve Tear-drops?"

"They were different. Thangra had once boasted that he owned them. Later, it was reported that he sold them, but the buyer was never named."

"So they were Naseby's commission," said Ted, with a head-shake. "A million dollar clean-up and he was too cheap to sink his own dough in the deal that made it possible!"

All during this talk, Janice had been trying to weave in a few words. Now she had her chance.

"Those must be the jewels that Welk was after!" the blonde exclaimed. "The ones he talked about over the phone."

Cranston was prompt with the query:

"To whom?"

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"I don't know," admitted Janice, "but I did hear where they were to go if anybody managed to get them. To somebody named Schorner."

The name rang home to Cranston.

"Carl Schorner, the jewel appraiser," he defined. "The chap who buys estates low, buys them out, then sells them high. The last man to be linked with a job like this and therefore the best."

"Why the best?" asked Ted.

"Because Naseby would never expect to find the Tear-drops with Schorner," explained Cranston, "nor would anybody else. It fits, though, because one of Schorner's money-making dodges is having antique jewelry recut or reset in modern style. He'd know how to disguise those Tear-drops as well as how to dispose of them."

Ted's teeth gritted.

"If we'd only known this sooner!"

"There may still be time," declared Cranston, quietly. "Wait until I call the Casino Monaco."

Making the call, Cranston didn't give his own name, but merely asked for someone named Vincent. After a brief chat with the man in question, Cranston hung up with a satisfied nod.

"Count Zurich is in his office," stated Cranston, "and Mata Safi is playing the roulette wheel. Perhaps those Tear-drops are still at Schorner's. I won't be long."

With that, Cranston bowed himself from the living room, leaving Janice staring until she heard the outer door go shut. A bit worried by the girl's grim expression, Ted put in some good words.

"Don't worry about Cranston," said Ted. "I'm sure he didn't murder either Grenshaw or Naseby."

"Who would I be to accuse him?" Janice faced Ted solemnly. "Why, it's only sheer luck that the police aren't accusing me of killing Welk!"

"You mean you were in the studio when Welk was murdered?"

"Certainly. I went across the roof and down through the Kit-Kat Shop. That's where I found the Quaker costume."

"So you were working me for an alibi," smiled Ted. "I don't blame you; I'd like one myself."

"We don't need alibis yet," returned Janice seriously. "The person we ought to worry about is your friend, Mr. Cranston."

Ted came to his feet.

"What fools we were!" he exclaimed. "We shouldn't have let Cranston go to Schorner's! Suppose he gets into trouble there! Why, the police would mark him for a murderer, the moment they showed up!"

Nodding, Janice asked:

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to Schorner's myself," returned Ted, bluntly. "Wouldn't you?"

"If you make it 'will' you," replied Janice, "the answer is 'yes.'"

The girl meant it; otherwise Ted wouldn't have given the nod. A few minutes later, these allies in a new cause were on their way to back up Cranston in his lone and dangerous mission.

CHAPTER XII

HARRY VINCENT gathered up his chips and stepped from the roulette table to the door of Count Zurich's office, only to be intercepted by a bowing man who stood there.

"Count Zurich is busy," the man informed him. "You can see him a little later."

"But I have to leave," explained Harry. "I wanted to cash in these chips."

"Over there." The bowing man gestured to a counter near the strong door that barred the route downstairs. "The cashier will pay you for them."

Still playing the roulette wheel, Mata Safi didn't even glance Harry's way as he left. But that had nothing to do with the thing that bothered Harry. Why hadn't he been allowed to see Count Zurich?

Once out of the Casino Monaco, Harry walked around the corner to find Shrevvy's cab. Getting in, Harry played a hunch.

"Anybody come out of a house on this street, Shrevvy?"

The cabby gestured to a house that flanked the rear of the Casino Monaco.

"Over there," said Shrevvy. "About ten minutes ago. Don't know who he was, but it's funny though. I thought that was the house the chief said was empty."

That was enough for Harry. He told Shrevvy to take him to a telephone and fast. There was still a chance that The Shadow would phone Burbank, the contact man who relayed messages from various agents. He might call the Hotel Ramorez, where Burbank was at present tending switchboard.

Perhaps Harry's last minute tactics had something to do with the fact that Schorner's jewelry store was so quiet when Ted and Janice arrived there. The place was open, but in sole charge of a weary-looking clerk, who certainly couldn't be Schorner. In fact, the store itself looked very pitiful. The only gems on sale were old-fashioned ones, priced cheaply, to keep up the pretence that Schorner sold whatever he bought for only a trifle more than what he paid.

Ted wanted to see Schorner and said so. In his turn, the clerk gave the wrong reply. Instead of saying that Schorner was out, he stated that he was in the office but didn't want to be disturbed. Ted simply gestured Janice ahead of him and gave the clerk a shove when he tried to block the way. Opening the office door, Ted bowed Janice through and followed. Then he wished he hadn't.

Carl Schorner was definitely busy. The trouble was he had visitors who weren't. One was a man who wore a tilted gray hat, along with a tuxedo. As he turned his face, he didn't quite obscure it from the light and Ted

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was startled to see the suave, mustached face of Count Bela Zurich.

There were two other men here with Zurich. One was heavy, powerful, stooped of shoulder, which made his shocky red hair the most conspicuous thing about him. The other was a limber man who wore baggy trousers and a black jersey, with a cap pulled down over one eye.

Their names flashed home to Ted:

Rouge and Noir!

Just where he'd heard those names, he didn't remember, but there was also something about the men that reminded him of the pierrot and cavalier who had kicked trouble outside the Village Mill.

As for Janice, her eyes were startled as she recognized Count Zurich and the big man, Rouge.

Zurich's smooth laugh had an ugly sound. The Count didn't mind being recognized by persons whose existence he regarded as superfluous after they had walked right into a trap. Wherever Zurich went, he carried his trap with him, in the persons of Rouge and Noir.

They were already crowding Ted and Janice. It was Rouge who planted a gun against Ted's back while Noir pointed a revolver at Janice. Evidently Zurich had overruled Noir's preference for knives because of the limber man's inefficiency with such weapons during his two encounters with The Shadow.

Under the persuasion of those guns, there was nothing for Ted and Janice to do but stand by. The thrust of Ted's strong jaw, the worried expression in Janice's blue eyes, showed that they shared the same apprehension. Death might not be an immediate threat, because Zurich wouldn't want to commit murder on these premises; but it would certainly be an incident of the future.

Count Bela Zurich just couldn't afford to spare the lives of these two people who had laid the finger squarely on the pulse-beat of his crimes.

In plain sight, twinkling their story of cruelty, bribery and greed, lay twelve magnificent gems that answered the description of those baubles of murder, the Tear-drops of Buddha!

Four blood-red rubies; four glorious green emeralds; four diamonds that flashed fire of myriad hues. Lustrous stones matched in size, so large that the average thumb and forefinger could just about have circled each fabulous gem.

The Tear-drops were lying on a bench that seemed part of a miniature laboratory, presided over by Schorner, a burly, bitter-faced man who looked quite in keeping with his comrades. Only there was something in Schorner's attitude that didn't entirely smack of friendship with the suave Count Zurich.

Arms folded, the Count tilted his head toward Schorner. He'd been playing possum recently, but he saw no reason to keep up the game for the benefit of Ted and Janice. Indeed, there was a triumphant gleam on the Count's sallow features, as though this situation struck him as the perfect finale for the drama he had played.

"Proceed, Schorner," ordered Zurich, in a smooth but foreign accent. "You were appraising these gems to give us their true worth. We should like to know how well Naseby bargained with the former Rajah of Bildapore."

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With a sidelong glance, Zurich was watching Ted and Janice to gauge how much they already knew. Their calm acceptance of the facts brought a hard look to Zurich's eyes. What these prisoners knew, someone must have told them. This meant that further murder lay ahead for Count Bela and his imported assassins.

What Zurich didn't notice was the glum expression that grew on Schorner's big, coarse face.

"Come, Schorner!" purred Zurich. "The value!"

"Not as much as you would expect," returned Schorner, bluntly. "I wouldn't say that Naseby bargained well."

"And why not?"

"All that trouble that Welk spoke about, for several thousand dollars –"

Zurich whirled as he interrupted:

"Did you say thousand, Schorner? You mean million!"

Schorner shook his big head.

"I have tested these Tear-drops," he stated. "They are deceptive, very much so. But they are not what they are claimed to be."

A snarl now dominated Zurich's tone.

"You fool, Schorner! To treat me as you do your customers! Why, those rubies alone are worth a ransom!"

"They are not rubies," returned Schorner. "They are garnets. Their color is excellent, I might say perfect, but I have studied them in the dichroscope and found them isoprenic."

This made perfect Greek to Ted and Janice, but Zurich seemed to understand it. From the bench, he picked up an object resembling a microscope, set horizontally above a handle, much like an old-fashioned stereoscope. Setting one of the red gems in place, Zurich studied it through the glass.

"You will see two images," stated Schorner. "Their rays are polarized at right angles to each other and in rubies the shades of red should differ. With garnets they do not."

Scowling as he tested the remaining red gems, Zurich found that Schorner was right concerning all of them. Buddha's crimson tear-drops were garnets, not rubies.

Immediately Zurich pounced upon the four green gems, only to hear Schorner say:

"Those are tourmalines, not emeralds. I would not have suspected them ordinarily. In fact, I might still believe them to be emeralds if their hardness were seven and one-half, the top rating for a tourmaline, and the lowest for an emerald; that is the dividing line.

"But whoever chose these remarkable specimens was forced to sacrifice hardness at the expense of color, the thing most needed to perpetrate the fraud. Those tourmalines have a hardness of only seven, I should say a trifle under, for a fine steel file will bite them. Make the test yourself, but put the scratches on the girdles of the stones. It would be a shame to mar such fine specimens of tourmaline."

Zurich didn't share Schorner's admiration of semi-precious stones, but he followed instructions with the file and discovered that Schorner was right again. That brought up the question of the alleged diamonds.

Here, Schorner's admiration was overwhelming.

"Such wonderful zircons!" he exclaimed. "They have given them some heat treatment that is worth a fortune in itself! They have acquired color, unusual optical properties, and even a surprising hardness. Why, with this secret we could go into business as diamond merchants, with only a stock of zircons, provided we did not sell specimens too large to invite suspicion.

"There is only one thing they lack, the right specific gravity. The pure diamond should be three decimal fifty-two, which is less than the Rohrbach's Solution." Schorner gestured to a liquid in a tall glass cylinder. "These zircons have a higher specific gravity, at least four decimal zero. I shall show you with the Westphal Balance."

The instrument in question looked like a miniature scales with an extension arm with a thin cord to which Schorner attached one of the scintillating gems and lowered it like a sinker into the glass cylinder. Ted gathered that a diamond, having a lower specific gravity than the solution, should not have sunk below the half-way point, but this gem did. Still scowling, Zurich eyed the balance closely while Schorner repeated the tests with the remaining zircons.

At the conclusion, Schorner shrugged.

"You see?" he said glumly. "We have been swindled, and outright."

As cold as the zircons yet as fiery in their sparkle, Zurich's eyes fixed on Schorner.

"You mean that I have been swindled, Schorner – by you!"

Schorner's face took on the startled expression of a fish, then grimaced into what he thought was a smile.

"A very funny thing to say, Zurich," began Schorner, "after I have been so honest with you."

"Give over." Zurich's tone was hard. "I want the real gems, Schorner."

For a moment real amazement gripped Schorner; then, glancing at Rouge and Noir, he gave way to resignation. Opening a drawer beneath his table, he reached for something that Janice actually thought might be a box containing the genuine Tear-drops. Instead, Schorner's hand whipped out with a revolver, pointed straight at Zurich.

It took speed to be quicker than Count Zurich. The suave man's arms had unfolded. Schorner's gun was matched by another revolver in Zurich's fist.

Muzzle for muzzle, these former partners in crime were halted neck to neck in a race where death was to mark the finish line!

CHAPTER XIII

TED TRENT found his breath coming back after a prolonged absence. One glance at Janice Moreland, and he saw a face so tense that it told him what his own must look like. They had forgotten their own plight to become spectators awaiting the result of a hair-trigger duel that hadn't quite exploded.

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Now Ted was thinking what could happen if it did. It might prove a chance in favor of Janice and himself, but they would have to act fast. Once shooting started here in Schorner's back room, Rouge and Noir would accept it as a signal to dispose of their prisoners.

Unless Schorner should win!

Then Rouge and Noir would think first of avenging Zurich, a break indeed for Ted and Janice.

Maybe Zurich calculated all that.

Almost indifferently, Count Bela lowered his gun with an apologetic smile. Schorner, still mistrustful, kept his own revolver leveled.

"I was hasty, Schorner," explained Zurich. "For a moment I thought you had perpetrated this swindle yourself."

Schorner gave a short laugh.

"That would have been smart, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, very smart," replied Zurich, "and quite easy."

"Easy?" questioned Schorner. "How?"

"These inferior gems" – Zurich gestured at the glittering dozen with his gun – "could be bought almost anywhere."

Schorner gave his head an emphatic shake.

"It would take a long time."

"But you had a long time," reminded Zurich. "Welk knew about the Twelve Tear-drops from the start."

"Perhaps. But neither of us had ever seen them."

"That wouldn't have been necessary. The description of the gems could have been obtained. My man Noir didn't have much opportunity to look at the originals when he brought them from the Argonne."

Noir was staring at the gems now. Turning to Zurich, the limber man spoke rapidly but in an odd foreign tongue that made Schorner look worried as he tightened his hand on his gun.

"It's all right, Schorner," stated Zurich. "Noir says they look to be the same. Of course if you had arranged things with Grenshaw –"

"I never knew Grenshaw."

"Welk must have told you about him. But I don't think it would have mattered. Do you know, Schorner" – Zurich stared, then nodded slowly – "I really believe you have been honest all along!"

That commendation really relieved Schorner. In return, he lowered his revolver.

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"And being honest is a virtue," added Zurich. "The sort of virtue that deserves a reward – like this!"

It happened in the pause before those last two words. Zurich's gun came up so fast that it looked like a silvery blur. The muzzle mouthed a scorching message straight for Schorner's heart before the big-faced man could bring his own gun into motion. But Count Bela wasn't leaving anything to chance. He'd read the newspapers with their account of Homer's statement and wasn't going to make the same mistake of leaving a dying victim instead of a dead one, particularly when such a victim still held a gun.

Literally, Zurich riddled Schorner clear down to the floor, using every bullet in his six-chambered revolver.

Along about the fourth shot, Ted Trent found himself. Letting all caution ride, he swung about, grabbed Janice Moreland, and flung her toward the door.

Rouge and Noir had done the expected. With Zurich's shots they had shoved their own guns forward, both thinking that Schorner might require solid treatment. Before they could whip around again, Ted and Janice were away, but with no more chance of escaping through that closed door than they had of scooting off through the fourth dimension.

Maybe there was a fourth dimension!

The laugh that filled this rear room seemed to come from nowhere. What it did was drown the crash that accompanied it, the smash of a back window. Into this scene where murder again held sway, launched the cloaked figure of The Shadow!

He'd taken his own time about getting here, this fighter whose other self was Cranston, particularly after contacting Burbank on the way and getting the report from Vincent. The Shadow calculated everything, except that Ted and Janice would commit the indiscretion of putting themselves in line for murder.

There was one thing Ted Trent had learned, not to meddle with the human buzz-saw in black. The Shadow had demonstrated that his one-man prowess brooked no interference, even from friends, that night outside the Village Mill. Having lost Janice once by mixing in The Shadow's business. Ted wasn't chancing it again. He ripped the door open and flung Janice through, confident that The Shadow could handle Rouge and Noir – as he had before – now that Zurich's gun was empty.

It would have worked that way if Zurich hadn't remembered a trick worked by Welk.

Too late had the artist clicked off the lights in his studio, to gain a respite against attackers. But quick as Zurich had been with his trigger, here at Schorner's, he was equally fast with the back room light switch, which happened to be right over Schorner's bench.

A snap, and the light was off. A sweep, and Zurich heaved the bench, equipment and all, in the general direction of where he had last seen The Shadow.

Zurich almost scored a knockout with that lucky fling. As the bench struck his shoulder, The Shadow's arm came up automatically and he let himself sprawl away to a corner while he was warding the heavy missile. Tripping over some obstacle, The Shadow landed among some shelves that came clattering down upon him, but he turned his sprawl into a dive in the direction of the door, hoping to block it off.

This took time that Zurich and his men were using to other advantage. Count Bela couldn't pause to load his revolver in the dark, while Rouge and Noir had no intention of battling The Shadow without the sturdy backing of their chief. So closely that they crowded one another, the three went out through the window that

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The Shadow had used to crash in upon them.

By the time The Shadow stepped across Schorner's body and reached that same window, rapid footfalls were fading out of ear-shot.

Pausing at the window, The Shadow focused a flashlight around the room. A laugh whispered from his lips as he saw the scattered jewels, for from the distance The Shadow could hear the wails of arriving police cars. They were coming because The Shadow had ordered Burbank to put in a call to Police Commissioner Weston, advising him to come here in person. It all would have fitted with The Shadow's plans, trapping Schorner with a hoard of gems of incredible value.

Perhaps it still would, even though Schorner lay dead and the gems were merely cheap substitutes.

But The Shadow didn't intend to stay. He had a better plan. As the police cars arrived, he moved out through the window. He waited in the alley, until he saw the light go on in the back room and heard the calls of the police.

It was then The Shadow laughed again.

To punctuate that mirth from the dark, The Shadow used a few gunshots. Weston's voice shouted an order and police came out through the window and in from the side alley.

What they saw was a cab, scudding away as though it had just picked up a passenger. That was all they needed for a reason to follow along a trail by which The Shadow intended to lead them to a surprising goal, the Casino Monaco, headquarters of Count Bela Zurich.

It didn't matter that Zurich had gained a start and that The Shadow intended to lead the police a roundabout way. The Shadow was planning a surprise at the end of it.

Count Bela liked surprises too.

Only half a dozen blocks away, the suave master of murder was making a call from the only booth in a lonely drug store while Rouge and Noir waited and worried in a car out front.

"Hello?" Bela's inquiring tone was oily, but quite different from his own. "Inspector Cardona? Good... I have a complaint to make, but you must attend to it immediately... It concerns the Casino Monaco. I have just lost money there... You ask how? How else except by gambling..."

"Yes, gambling upstairs... On a roulette table and a big one, with many players... But you must hurry, because in fifteen minutes the gambling room will close... Early? Of course. But it is only during the dinner hour that roulette is played there... Yes, because that is a time that nobody would suspect... Good-bye..."

Fifteen minutes was a very short order for Inspector Joe Cardona; he'd be lucky if he reached the Casino Monaco in that time. Which in turn allowed time for Count Bela to be back there, completing his own little scheme.

A smart fellow, Count Bela Zurich! He was still confident that he could outwit the Shadow!

CHAPTER XIV

IT was as calm as ever in the gambling room upstairs in the Casino Monaco, the only sound the clack of the roulette ball against the metal pockets of the smoothly revolving wheel. Across the board, Harry Vincent kept watching Mata Safi.

The alluring lady with the gaze of a Bengalese tiger was quite cognizant that she was under observation by the handsome, self-contained young man who stood opposite. Mata Safi liked that. Experience had taught her to be suspicious only of those men who ignored the captivating charms that Mata had built into her unconscious moods.

Harry was noticing Mata's eyes. The exotic brunette had a way of letting her gaze stray, just when she had gained a man's fixed attention. She was playing that game with Harry, not realizing that he was topping it with a game of his own.

Mata's eyes invariably ended on Zurich's door as though Mata, too, had begun to wonder over the prolonged absence of Count Bela.

And now Harry was wondering if Mata had begun to suspect what he was quite sure existed: that Count Bela had another way out from his office, through the next door house where he had received phone calls with the passwords "Rouge et Noir."

In fact, the sum of Mata Safi's knowledge was a subject for speculation in itself, a matter which The Shadow had delegated Harry Vincent to investigate. This Oriental Tiger Lily hadn't blossomed into the general scenery until after the Hudson River had swallowed the unfortunate Mr. Grenshaw; hence her connection with the case of the Twelve Tear-drops featured the second act in this drama of death.

Maybe the second act was nearly over; if so, Mata Safi might play a surprising part in the finale.

Harry snapped from those speculations suddenly, as he caught the gleam in Mata's eyes. They were fixed on Zurich's door. With a casual half-turn, Harry saw the reason.

Never more polite, the Count had stepped from the office to mingle with the patrons, at the same time informing them courteously that the gaming period was almost ended. Maybe it was just a hunch on Harry's part; perhaps he was gauging matters from much that had gone before, but he could have sworn that Bela's whole purpose was the building of an alibi.

And why not?

Here were a few dozen witnesses who would swear on oath that Zurich could have been nowhere other than his office during the last full hour.

The only thing that puzzled Harry was Zurich's peculiar anxiety to greet the customers all at once. Around the roulette table he was passing from player to player, impressing his presence with a smooth rapidity. The explanation of this came by the time the suave proprietor had completed his round trip.

So suddenly that the effect was startling, the lights in the gaming room began to blink!

Before the customers could move, Count Bela was at the head of the table, raising his arms. Then, turning toward the door, he shook his head at the attendants who were starting to bar it.

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"We want no violence," stated Zurich. "If it is the police, we must let them enter peaceably."

It was the police.

The raid squad was headed by a stocky, swarthy man, Inspector Joe Cardona. As the patrons drew away from the table, Cardona and his men took over, seizing the roulette wheel as evidence, clamping handcuffs on the croupiers and other attendants. Meanwhile, Count Bela had stepped to the office door and closed it; he was standing in front of the door with folded arms, smiling too calmly.

Something was due to happen very soon and Zurich was hoping it would turn out exactly as he planned.

Unbeknownst to Inspector Cardona, another raiding crew was arriving outside the Casino Monaco. Commissioner Weston and the police who had accompanied him from Schorner's were hard on the rear wheels of the cab that bore The Shadow.

That cab, piloted by the able Shrevvy, swung past the front of the gambling club and careened around the corner. Seeing other cabs parked at the Casino Monaco, the drivers of the police cars thought that the fugitive cab was among them. Hopping out at Weston's order, the police piled into the building and up the stairs to the gaming room.

Which in turn suited The Shadow – so far.

Clear around on the rear street, The Shadow was whisking from the cab and into the empty house which he was sure formed Zurich's private exit from the gambling club. Under the stress of a police raid, the Count would logically dash for freedom by his secret route. The Shadow expected to meet the manifold murderer on the stairs and cut off his escape in final fashion.

It didn't happen that way.

Still standing in front of his office door, Zurich was watching the big clock in the gaming room as its minute hand reached the exact spot he wanted. Then, as Cardona strode in his direction, the suave man unfolded his arms and said:

"Wait!"

There was something sinister enough in that command to halt even an experienced official like Cardona. For with it, Zurich gave a warning smile that indicated he was speaking for Cardona's benefit.

Zurich heard Weston's crew on the stairs. The clever Count had timed things right to the dot on the basis of The Shadow's own activities. As Cardona halted, trying to guess what was coming, it came.

A dull but heavy explosion sounded within Zurich's office. The door, heavy though it was, literally bulged outward from the blast. The gaming room rocked to the shrieks of the excited patrons and in another instant, darkness blanked the scene. All lights, except those leading down the front stairs, had been extinguished by the explosion.

In from the stairway door surged a group of dim unrecognizables that Cardona took to be Zurich's reserves. The ace inspector bawled an order to his men and they wheeled to meet the invaders. Two groups of police launched at each other, swinging clubs and guns, intending to beat down all resistance. The brawl was the perfect break that Zurich wanted.

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Calling all patrons, Count Bela led a dash down the front stairs, which now were clear. Very few followed, for most were tangled in the police melee, but Harry Vincent managed to skirt the throng. He gripped a full fistful of velvet and hauled it along with him, down the stairs and out.

Count Zurich, recognized by the downstairs patron, was away in a waiting car, adding another notch to his alibi. Looking for Shrevvy's cab, Harry couldn't see it, but he found another and bundled Mata Safi into it.

Upstairs, the rival police squads were learning their identity through a process of elimination. Bawling mutual commands, Weston and Cardona put a stop to the melee and ordered their men to break down the office door.

They found what they expected, a complete ruin. Count Zurich had set off a time bomb, actuated by the closing of the door, to demolish the office and obliterate all records of his friends and patrons. Quite the customary thing to do, on the part of a man who ran a gambling establishment.

Only Zurich had gone the usual game one better.

The blast had caved the wall of his office, carrying through to the house next door. A huge pile of debris showed a gap that looked like the caving of a normal wall, leaving no trace of the secret doorway that had existed.

Zurich had really built himself an alibi. He hadn't left a trace of evidence to show that he could have gone in and out of the Casino Monaco. His flight by the front route was the final touch.

Who, now, would believe that there had been another way out, considering that Zurich hadn't used it in the very sort of emergency for which it should have been intended?

Only The Shadow.

Almost at the head of the stairs, he had been met by the full force of the blast. The Shadow had taken the stairs in one long plunge.

Ahead of the avalanching bricks, The Shadow had rolled into a vacant front room. There, groggily, he wrenched open a window and tumbled through, almost into the arms of Shrevvy, who was out of the cab the moment that he heard the powerful blast. Into the cab and away, The Shadow was again at large, though too dazed to hunt up Zurich's trail.

The laugh that trailed from the cab window lacked The Shadow's usual challenge, but it served as a reminder that Count Bela Zurich would still find a contender in the quest for the real gems that were known as Buddha's Tear-drops!

CHAPTER XV

COMMISSIONER WESTON sat in his office studying a mass of photographs which all pertained to the same subject: Lamont Cranston. The commissioner was intent upon hounding his former friend to the absolute limit, for he was convinced that Cranston was the cause of everything, including murder.

On the commissioner's big desk glistened the baubles that had made Cranston go wrong; twelve gems that had turned out to be only semiprecious stones of comparatively small value. The myth of Buddha's Tear-drops which Cranston, who knew India and its fabled tales, had been foolish enough to believe, was dispelled, and Cranston had wrecked his long and estimable career.

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Such people as Bela Zurich meant little to Weston in comparison and as for Mata Safi, the commissioner had never heard of her. The commissioner was turning one name over in his mind. Savagely, Weston repeated it as he glared from his window into the gathering dusk:

"Cranston!"

"Well, well, commissioner." The voice was calm, but cheery. "It's quite a relief to know that you can't forget a friend!"

"Cranston!"

This time Weston's epithet was fierce. Wheeling in his swivel chair, the commissioner grabbed for a revolver that was lying in his open desk drawer.

But across the desk, Cranston was pointing the same famous automatic at the commissioner that had allegedly threatened Naseby before the latter was murdered with his own gun. This, too, was the weapon that Weston believed responsible for the deaths of Grenshaw, Welk, and Schorner!

There was nothing to do but let Cranston speak.

"You have done nicely, commissioner," approved Cranston, coolly. "As a press agent, I couldn't have chosen anyone better."

Weston's only answer was a glower.

"Come, commissioner," continued Cranston. "You can't really believe I murdered Grenshaw and Naseby?"

"And why not?"

"Because in both cases you have witnesses to the contrary."

"What witnesses?"

"In Grenshaw's case, a waiter," explained Cranston. "His name is Johnny and he works at The Cave. You just didn't question him enough."

"What should I have asked him?"

"About the phone call that he made, telling someone where to meet him. Get his story and make him tell the number; you will find that it belonged to the house next door to the Casino Monaco."

Enlightenment reluctantly started to spread over Weston's face.

"As for Naseby's death," continued Cranston, "talk to Dorgan again, and that chap who operated the cloak room at the Argonne. You'll find them both reliable."

"I already have," retorted Weston crisply. "They both identified you absolutely."

"I was depending on that," spoke the ever-calm Cranston. "What you completely overlooked was the time element. Check it, commissioner, and you'll find that I couldn't possibly have reached the Argonne so soon after Naseby's death."

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These were vital points, if true, and with them, Weston's speculation that Cranston stood responsible for the murders of Welk and Schorner would fall of its own weight. Whoever had committed the first two crimes would be the logical suspect in the last two. Still, Weston wasn't to be too easily persuaded.

"What brings you here, Cranston?" queried the commissioner drily. "If you want these" – he gestured to the second-rate gems – "I might as well tell you that they aren't what you think they are."

"Not Buddha's Tear-drops?" Cranston gave an expression of mock surprise. "Have you really found that out, commissioner?"

"I have," retorted Weston, "and so has everybody else –"

"Including Count Zurich." Cranston's interruption carried firmness. "Give that office of his a going-over, commissioner. Count the bricks that he blew apart last night. You'll find a whole door-load missing; enough to account for the way out that Zurich no longer wanted."

Weston was suddenly seeing a lot of things, though he didn't say so. He wasn't going to trust Cranston until after these facts were checked and proved.

"Here's the deal, commissioner," put in Cranston bluntly. "Wherever Zurich is, you won't find him, but he's still after the real Tear-drops. I can find him if you give me leeway, which means easing up this man-hunt. I don't want a clear bill, because it's better to keep Zurich bluffed; but active interference will only handicap me."

Weston was nodding, but very doubtfully, his eyes on the gun in Cranston's hand. With a generous gesture, Cranston drew the magazine from the handle of his automatic and dumped its cartridges on the desk. Then, with a wave to show the weapon was useless, he arose, turned to the door, and paused as he reached it.

"This is all I did at Naseby's," insisted Cranston. "I went out, and for all he knew, I held an empty gun. You'll be hearing from me, commissioner" – Cranston's eyes were fixed toward Weston, but their gaze seemed more distant. Then, in a parting tone he added: "Later."

Before the door had really closed, Weston was grabbing the telephone with one hand, his revolver with the other. He wasn't going to let Cranston get away with this bluff; he'd have him stopped before he reached the downstairs door.

But Weston was forgetting windows. One was rising right behind him and in from the dusk that framed it came a lean brown man with soft shoes and baggy clothes, whose tiny eyes had a glint as ferocious as his big bulging teeth. In his hands, the invader held a length of whip-cord. With a forward spring he lashed the murderous string over Weston's neck, tightening it with one deft hand, while the other made a wide sweep to pick up the Tear-drops lying on the desk!

Weston was choking helplessly when the door hurled itself open and in from the corridor sprang Cranston, gun in hand!

An empty gun, unloaded in the commissioner's presence, and witnessed by the brown face at the window!

Contemptuously, the assassin forgot the jewels and reached for a knife, but his hand stopped in midair.

A spurt from that unloaded automatic laid a bullet right to the brown wrist!

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With a howl like a jaguar, the grinning creature forgot noose, gems and knife. Clutching that damaged wrist, he bounced across the room, out through the window, and lurched to a ledge below. Landing like something of rubber, the brown man reached a waiting car and sped away by the time Cranston arrived at the window.

But from that window, Cranston saw the face that looked back from the fleeing car and under his breath, the commissioner's friend breathed a whispered laugh that formed an echo of The Shadow's.

By the time Cranston returned to the desk, Weston was able to pant three words:

"What – was – it?"

"A dacoit," specified Cranston, "otherwise a Hindu strangler. I'd better take along these souvenirs" – Cranston was sweeping up the false Tear-drops of Buddha – "in case they might tempt others of his breed. I think I know how to handle them, commissioner."

"Did – did Zurich send that fellow?"

"Of course not. Zurich would have kept these gems if he'd wanted them. This looks like a new development, commissioner, and a deeper one."

With that, Cranston began to reload his automatic. Weston watched, while dangling the cord that he had freed from his neck. As Cranston pressed the magazine up into the gun handle, he said:

"Hear that, commissioner?"

Whether or not Weston heard it, he nodded. He remembered now that when an automatic was loaded, the first shell dropped into the breech. In removing the load, Cranston hadn't withdrawn that number one cartridge; instead, it had remained where it could save Weston's life.

"Somebody must think those are the genuine Tear-drops," declared Weston, gesturing to Cranston's pocket which held the disputed gems. "Otherwise the dacoit wouldn't have been sent here."

"Anyone who employs dacoits," returned Cranston, "would know all about the Tear-drops. The real answer is that these imitations have some value of their own which we have not yet recognized."

That was all. With a parting wave, Cranston strode to the door, pocketing his automatic as he went. Pausing there, he turned to state:

"I'll handle the Tear-drops, commissioner, along with the rest of the deal. I'm really leaving this time, so you'll have to watch the window for yourself. I would suggest that you reverse your previous procedure. Pick up your revolver first; then the telephone."

The advice suited Weston. As Cranston left, the commissioner picked up his revolver and swivelled around to make sure no brown faces were grinning from the window.

As for the telephone, Commissioner Weston just forgot that he had one.

CHAPTER XVI

LISTENING to the report that Harry Vincent gave, Lamont Cranston turned from the window overlooking Central Park and gave an emphatic nod.

"It was Mata Safi."

Janice Moreland gave a grim smile at Cranston's words; the smile was meant for Ted Trent.

"But I can't believe it!" exclaimed Ted. "Mata hadn't any hand in those other murders. Why should she unleash a dacoit on the commissioner?"

"We can ask her when we find her," replied Cranston. "Nevertheless, she was in the car outside the commissioner's office. I glimpsed her face and now Vincent reports that he trailed her there after she'd left him in the cocktail lounge downstairs."

"And she's missed our dinner date," added Harry, "because she checked out as soon as she arrived back here."

At least Harry was no longer susceptible to Mata's superior allure, which made Janice all the merrier because the raven-haired beauty had departed. Without Harry in the field, Ted might be considering a renewal of what Janice regarded as more than an acquaintance with Mata Safi. At this moment, however, Ted's mind was reverting to business.

"Whether the dacoit intended to murder Weston or not," argued Ted, "he was after the phoney Tear-drops. It doesn't add up."

"The trouble is, it does," put in Cranston. "I would say it adds up to too much."

Ted's eyes became really puzzled.

"Whatever Naseby's services," explained Cranston, "he could hardly have expected the Tear-drops in return. Their value is too great in proportion."

"I don't know," said Ted. "To begin with, it meant sinking a quarter million in Bombay Moon to work the other valuables into America."

"But not of Naseby's money," reminded Cranston, in a tone that Janice highly approved. "Naseby didn't risk a dollar. What's more, it was too dangerous for Grenshaw to bring them alone; the real Tear-drops, I mean."

"Then why –"

"Then why the false ones? To cover the very situation that occurred, their falling into the wrong hands. It couldn't have been an effort to deceive Naseby, because he knew enough inside facts to retaliate. No, somebody was playing square with Naseby, but in a singular way."

Crossing the room, Cranston stopped at a table and opened a large square box. From it he produced an object that resembled a miniature movie projector.

"From the sale of Naseby's belongings," explained Cranston. "I picked this up because it was different."

It was different, that projector. It had a large face like a clock dial, consisting of twelve openings. What it looked like was the model for some new theatrical device, intended to throw a dozen spot-lights all at once. Naseby was always interested in such gadgets; plenty more had been around his penthouse.

Why Cranston had chosen this particular contraption was immediately explained.

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"Twelve spots," stated Cranston. "Twelve Tear-drops, or their equivalent. Let's see how they are for size."

Their size was just right. Every one of the stones that Cranston had acquired in Weston's office fitted perfectly in a hole of the curious projector!

Even odder was the fact that the cut of those gems was such that there was only one way in which they could be fitted. Though low in value, these imitations of twelve priceless gems were taking on an unusual significance.

Placing four red garnets in the first batch of sockets, Cranston set the colorless zircons in the next four, and finally, the green tourmalines as a last group. Plugging in the projector, he pressed the switch and the light cast itself in the form of twelve circles on the far wall of the living room.

Four circles in clusters of three: red, white and green.

But the feature of the spot lights lay in the symbols that appeared. Every one of those luminous circles contained a large letter of the alphabet!

The red spots showed the letters L H I A.

The letters in the white spots spelled a word: O I L Y

The green circles contained: L D H L

Whatever these letters might mean, the imitation Tear-drops had revealed their basic secret. On a single facet of each gem, some skilled hand had engraved a microscopic letter, too tiny to appear as more than a scratch even under a jeweler's glass. The only way to bring these letters into being was to use the gems as projector lenses and thus raise the letters to a visible size by centering them in spotlights that were vast in proportion to the gems themselves.

The very ingenuity of the thing was impressive; this mode of slipping a coded message right through the hands that held it in their grasp. Meant for Naseby and no one else, the very existence of such a message had eluded criminal minds and escaped discovery by the law.

Only the logic of The Shadow was sufficient to track down this riddle. On the premise that Mata Safi, of all people, would not have taken the chance she had unless some vital secret lay at stake, The Shadow had sifted out that very secret.

A study of these gems and their significance by The Shadow was exactly what Mata Safi had been ordered to prevent. Some mighty mind had given The Shadow credit for an ability to guess the existence of the riddle and had therefore betrayed the fact in an effort to forestall the thing that had not even been in process!

For in that visit to Weston's office, Cranston had not originally cared about the imitation Tear-drops. He'd been interested in finding that man of murder, Count Bela Zurich.

Here was a nut within a nut, the sort of thing that always intrigued The Shadow. It was to alter his course from this moment on, though the calm Mr. Cranston did not say so.

What could the coded message mean?

That again was Cranston's question, the answer to be provided by his other self, The Shadow.

For several minutes Cranston studied the writing on the wall, then made this calm analysis:

"Those letters promise a multitude of combinations," declared Cranston. "There seems to be no index to their sequence unless it can be found in the gems themselves. Though their girdles are cut to an identical size, there must be a difference in their weight.

"It is a question of karats, which can readily be determined." With that, Cranston unplugged the projector and turned on the room lights. "So I shall weigh these semi-precious stones and proceed from there" – he paused and then delivered the proviso "provided my theory proves correct."

Taking the baubles from their lodging places, Cranston weighed them thoughtfully in his hand, and finally added:

"Count Zurich must still be found and made to answer for his crimes. I have persuaded my friend, the police commissioner, to give me a free path to that objective. After I have reached it, you will hear from me again."

Pouring the code-bearing minerals into a chamois bag, Lamont Cranston pocketed the latter and bowed his departure, which marked the beginning of the strangest trail in the whole career of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XVII

JANICE MORELAND gave one of her prettiest frowns and asked:

"How many L's are there in the word 'holiday'?"

Looking up from the newspaper, Ted Trent shook his head. Much though he regarded Janice as the exception, he was sometimes willing to accept the argument he'd often heard, that all blondes were dumb.

Ted and Janice were in their favorite restaurant, chosen because it had booths that were properly secluded; thus Ted could really voice his sentiments.

"Here I'm trying to get some lead on Cranston" – Ted slapped the newspaper as he spoke – "just on the chance that I can help him even if he doesn't want it. And you start talking about a holiday!"

"I'm talking about a word," retorted Janice. "It's only a question of spelling. Besides, you know what Cranston is doing. Vincent told us."

"What Vincent has told us during the past week," declared Ted with a smile, "could be added on one finger of one hand. Cranston is still hunting for Zurich, that's all."

"But Vincent told us how he was hunting," reminded Janice. "He's going to every known gambling resort within a hundred miles of New York, hoping to find Zurich's men."

"You mean Cranston is hoping they'll find him," corrected Ted, "because if they do, they'll tell Zurich. Then if Zurich decides to put the clamp on Cranston, he'll have to show himself. And then the law will bag Zurich" – Ted snapped his fingers – "just as easy as that."

Janice nodded to agree it was just that easy.

"But suppose Zurich doesn't care about Cranston," suggested Ted, leaning forward and adopting a confidential air. "What if he's satisfied to let the police keep hunting Cranston, which they're supposed to be

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doing anyway? It keeps the heat off Zurich, doesn't it, and saves him a lot of trouble."

"Eventually, though, he'll have to settle Cranston."

"Yes, eventually, but why now? If I were Zurich" – Ted sat back let his rugged features form a conniving scowl – "I'd let Cranston keep on playing hide-and-seek until I found the real Twelve Tear-drops, if they're anywhere around."

Janice hadn't thought of that angle, but she could see its possibilities. Her blue eyes were admiring as she said:

"You know so much, Ted –"

"I just use judgment," interrupted Ted, modestly, "and I must admit I learned a lot from Cranston. But after all, I know a few things on my own."

"Like the number of L's in 'holiday'?"

This time Ted couldn't help laughing. For persistence, you couldn't equal Janice and there was something cute in her way of being stubborn.

"You win," chuckled Ted. "The word 'holiday' has just one 'L' and no more."

"Then I'll have to start all over," mourned Janice. "Do you know, I really thought I had it!"

"Had what?"

"The message on those Tear-drops that weren't Buddha's. See?"

Janice handed Ted a sheet of paper which was all scribbled with letters and little check-marks. At the bottom Janice had inscribed her final finding:

HOLLIDAY HILL

"Where did you get these?" queried Ted. "You couldn't have remembered them."

"I copied them while Cranston was talking in the dark," explained Janice, "and see? I marked them according to colors; one, two, three, for red, white and green. Then I began to think that maybe that was their right order, so I put them that way –"

"And got this!"

"Not right away, but after I tried words. The first I used was 'Hill' because it looked so easy. And then along came 'Holliday' which was the only way to work in 'Day', but now I find it's wrong!"

A sudden idea struck Ted. He said:

"Come on."

Where Ted took Janice proved to be a book store only a half block from the restaurant. There Ted found a big road atlas and began checking the names of towns in the states that neighbored New York City.

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"Here it is!" exclaimed Ted suddenly. "Holliday Hill and with two 'L's' just like you needed, Janice! Now for one of those comprehensive guide-books on that shelf over there!"

The guide proved really comprehensive.

It told all about the town of Holliday and what was better, the famous Hill a few miles outside. From away back, a wealthy Colonial settler named Hubert Holliday had built his house upon a hill, so he could watch for Indians in all directions. Rock being plentiful in that area, the farsighted Mr. Holliday had constructed his home of stone, so flaming arrows could not ignite it.

The building had grown into a clumsy castle, long since abandoned, but still a notable landmark. It was worth a visit because it was in a famous cavern district, about midway between the Golden Grotto (admission \$.50, long tour \$1) and Dunkelkopfer's Cave (admission free but donations accepted) where a hermit of that name had languished for a brief span of sixty-three years, learning bird-calls and transcribing the language of all species to an illuminated parchment now harbored under glass in the State Museum.

"From Golden Grotto to Dunkelkopfer's Cave," read Janice, "mileage twenty-three point six. From junction with paved highway Number Sixty-eight, turn two point three miles north to dirt road leading up to Holliday Hill. At one point four, a sign points to path which may be followed on foot, point seven, to the castle originally constructed in 1713 -"

"When Susan Bigelow was probably a very little girl," interrupted Ted, taking the guide book and putting it back on the shelf. "So transcribing the past to the present, I would suggest, Miss Bigelow, that we pay an immediate visit to our esteemed friend Hubert Holliday."

"Summon the conveyance," returned Janice, "and don't forget to bring the bird whistles, Friend Dunkelkopfer."

"Costumes first," suggested Ted. "I'll go back to the hotel and climb into some dungarees. You can stop at the apartment and pick one of your sporting outfits."

"Tennis or yachting?"

"We're going to climb a big hill," said Ted, patiently, "where there are rocks and brambles. Those sort of clothes wouldn't stand the gaff. I know you've managed with less, but there won't be a handy costume shop waiting at the end of this crime-hunting excursion."

"I took up riding once," remarked Janice, brightly, "and in some ways there's nothing rougher, as I found out. I still have the outfit that made me look the perfect horsewoman that I wasn't. How would that do?"

"Fine," assured Ted, "but don't include the spurs. We're going by car and the sooner we get there the better."

Less than an hour later, Ted hauled a coupe to a stop outside of Janice's apartment to find the girl awaiting him. It was well into the evening and with a hundred-odd miles ahead, some of it over secondary highways, the expedition promised to be an all-night job.

How tangible the clue that Janice had uncovered, Ted wasn't certain; but incongruous though it seemed, the discovery of the words "Holliday Hill" engraved on the spurious Tear-drops of Buddha, was too remarkable to be a mere coincidence.

Only briefly did Ted Trent feel doubts toward undertaking this enterprise which in a sense was a privilege belonging to Lamont Cranston. Then Ted argued that if Cranston wanted others to stay under wraps, he should at least inform them how to reach him, should they have ideas of their own.

At least Janice Moreland had gained the clue to Holliday Hill quite on her own and therefore she and Ted had a right to make the most of it. What made Ted smile was the notion that if Janice had been a better speller, she might have passed up the clue entirely.

Maybe Ted Trent could improve his own spelling somewhat. From the jaunty way he drove the car, he apparently thought that Holliday Hill still had some connection with a holiday.

It didn't.

There was one man who knew, but Ted hadn't asked The Shadow.

CHAPTER XVIII

LIKE some mythical monster, the crumbling gray castle bulked ominously in the pale moonlight, looming across one's shoulder from whatever angle it was viewed.

The thing gave Janice Moreland the shudders as she crawled among the gaunt, dull rocks, hoping to find something worthy of this search. Ted was right, there were plenty of bramble bushes, but the whip-cord riding habit was good protection, and its dark tone made her invisible.

Yet Janice would have traded this slow-motion ordeal with its suspense of the approaching unknown, for a dozen incidents like her quick flight from Welk's studio. Somehow, the city itself resembled a great enfolding cloak that carried protection in its folds; but the loneliness of the vast, bleak countryside created terrors of its own.

Startled, as the bough of a scrub pine brushed her shoulder, Janice stumbled forward, caught her boot in a rocky crevice and sprawled into a thick bush that seemed like a horde of invisible claws, plucking at her as some hawk would snatch a hapless pigeon.

Then Ted was on the scene with blinking flashlight, undertoning for Janice to hush.

"They've found this place too," informed Ted, "whoever they are. We've got to get away from this hill before they find us. It will soon be dawn; we've wasted more time than I thought."

Not Janice.

She'd lived through years during the past few hours that they had spent in probing stone-clogged cellars and other portions of the ruin once known as Holliday Castle. This business of searching around the building had been another of Ted's bright ideas that was leading to nowhere except trouble.

Getting out of it was Ted's job, so Janice left it to him. Characteristically, Ted chose the toughest way.

Slight blinks of guarded flashlights proved Ted's contention that prowlers were about, during the circuit that he made to bring Janice to the one part of the hill-top that they had meticulously avoided until now. It was the brow of what amounted to a cliff, though Ted regarded it as just a rugged slope.

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Maybe that was because Ted was rugged in his own right. Janice certainly knew she wasn't when Ted helped her right over the brow into what seemed a ride down a roller coaster without the roller coaster. Ted's arm gripped Janice, breaking the tumble, until a shaggy bunch of brush ended the mad descent.

All Ted said was:

"That was getting out of it."

"Into it, I'd call it!" emphasized Janice. "What are we going to do now?"

"Work down the slope. It will be easy from here on."

"And what's your idea of easy?"

Ted gave a brief laugh.

"We could have worked down slowly," he explained, "but we were in a hurry. Now we can afford to take our time."

"You think so?" Pointing through the scraggly brush, Janice indicated lights that were already working down the slope but in a fashion more conservative and round-about. "Are we going to have company, or aren't we?"

"They can't be searching for us," argued Ted, "at least not this soon. I wonder –"

He paused, weighed it a moment, then:

"That message read 'Holliday Hill' but it didn't say Hill-top, or Castle."

"How could it?" queried Janice. "There weren't enough stones."

Ted didn't dispute the point; he merely stuck to his theme.

"This is really the hill, this rugged side," he said. "The rest is just a back slope. Here's where we should have hunted in the first place."

"For what?"

"For whatever we're supposed to find. Right now, our best bet is to burrow deeper into this brush, which is about the heaviest on the hill and the most difficult to reach. We can hope those fellows with the lights find what they're looking for before they reach us."

The argument was sensible so Janice followed Ted's lead in seeking the best hiding place. They found a space nicely hollowed in the rock, its front completely obscured by the brush. It couldn't have been a better nook if made to order. Then Ted suddenly found that such was its very fault.

"Look, Janice!"

There was enough moonlight to reveal the steel glint at the back of the tapering hollow, visible only from behind the bushes that otherwise obscured it from outside eyes. A flat metal surface, set upright in the chiseled rock, Ted's discovery represented a sizeable door, irregularly shaped yet large enough for three or

more people to enter.

At no spot, however, was there anything resembling a crack or opening by which this barrier could be moved!

"It's a cave," established Ted. "We should have expected one in this limestone region with its golden grotto and hermit's hang-out. Right under the castle, too, which probably means that it's the only outlet, since the other way is blocked. Only somebody has already converted it to their own use."

"And now others are looking for it," reminded Janice, "and since they must know it's around, they won't stop until they find it. That means they'll uncover us first."

"Not if we get into the cave –"

"But how? This isn't one of those Aladdin caves where magic words make it open."

"Aladdin didn't have a cave."

"Of course he did. That's where he found the wonderful lamp."

"I guess that's right," admitted Ted, "but it was Ali Baba who opened the cave by speaking words."

"So it was," recalled Janice. "Only he couldn't remember them."

"He remembered them. It was his cousin or somebody who didn't. That story never convinced me, though."

"Well, here's a sealed cave. You ought to be convinced now."

"I don't mean about the cave," argued Ted. "I mean I never believed that anybody could forget two simple little words like 'Open Sesame'."

Ted was looking right at the steel door as he spoke that magic couplet. A moment later he was staring at something else, a deeper space beyond. For with the pronouncing of those words from the Arabian Nights, the smooth steel door slithered into the stony hillside, opening a path to safety from the hunters on the slope.

Ali Baba had nothing on Ted Trent!

CHAPTER XIX

IF Janice hadn't jogged Ted forward, they'd never have gotten through the door before it closed. Ted was too stupefied to take advantage of the situation if his companion hadn't come to his aid.

As they shoved past the barrier that almost brushed them as it closed, they saw the apparatus responsible for the double action. It was a short wave job, hooked to the mechanism of the door, tuned to pickup and respond to the famous phrase that was reputed to control the entrance of a fabled cave.

And this cavern surpassed fable.

At the end of a short passage, Ted and Janice came into a lighted chamber hung with stalactites, stumped with stalagmites, and flowing with rock crystal. Yet the gorgeous gifts of nature that filled this wonderland were mild compared with the luxuries that human hands had lavished.

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Here were the gold and silver screens, the jeweled tapestries, the other sumptuous furnishings that had once belonged to Thangra, Rajah of Bildapore. Their resemblance to the stage sets that Naseby had ordered Welk to duplicate were scarcely more than coincidental. All these trappings had purposely been dulled, so they would pass as the theatrical properties homeward bound. Now installed where they belonged, there was no need for sham. Everything had been polished to the full, so that the jewels flashed like brilliant stars and the delicate filigrees shone like lace-work woven by elfin hands.

Most magnificent of all was the rajah's throne in the very center of this deeply-recessed cavern. On the throne sat a portly potentate, none other than Thangra, ex-ruler of Bildapore, attired in bejeweled robes and wearing a gem-studded crown.

Beside him, as watchful guardians stood tawny men in loin clothes, armed with such formidable weapons as long, curved scimitars and big, funnel-mouthed muskets. All the pageantry of the Orient was here transcribed in reality, including the languid creature that reclined on the golden divan near the rajah's throne.

She rose in alarm as the guards sprang forward. It was Mata Safi, truly Oriental now, in a costume that consisted of clustered jewels, spaced according to propriety and connected by strands of beaded gems. More tigerish than ever, this royal consort would have flung herself between those scimitars and at least one neck for which the blades were intended, if other intervention had not arrived.

In a darkened corner just within the passage through which Ted and Janice had strolled into this death trap stood an unseen figure cloaked in black. How The Shadow had arrived here was one question; what he did and why he did it, became two others.

With a quick gesture, The Shadow flung aside both cloak and hat; spinning to the passage proper, he lunged into the scene as Lamont Cranston, apparently some one who had simply come along with Ted and Janice. They of all present, were most surprised to see this madcap rescuer.

All that Cranston retained of his other personality was an automatic, which he used as a warding bludgeon against the slashing scimitars. Deftly, he beat off those strokes with criss-cross slashes while Ted was flinging Janice from harm's way. By then, Mata Safi was able to place her gem-studded form between the scimitar men and the pair that Cranston had rescued.

Away from the attackers, Cranston beat the blasts of the big-mouthed guns by diving back to the passage. The sword men followed him while the gun squad was reloading, but again Cranston had an answer for his adversaries. He reached the door that answered to the name of Open Sesame and pressed the switch he found there.

Open Sesame opened without Open Sesame.

From the bramble-covered cavern mouth, Cranston fired quick shots back along the passage. Oddly his aim was off, for he missed the swordsmen entirely, but as Cranston, his aim was not supposed to have The Shadow's precision.

At least the process brought results.

Those shots produced shouts from the outside slope. Surging to the battle came an ill-assorted group who plunged through the opening and blazed shots of their own at the rajah's retiring scimitar squad.

Unnoticed as they passed him, Cranston simply followed with the surge. With these new invaders he was trapped in the mesh that Thangra provided. Reaching the throne room, the arrivals no longer had a chance to

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overtake the swordsmen, because they were flanked by the reloaded musketoons held by the rest of Thangra's bodyguards.

The invaders stopped short and Cranston with them, though he was careful to stay in the center of the cluster to have the benefit of human shields should the musketoons go off. As for Ted and Janice, they were staring, astonished, from the corner where Mata Safi had pressed them.

Those men from the hillside were headed by Count Zurich. With him were Rouge and Noir and a pair of secondary ruffians who looked quite as murderous as Zurich's favorite killers. These were the enemies that Ted and Janice had eluded, only to fall into the iron grip of Thangra, one time Rajah of Bildapore!

It was a tense scene.

From his throne, Thangra looked toward Mata Safi to learn her choice regarding these trapped foemen. A mere gesture from the bejeweled consort would have meant death for all. Instead, Mata Safi pointed a slender thumb upward.

Doubt clouded Thangra's heavy brow. He did not approve such mercy; if he had, he would have delivered it himself. But Mata Safi had an explanation for her whim.

Jewels undulating with every motion of her vibrant form, this lithesome creature approached the rajah's throne and delivered a sparkling bow. Then in a tone as hard as the glint of the gems that clothed her, Mata Safi queried:

"Why give swift death to those who do not deserve it?"

Such language humored the rajah. He waved for his dozen servants to huddle the prisoners toward the throne. It was then that Ted Trent realized how badly he had again injured Cranston's well-laid plans.

If left untrammelled, Cranston would have counted on Zurich's band to cancel off the rajah's crew. Cranston himself could have acted as the final arbiter, with guns. That fact drove home to Ted, although he didn't realize how much more effectively Cranston could have managed it while caparisoned as The Shadow, for Ted had not guessed the secret of such dual identity.

What The Shadow had done was throw away his leading trump. If he'd played his cloaked self in drawing off Thangra's cohorts, he would have become an immediate target for Zurich's crew which would have placed him right between. As Cranston, The Shadow was banking on the future, having eliminated one faction – Zurich's – by letting the balance swing the other way.

The Shadow, a prisoner like the rest, was trying a double game and counting on another person whose method was the same: Mata Safi.

Well did the calm-faced Cranston know that Mata was indifferent to the fate of the throng at large. Her purpose was to save the life of one man, Ted Trent, if only to gloat her triumph over her blonde rival, Janice Moreland.

To cover that purpose, the gem-spangled brunette had decreed life for all, rather than arouse the rajah's jealousy. Even now, as she let her cold eyes rove the group, Mata gave them moments of warmth when they met Ted's gaze.

If Ted happened to be too strained to guess the truth, so was the rajah.

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"Before we arrange your torture," announced Thangra, addressing the prisoners in perfect English, "you may have the privilege of stating how you learned of my present residence."

Cranston did not deign a reply, but Zurich decided to play policy. Count Bela wasn't his usual jaunty self, for he was clad in old clothes instead of tuxedo and gray hat. Being out of character, he could afford to act it.

"On account of Grenshaw's letters," stated Zurich. "We found a few that he'd sent to this man."

Zurich's thumb nudge indicated Cranston, whose face maintained its calm. Again, Ted groped for the answer and found it. Cranston must have weighed the gems and placed them in the order that spelled Holliday Hill; then, after tracing Zurich, he had faked letters that looked like Grenshaw's and let them fall into Bela's eager hands.

All toward the crux of bringing two murderous bands into a final fray!

Thangra's eyes were fixed on Cranston. Finding that this prisoner preferred silence, the rajah spoke instead.

"I was no fool to trust Grenshaw," affirmed Thangra, "because I had no other choice. The real fool was Naseby, because he trusted me. Twice a fool, to think that I would let him have the matchless Tear-drops of Buddha as a reward for helping me import my other wealth."

As he spoke, the rajah removed his crown and slowly revolved it in the light. The sparkle from the golden band was dazzling, for it was girded alternately with rubies, diamonds and emeralds, twelve in all. The real Tear-drops, these, gracing the crown that Thangra wore as ruler of this underground domain which he had chosen as a substitute for his lost realm of Bildapore!

"Of course I promised Naseby the Tear-drops," continued Thangra, "but I said that first I would deliver tokens to represent them. I knew how those replicas with their secret message would appeal to Naseby's avarice. Having been told how he could read it, he would do so, and come here in good faith expecting to exchange the spurious for the real."

Carefully, Thangra replaced the priceless crown upon his head. Rising from his throne, he gestured for the guards to herd the prisoners to corners of the cavern. With a gesture calling for Mata Safi to follow, Thangra turned away; then paused long enough to deliver this ominous pronouncement:

"What Naseby would have experienced, once he came here, you will all suffer in varying degrees. As ruler of Bildapore I held power over life and death" – his broad face wreathed in an evil smile, the rajah let his ugly eyes wallow in their fatty sockets, as he added gloatingly: "And pain."

Then, accompanied by Mata Safi who had so thoughtfully reminded him of his royal privilege, Thangra, former tyrant of Bildapore, strode from his throne cavern to plan the delight that was to be his – delight that would depend upon the anguish that he delivered unto others!

CHAPTER XX

HOUSED in a limestone niche that resembled a crude cell, Lamont Cranston was waiting steadfastly along with others who were similarly trapped.

The jitters were creeping over Ted Trent, who was in an adjoining compartment, but he was trying not to show it, hoping that his example would help Janice Moreland bear the strain.

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And then, into this realm of the lost who could only wait, swayed the creature who had suggested their ill-fate: Mata Safi.

Arms akimbo, shoulders erect, her head raised in a hauteur that suited the disdain her features registered, Mata Safi began a slow tour of the niches where the prisoners were segregated.

Cranston's face remained impassive; Ted's was grim. Zurich registered a sneer and turned away; his followers snarled angrily. Janice was the last to receive the cold eye and her own glare seemed lost on Mata Safi.

Once a lady with a dash of leopard, Mata Safi now seemed all leopard, with very little lady.

From his stony cubicle, Cranston watched where Mata Safi went. He knew that those cold eyes had missed nothing during the tour. In the course of her rounds, Mata Safi had spied exactly what Cranston hoped, the cloak and hat that lay otherwise forgotten in the gloom near the outer passage.

She had paused there to gather in those garments. Bundled under one arm, they scarcely showed as she started what seemed the beginning of another round. Then, stooping slinkily along the wall, this creature of changing moods arrived with a warning whisper beside the low stone barrier behind which Ted Trent stood.

Into Ted's motionless hands, Mata Safi thrust the garments she had found. Her voice became an alluring purr, actually warming in its tone, as she confided in the astonished prisoner.

"He is here, The Shadow!" spoke Mata Safi. "Where he has gone, I do not know, but he left these. If they aid him in the darkness, they will do the same for you. Watch where I go; then put these on – and follow!"

Soft though those words were, they reached the real owner of the black regalia, in his coop not too far distant. Watching Mata Safi resume her mannequin pose and strut in jewelled splendor past the guards, Cranston turned in Ted's direction just as his fellow-prisoner was about to fling away the unrequested gift.

Low, calm, but audible was Cranston's tone:

"Wait!"

Ted waited. He owed some courtesy to Cranston after all those previous mistakes. Noting an upward gesture of Cranston's hands, Ted tossed the bundle of black. Cranston caught it with a dip that carried him from sight.

If Ted had watched, he would have observed that his friend did not reappear.

Instead, The Shadow emerged from the limestone niche. Only briefly did his cloaked form flit like a passing swirl of smoke; then he was lost in the darkness along the cavern walls.

Lost to the sharp eyes of the rajah's servitors who paced these premises with scimitars and musketoons. If Ted had tried it, his chances would have been slim; but this garb of black fitted with Cranston's skill at choosing darkened paths, an aptitude he always demonstrated as The Shadow.

It was when he had reached the upper end of a lighted passage that The Shadow openly moved into sight. Eager hands clutched his cloaked arm and drew him toward a pair of crude stone steps, leading upward to a mass of broken beams that were tilted like a flock of giant jackstraws.

And Mata Safi, in the dimness that obscured the hard glint of her clustered jewels, was soft and soulful in the tone she thought was heard by Ted Trent, the man whose love she coveted.

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"There is a way up through the ruins," breathed Mata Safi. "Easy to find from here, but not from above. It is dawn now, you can find your way out, but be careful!"

"We shall meet later, when I am free of the rajah." Momentarily there was a hard significance in Mata's voice. "I never cared for him; it was Grenshaw who persuaded me to act as an inducement in the scheme.

"And why not?" They were on the stairs now and though she halted, Mata still clung to The Shadow's arm. "I shall see that I gain enough of this stolen wealth including the Twelve Tear-drops!"

"It will be mine" – Mata's words were breathless – "and yours, wherever you await me! But wait" – the hands clutched tighter – "I know your wish and I shall grant it before you ask it. I shall save your friends. Believe me."

Mata Safi sent The Shadow up the route that he already knew, for it was by probing the empty ruin that he had reached the secret cavern.

Blended with blackness, The Shadow paused to watch Mata Safi return soft-footed toward the passage below. As her sleek form turned the corner, he swung about and followed, his glide as silent as Mata's feline tread.

There was a doorway just past the turn. There The Shadow saw Mata pause, her fingers clenching at her hip as though seeking a knife she wished were there. Then, catlike as before, Mata glided through the doorway.

Again, The Shadow was within observation distance of the thing that followed. The room, hewn from a side cavern, contained a filigreed desk at which Thangra sat toying with tiny puppets, representing the victims whom he intended to torture for his own and Mata's enjoyment. From the rajah's sash extended the jewelled handle of an Oriental dagger and Mata's fingers crept for the weapon like a snake approaching an unseeing prey.

Before the blade was half-drawn, Thangra sensed it. Swinging about in his chair, he saw Mata Safi whip away, carrying the dagger with her. From his other hip, the rajah hauled an ancient pistol that looked like a miniature of the blunderbuss guns his followers carried.

Which would have won, Mata's back-hand knife thrust or Thangra's rising aim, was a question never to be answered. Ahead of both came the whirling figure of The Shadow.

Plucking Thangra's heavy pistol with one hand, The Shadow sent the rajah reeling with an elbow sweep of the same arm. Simultaneously, he caught Mata's wrist with a wrench that flung the dagger one direction and shoved Mata toward the door. The jewelled creature was momentarily astonished; then, frantically, she reached her feet and dashed down the passage to the lower cavern.

Stopping the rising rajah with a fling of the fancy table, The Shadow wheeled from the doorway carrying the borrowed pistolette. Footsteps were coming in response to Mata's call and too well did The Shadow know why. By bringing the guards, Mata hoped to dispose of The Shadow along with Thangra while she tried her own hand at rescuing Ted Trent, the man she realized had not worn The Shadow's garb.

Thrusting the big pistol beneath his cloak, The Shadow seized a huge mace that hung just inside the doorway. Instead of turning to meet arriving foemen with that cumbersome weapon, The Shadow sped for the rough-hewn stairs. The long-handled mace had other advantages than that of a battle-axe; it was suited aptly to a test The Shadow saw for it.

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With terrific strokes, The Shadow slashed the great blade into the lowermost of the fallen timbers, chopping huge chunks with every stroke. Then, as dark faces came glaring from below, he turned and flung the mace at the lifting musketoons. Thangra's men dived pell-mell with their weapons and The Shadow, following the fling that he had made, came headlong after the clattering mace.

Something crackled just above and with it a heavy timber sagged and split the one The Shadow had chopped. Another great beam toppled sideways, releasing two others that formed a rough arch across the narrow steps. A stone block quivered higher up and overbalanced another that formed a support for more above it.

The very foundations of Holliday Castle were being stirred as if by a giant's invisible hand, but there were no witnesses to the slow-motion growth of this gradual catastrophe. Even its sounds were drowned by the strident laugh that came from the turn below the stairs.

Like a prophecy of a greater force to come, The Shadow had struck into the midst of Thangra's rallying tribe. Musketoons were swinging to flank him before he could pass the rising scimitars that barred his path, but The Shadow didn't wait. He let blast with the rajah's pistolette and the spreading hail from its funnel mouth cleared a path through which he drove, whirling only to fling the one-shot weapon at Thangra, who was aiming the pistol's twin from the door of the side cavern.

Dodging as he pulled the trigger, Thangra merely marred a few minor stalactites that hung like stony icicles above the limestone passage.

They were after The Shadow, all of them, but he had become a streak of living blackness, beyond the range of their clumsy guns. Swirling into the great lower cavern, The Shadow furnished another of his timely laughs, but not as a taunt for those he had left behind him. Here was new chaos that demanded his prompt attention.

Mata Safi had freed Ted Trent by calling off Thangra's watch-dogs, but she'd bettered matters for a clan of undesirables as well. Count Zurich and his cronies had reached a stock-pile consisting of the weapons that had been taken from them. Their various shooting irons lay in front of the rajah's throne and two men had found their guns already: Rouge and Noir.

Turned, that pair were covering Ted and Janice, at the same time watching Mata Safi as she tried to slink away. Coming up with his own gun, Zurich was announcing that he'd keep control of those desirable jewels and their human supplement, when The Shadow's challenge relieved the monotony of the one-sided issue.

Wheeling savagely to meet this new contender, Zurich and his undesirables received the rajah's throne all at once. They built them big and heavy in Bildapore; hence The Shadow could have found no better missile in opening negotiations. Scattering as the overturning object bounded in their very midst, none of Zurich's men saw The Shadow traveling in the throne's wake.

Up from the floor, a long black swooping figure scooped the automatics that had formerly been Cranston's, took another whirl and with it disgorged a round-house volley that scattered Zurich's crowd still further.

They thought The Shadow would stay around for battle, but with one of his elusive fades, he came behind Ted and Janice, and started them toward the lower passage with a command that brooked no argument. Away again, The Shadow still remained elusive, even to the sharp eyes of Mata Safi, who had reached the overturned throne and was leaning there, staring one way, then another.

A fierce shout from Zurich changed the tide of battle. Thangra's crowd was arriving, followed by their master, and this called for all-out action. Two factions launched into a head-on fray, the long-delayed battle

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that The Shadow had originally planned. But it lasted only until Thangra's shouts won out. A commanding presence, even to his foemen, Thangra produced concerted effort with his cry:

"The Shadow!"

That was right. The Shadow! He was the menace to all concerned, a fact that Zurich echoed in loud-lunged style. They looked for The Shadow and heard his strange, defiant laugh, from some untraceable corner of the cavern.

Mata Safi had heard something else.

That thunder from the upper passage couldn't be the arrival of some new human horde. Who had started it, Mata could guess, but she had less doubt regarding the result. Thangra, Zurich and the rest saw a flash of scintillating gems taking their human carrier toward the exit that Ted and Janice had already found.

Then, Mata's resplendence was suddenly blacked out, not by the gloom of the passage, but by a cloaked shape that overtook her.

It was The Shadow, also taking to flight!

As he spun into the passage, The Shadow lashed back two shots to cover his swift exit, but his foemen weren't deterred by that feeble show of a once vaunted prowess. They thought they had routed The Shadow and that now was the time to go after the kill.

They thought and went too late.

Shouts, barks of guns were drowned by the mighty thunder that roared into the cavern, literally splitting the walls of the wide upper passage. All of old Holliday's Castle was arriving in a flood-tide of stone and timbers that spread into a mammoth pool, as turbulent as any tidal wave. Great chunks of stone formed a flying barrage that cleared the heads of wildly darting men and landed with titanic crashes to block the lower outlet from the cavern.

Other masses, splitting as they struck, flayed their human targets like chunks of oversized shrapnel. Dodging rock that was gauged not in pounds but tonnage, was too serious a pastime even for Thangra and Zurich.

Rajah and gamester were felled and buried with their followers under the debris that rose until it blocked the passage that had served it as a sluice. A deep silence settled in this cavern, where excavation would be necessary to reclaim the lost treasures of Bildapore.

Lost somewhere deep in the dust-clouded pile was the cause of this mighty climax, the golden crown that contained the fabled gems known as the Twelve Tear-drops of Buddha.

Far down the slope, Lamont Cranston was greeting men who had arrived with the dawn, according to his schedule. They were the local authorities, with Commissioner Weston as a visiting delegate. Nearby were Ted Trent and Janice Moreland, staring upward like the rest, watching the grayish cloud of dust that filtered steadily from the brush upon the steep, like the smoking fissure of a newly formed volcano.

There was one other person.

Clutching the folds of a black cloak that now enveloped her, Mata Safi didn't even know it was The Shadow's. Half-dazed, she was wondering how she had arrived here, wondering too how far her testimony

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would go toward lessening her guilt as an accomplice in the crimes of others.

After all, she had only teamed with Zurich in order to report his actions to Thangra. True, she had once launched violence in the form of a dacoit now buried with the rest of Thangra's followers, but Commissioner Weston was here and alive to prove that the attempt hadn't clicked.

How far Mata Safi had redeemed her past in relation to a future reckoning would be a problem for some keen brain to decide by weighing fact against fact until his unerring mind tipped the final balance.

Perhaps that judge would be The Shadow!

THE END