

THE WASP

Maxwell Grant

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THE WASP

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CHAPTER I. THE WASP'S NEST

CRIME was rampant in Manhattan. The fact was evident everywhere. George Ambril noted the symptoms as he rode in the subway, where he watched passengers reading newspaper headlines over each other's shoulders. The same was true when he took a taxicab from the subway to his apartment house.

Every traffic cop along the line gave the cab a thorough scrutiny, as though expecting to find it filled with thuggish men armed with machine guns. The cabby, in his turn, was wary. He looked nervously at every car that passed him, fearing that such vehicles might contain marauders.

The cops became apologetic when they saw George Ambril. He was a sleek, well-groomed young man, with a thin mustache and a bland smile; certainly not the sort who would defy the law. As for the cabby, he was worried because he had such an elegant passenger. He felt it his duty to protect such a rider, and he pictured Ambril as the type of target that crooks would choose.

When jitters gripped traffic officers and cab drivers in broad daylight, it was quite obvious that the present

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crime wave had reached an unprecedented height. Anything might happen, anywhere, at any time, and the one man who seemed unaware of it was George Ambril.

The bland young man had a very good reason to preserve his pose of unconcern. He happened to know a great deal about the crimes that had so far baffled the law. He knew the stories in back of the newspaper headlines.

There weren't any mobbies with machine guns; no big-shots who snarled orders at ugly hordes. Such stuff belonged in the days of prohibition. Crime had gone streamlined, although the police did not know it. The men who were doing the dirty work were smart-looking chaps like George Ambril, and their leader dealt in crime as a highly profitable, big-scale business.

As yet, the law had not even heard of crime's greatest profiteer, the Wasp.

There was money in crime. The Wasp had proven it; not for himself alone, but for all who served him. George Ambril could testify to that fact, for he had made his share by serving his hidden master.

As the cab swung from the avenue and pulled up in front of a pretentious apartment house, Ambril gave a contemptuous smile which expressed his opinion of all Manhattan.

Ambрил wasn't even a New Yorker, nor were any of the others who served the Wasp. That was why their chief was clever. He imported his workers, like Ambril, and showed them opportunities of which they made the most. They were a bold lot, who could pull anything from stick-ups to murder, in first-class style.

The Wasp told them how; they did the rest. For weeks, the police had been rounding up racketeers and hoodlums and overlooking gentlemanly strangers of Ambril's ilk. By the time a worker had done his quota of crooked jobs, the Wasp sent him out of New York. For the Wasp was too smart to miss a trick.

Like a giant octopus, he had Manhattan in his clutch and was extending his long tentacles to the distant towns where his workers came from, showing those communities what crime could be when done in expert style.

As the cab halted in front of the apartment house, Ambril regretfully tossed aside a newspaper. He would have liked to clip a front-page story from that sheet; one that told of a recent bank robbery, where masked men had begun in the cashier's office and worked outward.

Ambрил had been one of the bank robbers. The police were still looking for the mob around the Bowery and other parts of the city that Ambril had heard about, but had never visited.

Entering his apartment, Ambril scanned the place with approval. It wasn't the sort of hideaway where police would expect to find a member of the bank mob. In fact, it wasn't a hideaway at all.

Ambрил had been living here for six months, finishing out a lease. He expected to stay another month, because he was doing well as a cigar salesman, handling a high-priced brand which he placed at exclusive clubs and hotels.

There was a letter from the cigar company under the door. Ambрил opened it, and frowned. It contained news that the usual salesman would have liked. Ambрил had been given a new territory, operating out of Cincinnati. But he hadn't expected the appointment quite so soon. Still frowning, he wondered if the Wasp had heard about it.

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Very probably. The Wasp heard about everything, usually before it happened. Nervously, Ambril yanked open a desk drawer and began to thumb through stacks of bills. He'd wanted another month to pay these up. It wouldn't do to leave town with a lot of debts. Then, as Ambril's forehead relieved itself of wrinkles; his lips resumed their former smile.

Reaching for the telephone, he dialed a number. He gave his name when someone answered, and inquired if Mr. Warrendon had returned to New York. Learning that Mr. Warrendon would be back this evening, Ambril hung up the receiver and turned to the door, to answer a steady knock.

THE man who entered was of lighter build than Ambril, and younger in appearance. His manner was suave, though a trifle forced. He introduced himself, rather formally, as Jack Prenter, and Ambril nodded when he heard the name.

As the two faced each other, they looked very much alike; if they had been actors, Prenter could have served as Ambril's understudy.

"Have a drink, Prenter," suggested Ambril, as he opened a closet that contained a variety of bottles. "We're old friends. We've met before, even though we were masked."

Ambril paused, as Prenter glanced nervously toward the door. Then, in the same tone, he continued:

"Don't worry, Prenter. I always keep my voice low enough so that it won't be heard in the hall. I was phoning when you arrived. You didn't hear me, did you?"

Prenter shook his head.

"I'm going out of town," he said. "To Cleveland, to work in a branch office of the advertising agency. I heard that you were going to Cincinnati, so I thought maybe we could travel along together."

"I get it," returned Ambril, smoothly. "You've heard from the Wasp. We're to do some road work on the way."

"At a town called Richmond," nodded Prenter. "I'll show you where the place is" – he pulled a road map from his pocket – "because we're to go in your new car."

Ambril whistled softly. He hadn't told anyone that he had bought a new car. How word had reached the Wasp so soon was a real mystery to Ambril, as well as new proof that the Wasp knew everything. While Prenter was spreading the road map on the table, Ambril shoved the stack of bills in the drawer.

He was wondering if the Wasp had learned how far he had overdrawn his account. Such things didn't go well with the Wasp. Ambril's dilemma was becoming more than a mild one.

"We can start tonight," Prenter was saying, "and stop over in New Jersey. Of course, if you want me to take the car ahead, so you can meet me later –"

"Who said I'd want you to go ahead?" interrupted Ambril. "For that matter, what if I don't want to go at all?"

"It's all provided for," returned Prenter, smoothly. "I can wait until tomorrow noon. If you don't show up, someone else will join me."

"If I don't show up –"

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The words dropped from Ambril's lips like the beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead. Doubt as to where he would be tomorrow meant further doubt regarding Ambril's entire future. He wondered if the Wasp had crossed him off the list and was breaking the news gently, through Prenter. Ambril didn't want to be crossed from the list.

When names were crossed from the Wasp's list, their owners were usually rubbed out. Ambril knew. He had helped erase a few workers that the Wasp no longer wanted.

"I'll... I'll probably meet you tomorrow, Prenter," began Ambril, nervously. "I've a social matter to attend to before I go. I have to see a chap named Herbert Warrendon. He's a wealthy man, Warrendon, the sort of contact that the Wasp likes us to make. I wouldn't want to leave town without seeing him."

Prenter gave a half-doubtful nod. Watching him carefully, Ambril was trying to analyze the fellow's actual thoughts, when another knock came from the door. Ambril hesitated; then answered it. A telegraph messenger handed him an envelope.

"Probably from Warrendon," remarked Ambril, after he closed the door. "I phoned him awhile ago –"

The telegram had come from the envelope as Ambril tugged it. His eyes toward the yellow paper, Ambril was riveted by what he saw. Instead of a usual telegram, the paper was plain yellow. In large typed letters, it bore the message:

COME TO SUITE 810 HOTEL TRENTINE AT ONCE.

The message had no signature. Attached to it was a filmy thing that fluttered loose as Ambril eyed it. He reached to pick up the tiny object. It was a wasp's wing.

Stuffing the message in his pocket, Ambril walked from the apartment, with Prenter following him. When they reached the street, Ambril beckoned stiffly to a cab; then, turning to Prenter, he said jerkily:

"Here's the check for my car. You'd better take it from the garage. I may meet you tomorrow, Prenter."

"I hope so," replied Prenter, suavely. "Good luck, Ambril, wherever you're going!"

THOSE parting words were an encouragement to George Ambril, as he rode to the Hotel Trentine. He felt that there had been a touch of envy in Prenter's tone.

The message that Ambril had received was a summons to meet the Wasp in person, a privilege that came to few. Until he received the fake telegram, Ambril had never even guessed where the Wasp's lair was.

Probably Prenter didn't know, but would like to learn. To Ambril, it meant that the Wasp still considered him as useful, and would give him a chance to redeem himself for violating the strict rule of keeping within his budget. Nevertheless, he was shaky when he alighted from the cab at the Hotel Trentine.

Old-fashioned, conservative, the Trentine impressed most visitors as a place of calm. Not so with George Ambril.

From the moment that he entered the lobby, he felt himself under the surveillance of watchful clerks and bellboys. Riding to the eighth floor, Ambril noticed that the elevator operator was burly, powerful enough to settle him with a single punch.

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Along the eighth floor were doorways lining the corridor that led to Suite 810. Behind any of those doors might be watchers, ready to close in upon the hapless man who was answering the summons of the Wasp.

At the door of 810, Ambril hesitated; then realized that the mere act might produce suspicion. Summoning his nerve, he knocked, hopeful that his deed was for the best.

Automatically, the door swung inward. As Ambril stepped into a sumptuous living room, the portal closed behind him. Ahead was another door; he approached it, his footsteps hesitant. The door opened as he neared it; mechanically, Ambril continued through, to a smaller room, that ended in a curtained alcove.

There were no lights in the room. Only the gloom of dusk pervaded it; an ominous glow, like the fading of human hope. Halfway across the room, Ambril halted, fascinated by a stir of the dark—purple curtains.

He was in the lair of the Wasp, that fearful abode where few but the owner had ever entered.

What happened to those who came here was a mystery. The thought was fearful, even to George Ambril, who had answered the Wasp's own summons.

Then, as the very silence of the lair drove him almost to the point of frenzy, Ambril saw the curtains part. From between them stepped the strangest human creature that the visitor had ever beheld.

George Ambril, tool of crime, was face to face with his evil master, the Wasp!

CHAPTER II. STRANGE FOEMEN

PERHAPS the dusk, coupled with Ambril's fear—distorted vision, made the Wasp appear more grotesque than he actually was. One thing was certain: as Ambril stared, he understood why the Wasp had chosen his strange title.

Crime's overlord was a human wasp. His body was long, thin at the waist. His legs were long, like an insect's; his arms, folded across his stooped chest, looked like feelers.

For all that Ambril knew, those bent shoulders might have hidden a pair of transparent wings, completing the illusion that here was a gigantic wasp prepared to pounce upon a human prey.

As for a head, the Wasp had a large one that actually dwarfed his long, lean frame. His vision blurred at first, Ambril saw this monster only as a wasp; then, as the Wasp approached, he discerned a face which was actually human, if a devil's could be classed as such.

Distorted into a grimace that seemed permanent, the Wasp's features wore a livid gloat that impressed Ambril with their evil menace. The expression told why the Wasp had dealt unmercifully with those whom he chose to class as prey or enemies. The contortion of the face made it coarse and ugly – a shock, even to the visitor who had long served the Wasp's bidding.

When he spoke, the Wasp's tone sounded like a drone, a basso rumble that might well have been an insect's buzz magnified a thousandfold. Yet every word drilled home to Ambril, particularly as the tone carried accusation.

"You knew my rules," droned the Wasp. "All who serve me must be ready for whatever duty I command. They cannot afford to jeopardize the positions which they occupy in the eyes of the world. By placing your self in debt, you are not ready for the service which I have arranged. What excuse have you to offer?"

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It was several seconds before Ambril could find his voice. In those seconds, he did some quick thinking. He settled the matter of excuses with a single word:

"None!"

The terse reply won the Wasp's approval. His rolling drone turned to a low-buzzed laugh. Advancing, he clamped a hand upon Ambril's shoulder. At the touch, the bland man shrank away, stifling an involuntary gasp.

That touch had the sharpness of a sting!

Perhaps the Wasp was using some electric gadget to produce the sensation; possibly it was a product of Ambril's own imagination. One thing was certain: Ambril was impressed. He shrank from the sting, and the Wasp seemed pleased.

Purposely, the Wasp had turned his back toward the window, which was shaded with a slatted Venetian blind. Marred by the blind, the sunset produced an eerie twilight which made the Wasp's leering face appear monstrous.

Straining to make out those distorted features, Ambril realized that his own countenance, turned toward the light, was revealing every flicker of its expression.

"Might I inquire" – the Wasp's tone had a probing buzz – "just how you intended to pay your present debts?"

"I was going to borrow some cash," admitted Ambril. "This evening... from a friend –"

He halted, without naming the friend. The Wasp supplied the name in a sharp tone:

"Herbert Warrendon!"

Ambril nodded, more nonplused than ever. There was no use trying to hide anything from the Wasp. Apparently, the criminal overlord kept tabs on all who served him. It might be that he had heard from Prenter, to whom Ambril had expressed himself quite freely a short while ago.

Still, Ambril felt relieved. He had told the Wasp the truth. He hoped that it would count for something, for Ambril had a sinking feeling that he and the Wasp were not alone in the gloom of this room. It seemed that watchers were close, prying from nooks and alcoves, ready to snatch Ambril as a victim should the Wasp buzz the order.

Evidently, truth did count with the Wasp; not as a matter of principle, but merely as a gauge to determine the reliability of his workers.

THE big-headed man sidled away, to stop, his thin body crouched, while he rubbed his hands together in an insect's fashion. Ambril guessed right when he took the gesture for approval.

"Herbert Warrendon!" The Wasp pronounced the name with a sneer. "Why borrow money from a man so wealthy? Since you know him well, Ambril, you can follow a better course. Visit Warrendon this evening, but say nothing about money.

"Instead" – the Wasp whisked his hand into the dim glow, displaying a bright object at his fingertips – "take this! It is a duplicate key to Warrendon's wall safe, behind the hunting picture in his den.

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"There, you will find a sealed envelope marked 'Options.' Take the envelope, but nothing else. Go to dinner with Warrendon, and after you leave him, bring the envelope here. Wait!" The Wasp raised a pointing finger, before Ambril could speak. "There is just one point more."

He laid his hand upon Ambril's shoulder. This time, the Wasp's touch carried no sting. Piloting his visitor through the outer room, the Wasp stopped at the outside door and buzzed his final words close to Ambril's ear.

"If you get the envelope," spoke the Wasp, "pause to light a cigarette when you leave the house with Warrendon. It will be a signal to others. They will enter later, break open the wall safe and rifle it. Do you understand?"

Ambril understood. He was still nodding when the door dosed behind him. The robbery, happening while he was with Warrendon, would be a perfect alibi for Ambril. But the Wasp was not willing to trust the precious options to an ordinary crew of workers.

Tonight meant promotion for George Ambril. He probably would not have to join Jack Prenter tomorrow. Ambril had met the Wasp; that was enough to place him in the select circle. Henceforth, he would rate as one of the crime master's lieutenants. He would be among the chosen few who received orders directly from their chief.

Ambril was smiling congratulations to himself when he reached the street. He might have lost his smile, had he known what was happening in the Wasp's eight-story nest.

In the thick gloom of the inner room, the Wasp was making a telephone call. His eyes had a catlike gleam that enabled them to see the phone dial, despite the dusk.

"Hello." The Wasp's buzzing tone was modified. "Is this Miss Velma Corl?" Then there was a moment's pause; the eyes shone brighter and the tone sharpened. "I am sending Ambril to Warrendon's, as planned... Yes, Velma, you can post the others. And remember, they are to watch for any false moves on Ambril's part... Yes, follow him yourself. We are testing him tonight —"

In speaking to Ambril and Velma, the Wasp had not mentioned the nature of the options that he wanted from Warrendon's. That was a matter that the Wasp considered his own concern; but there were other men who classed those options as vitally important.

THOSE others were a group seated at a table in the grillroom of the exclusive Cobalt Club. They were the directors of Consolidation Metals, a corporation on the verge of bankruptcy, a fact that they were not attempting to hide.

"If Herbert Warrendon has those options," spoke one, "we can pull through. Provided, of course, that he will sell them. I talked to Basil Gannaford today. He says that he can refinance our corporation if we can show new assets."

"Warrendon will sell," put in another. "He'll want a real profit, of course, because that's his business. He specializes in quick buys. They say he never has less than fifty thousand dollars on hand at his home."

The voices carried to a corner table, where two men were dining. One was New York's police commissioner, Ralph Weston, whose squarish face wore a short-clipped mustache. The other was the commissioner's friend, Lamont Cranston; his features were hawklike, so calm that they resembled a mask.

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Mention of fifty thousand dollars brought a brisk gesture from Weston. The commissioner nudged his friend across the table, but the result was merely a leisurely response on Cranston's part.

"Hear that, Cranston?" undertoned Weston. "Such gossip is the sort that criminals overhear, to their advantage."

Cranston's expression became quizzical. Evidently he hadn't caught the conversation from the other table.

"They're talking about Herbert Warrendon," continued the commissioner. "They say he keeps fifty thousand dollars at his house, right along."

"More than that, generally," responded Cranston, in a bored tone. "Fifty thousand dollars is small change for Warrendon."

"You know Warrendon?"

"Of course." Cranston gave a slow glance at his watch. "I was thinking about dropping in on him later. I understand that he has just returned home from a trip."

Commissioner Weston became very earnest, as he leaned across the table.

"If I could talk to men like Warrendon," he said, "it would help our battle against crime. Warrendon and his sort are natural targets for criminals. Rumors of easy money have been responsible for recent crimes. This present wave is baffling, Cranston. Crooks come and go almost like ghosts –"

Cranston interrupted the commissioner's harangue with an appropriate suggestion.

"I'll drop in on Warrendon," he proposed. "I can tell him that I expect a friend in half an hour. You will be the friend, and when I introduce you to Warrendon, you can express your opinions, commissioner."

Weston accepted the offer eagerly. He urged Cranston to start at once. As the leisurely man strolled from the grillroom, the commissioner could hardly curb his impatience. He had reached the point where he actually believed that Herbert Warrendon was already threatened by criminals.

So had Lamont Cranston. He knew how far talk of wealth could carry in New York. Like Weston, he was looking for the perpetrators of the huge crime wave that had swept Manhattan; but in a different way. Cranston had a system of his own.

Outside the Cobalt Club, he stepped into a waiting limousine. Calm-toned, he gave the chauffeur an address near Warrendon's house. The chauffeur did not notice that a taxicab followed as soon as they set out. Nor did he observe Cranston in the rear of the limousine. The chauffeur was paid to keep his eyes ahead.

Cranston's leisurely pose was gone. With smooth speed, the hawk-faced passenger was sliding a secret drawer from beneath the rear seat. From the drawer he extracted a black cloak, a slouch hat, thin gloves, and a pair of formidable automatics.

Soon, Cranston was blotted from sight. The cloak was over his shoulders, the hat on his head. The automatics were stowed in special holsters; he was drawing on the gloves. His new garb practically rendered him invisible in the depths of the big car.

Lamont Cranston had become The Shadow, master of darkness. Forth on a chance trail, The Shadow would soon be meeting minions of the Wasp. Strange foemen, The Shadow and the Wasp!

Tonight's events might lead to a further crossing of their paths; to a time when they would come face to face in a duel of justice against crime!

CHAPTER III. CROSSED CRIME

IN his most dapper style, George Ambril stepped from a cab and approached the front door of Herbert Warrendon's pretentious brownstone home. Ringing the bell, he glanced about and smiled into the darkness, as though greeting hidden friends.

They were there, those friends. They were watching from cars parked along the street. The cars that they had brought were old ones; the sort that thugs would use. The occupants, too, were roughly dressed, but their tones were by no means uncouth.

One man noted the discrepancy and reminded the others of it, soon after Ambril had entered Warrendon's house.

"We're supposed to be hoodlums, for the benefit of Warrendon's servants," the spokesman said. "Remember: when we encounter them, speak roughly. We must not harm them –"

"Hey, guy!" interrupted a voice in back. "If we're going to act tough, why don't you talk that way?"

"You can depend on me," chuckled the spokesman, "in due time. For the present, we can be ourselves. As I was saying, our task is merely to overpower the servants, so that they can testify later that hoodlums were responsible for the burglary. Of course, circumstances can alter our policy."

A blotch of darkness had moved between a street lamp and the parked car. None of the disguised crooks observed it. If they had, they would not have classed it as a human form. The blotch was scarcely more than a shadow.

Beyond it, however, was a cloaked shape that blended with the darkness of a house wall. The Shadow, arriving on foot, had stopped by the car where he heard the voices. Talk was ended, but The Shadow had heard enough to form specific conclusions.

Here was a key to recent crimes.

Vanished thugs fitted with The Shadow's own theory. Police roundups had failed because crooks were of a new and unsuspected ilk. Not thugs but persons who passed as gentlemen were the members of the masked mobs that had torn Manhattan wide apart. The Shadow suspected that these workers had been imported; but that fact still remained unproven.

From the conversation in the car, The Shadow could gain no clue to the actual identity of the criminals; but he decided to let that matter wait. What he had learned, was that these men intended to invade Warrendon's premises and make trouble there.

The Shadow's natural course was to be on hand to greet them in his superb and unique style. Finding out who they were, could come later.

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As yet, The Shadow had not heard of a master crook who called himself the Wasp. Nor had he heard of George Ambril. At the present moment, the latter fact was more important. Unless The Shadow moved swiftly, the real crime would be under way before he entered Warrendon's house.

The Shadow did move swiftly, but with certain necessary detours. He kept to the gloom, which forced a roundabout course; furthermore, he stopped to check on another car, which contained a second load of silent men, who were awaiting a signal that The Shadow had not heard about.

After that, The Shadow headed for the rear street, where he contacted the cab that had followed the limousine from the Cobalt Club. Having sent the limousine home, The Shadow intended to use the cab in an emergency.

He owned the cab, as well as the limousine; the cab driver, Moe Shrevnitz, was one of The Shadow's secret agents. Unlike Stanley, Cranston's chauffeur, Moe figured often in running battles against crooks.

Moe had parked near a corner, as any hopeful cabby would, looking for a fare. From his vantage point, he had noted the absence of any lurkers along the rear street.

That settled, The Shadow undertook to enter Warrendon's house. The task proved simple enough. An unlocked window at the back of the basement served the required purpose.

MEANWHILE, a slow, but tense, drama was unfolding within the Warrendon mansion. Seated in a small reception room, George Ambril was receiving the apologies of a polite servant named Hector.

It appeared that Mr. Warrendon had not expected Mr. Ambril so soon, but Hector promised to go upstairs and inform Mr. Warrendon that Mr. Ambril had arrived.

Hector had hardly started up the stairs before Ambril was at the door of the reception room, peering avidly into the hall. He knew where Warrendon's den was – at the back of the library on the ground floor. Gauging the time that it would take him to go there and return, Ambril set himself an extra task.

On the other side of the hall was a side door leading into the house, an excellent route for the crew to use later; in fact, the very way that they would surely try. Ambril decided that an open door would help matters as the Wasp wanted them.

Instead of darting for the den as soon as Hector was out of sight, Ambril made for the side door and carefully unbolted it.

That done, Ambril moved across to the den. He turned on the light and closed the door behind him, leaving it very slightly ajar. Glancing at the pictures that lined the paneled walls, he tried to pick out the hunting scene the Wasp had mentioned. The thing was something of a problem.

One picture showed some hunting dogs; another, two men trudging along a road, with guns. A third depicted a fox hunt in active progress. It was probably the one that the Wasp meant, but when Ambril tried to move the picture, it didn't budge. So he tried the other two, which cost him valuable time, since they were tightly fixed, also.

Returning to the fox hunt, Ambril used new tactics. Instead of tugging at the picture, he used a sliding process. It finally slithered upward under pressure, and showed the door of a little wall safe; stout, but not formidable.

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Fumbling in his pockets, Ambril found the key. It fitted the lock. He was turning the key triumphantly when he heard a sound behind him.

Wheeling, Ambril saw Hector on the threshold. The servant had returned; not finding Ambril in the reception room, he had noted the light from the crack of the den door. Hector was more than a faithful servant: he was a wary one. He had armed himself with one of Warrendon's canes before coming in to accost Ambril.

Sight of Ambril's face, with its gloss changed to an ugly expression, was all that Hector needed. With a shout that carried through the house, the servant made a lunge into the den. He turned his head as he shouted, hoping that Warrendon would hear. In that moment, Ambril drove in, to meet Hector's lunge.

The swinging cane missed Ambril's head, but Hector made up for the slip. He was thwacking hard, as they reeled out into the hall. The blows that Ambril partly warded knocked the confusion from the crook's brain. He was beset with the sudden thought that overpowering Hector wouldn't be enough. The servant could still tell what he had seen.

Dodging wide of Hector's strongest stroke, Ambril yanked a revolver from his pocket and jabbed a shot straight for Hector's heart. It was luck, not good aim, that felled the servant.

Astonished at his own deed, Ambril saw Hector coil before him, dead. Out of the echoes of the gunshot, he heard footsteps on the stairs, then Warrendon's voice:

"What's happened, Hector?"

Swinging, Ambril saw Warrendon's face, a pudgy one, almost as white as the collarless shirt that the man was wearing. At the same moment, masked men surged through the side door that Ambril had unlocked. To the killer's mind flashed the thought of his own alibi. It came first. He waved toward the masked men.

"They murdered Hector!" shouted Ambril. "Look out, Warrendon, or they'll kill you, too!"

At that moment, a door shot open just across the hall. Against the light of a little pantry, Ambril saw another figure; one cloaked in black. Thoughts of an alibi sped from Ambril's mind, as he recognized the newcomer who was swinging an automatic into immediate aim.

The Shadow!

A CROOK by nature, schooled in the service of the Wasp, Ambril could not forego this chance to down crime's archfoe. He had luck with him again, for his revolver was almost aimed. His frenzy gave him remarkable speed.

Seldom had The Shadow been in such a tight spot as at this moment, when Ambril's gun took its last jog toward him, the crook's finger actually starting its trigger pull.

Then, as The Shadow made a desperate shift, the roar of half a dozen guns beat Ambril to the shot. Flayed by a deluge of bullets, the killer jounced high, his gun hand jerking upward as he completed pressure on the trigger. The bullet from Ambril's revolver zipped inches above The Shadow's head.

Ambril had seen The Shadow, but his pals from outside hadn't. They had heard Ambril put the blame on them. They took it as something that fitted the Wasp's instructions.

THE WASP

They had been told to handle Ambril if he tried a double cross. Aiming for Ambril as he wheeled to meet The Shadow, they finished him, along with his chance to drop the fighter in black!

They were masked, those roughly attired thugs, as they surged into the hallway intending to handle crime in their own way. They wanted to overpower Warrendon; to rifle his wall safe and complete crime in a way that would suit the Wasp. But their surge ended under a double attack from the flanks.

Warrendon was leaping in from one side, with a puny automatic that he had brought downstairs with him. The Shadow was coming from the other direction, seeking close-range battle. He was swinging his automatics, to drive the first crooks back upon the others – a better method than gunfire, at the outset of the fray.

Crooks reeled, shooting wide. Those in back fired uselessly, as they dodged the men who were falling back on them. The Shadow's big guns aimed, ready to drop hapless crooks with bullets before they could get away. Then, as he blasted, The Shadow took a sideward sprawl.

Warrendon was on him. Still thinking that Ambril was a friend, Warrendon mistakenly took The Shadow for a foe. The odds that The Shadow had gained over the masked crew were gone, as he flattened beneath Warrendon's pugny bulk.

Diving crooks voiced a howl of triumph as they witnessed The Shadow's sprawl.

The cloaked fighter's shots had gone as wide as theirs. Out of this new situation, the Wasp's masked invaders hoped to eliminate their chief's one challenger – The Shadow!

CHAPTER IV. CRIME RETRACED

THEY lunged as they aimed, those masked marksmen of the Wasp, and they were greeted with a real surprise. It came in the shape of Herbert Warrendon, a portly missile that hit them crosswise before they could reach The Shadow.

Flat on his back, The Shadow provided the only answer. Warrendon was half upon him, when he doubled his knees and drove both feet against the fellow, sending him on his way. It was dangerous for Warrendon, but no more so than leaving him alone would have been.

The Shadow knew that Warrendon's life depended on his own. By helping himself, he might help Warrendon later.

The leading thugs missed Warrendon when they fired. Their guns were above his level when he struck them. The bowling force of the portly man's form spoiled their shots at The Shadow.

By the time they aimed again, The Shadow had a human shield. Rolling across the floor, he hoisted Ambril's dead form with one arm and shoved his other hand into sight, with a gun.

It seemed that a dead man was delivering the spurts that issued from the gun muzzle. Many types of opponents would have fled at such a sight. The recoils of the automatic jogged Ambril's body into imitation life.

Glassy eyes were staring, dead lips wore a grotesque smile, as the head bobbed back and forth. But The Shadow's present foemen were not the type to be deceived by such an outlandish illusion.

THE WASP

They had slain Ambril themselves, and they promptly recognized The Shadow's ruse. But with such recognition, they also realized the folly of keeping up this battle. A corpse was stopping their bullets short of The Shadow. Defensively, they were safe for the present, but only because the dead weight of The Shadow's shield was disturbing his own aim.

One man, serving as leader of the masked mob, blasted a shot from the side door. The fellow was too ardent to remember that he should disguise his cry. His command for departure was given in a cultured tone, such as The Shadow had heard when these raiders were parked outside.

Warrendon failed to notice the discrepancy. The portly man was scrambling on hands and knees, seeking shelter from the shots that whizzed above his head. His ears heard nothing but the gun bursts. Even when the firing stopped, he thought he still could hear the air-splitting sounds. Safe in the doorway of his study, Warrendon looked around and blinked.

Battle was finished, as suddenly as it had begun. The rapid exchange of shots had taken place during the comparatively few seconds that Warrendon needed for his mad crawl. Masked men were piling out through the side door.

The Shadow was coming up from the floor wielding a smoking automatic, as he let Ambril's body tumble aside from its own sheer weight.

Had the crooks stayed on the ground, they would have suffered heavy losses, with doubtful chances of eliminating The Shadow. Ordinary thugs would have handled the risk; but not these men. They were not gunners by profession; not the sort to hurl themselves blindly into a path of fire. They were willing to give, but not to take.

To Warrendon's eyes, it looked like a rout, with The Shadow triumphant. But Warrendon was wrong. The Shadow's fire had been as hasty as that of the opposition. He had tried to scatter his enemies, hoping to pick them off later. They hadn't waited for the sequel.

Criminals remembered their duty to the Wasp.

Their primary purpose in every crime was to keep their identities concealed. They were choosing flight, to abide by that stringent rule. Except for two groggy men who had been cudged by The Shadow's gun strokes and a third who had received a bullet in his gun arm, the crew was practically intact.

By the time The Shadow reached the side door, to aim along an outer passage to the front street, his enemies were out of sight, dragging their stumbling pals with them. They were getting back to their cars, hoping to clear the neighborhood.

Pausing, The Shadow fired two quick shots straight upward. Hard upon the echoes, he delivered a weird, outlandish laugh that reverberated from the brownstone walls that lined the narrow passage. The taunt, like the shots, spurred the masked men into more rapid flight; but the sounds actually offset the chances for a getaway.

The Shadow had dispatched a signal to Moe, in the rear street. Obeying the summons, the speedy cabby whipped around to the front, reaching Warrendon's door to find The Shadow waiting for him. Boarding the cab while it was still in motion, The Shadow pointed out the corner that the fugitive cars had rounded.

WITHIN a few blocks, the cars were sighted. Spying the cab behind them, the gunmen opened a fire which The Shadow promptly returned. The range was too long for accuracy, but the shooting suited The Shadow.

THE WASP

The crooks were marking themselves as fugitives; in his turn, The Shadow was establishing himself as their pursuer. Should police patrol cars be encountered, they would take up the chase, along with The Shadow.

Some cool head in the front car must have recognized the folly, for the firing ceased suddenly. Trying to outdistance Moe in the straightaway, the mobsters soon learned that they were being tagged by a special high-gear cab that could keep up with them. The fleeing cars began to round corners, hoping to shake off the whippet vehicle that kept The Shadow on their trail.

Their new policy was a mistake. Moe slashed corners, hopped protruding curbs, in a most spectacular style. He was gaining at every turn; a few more blocks, and The Shadow would have the range. Abreast on a one-way street, the fleeing cars offered a double target for The Shadow's coming fire.

In a last, desperate effort, the Wasp's men tried to reverse their course. They thought that by heading back toward Warrendon's, they could deceive The Shadow and his driver.

As the cars took a corner clumsily, the occupants heard The Shadow's strident mockery, along with the roar of the pursuing cab. The laugh told them that their game would not work.

Still abreast, the cars were holding to the straightaway as the cab loomed behind them. Half from a window, The Shadow was taking steady aim, urging Moe to close the gap, only a few yards more. Moe was doing it, when catastrophe arrived only a few blocks from Warrendon's.

Taking a crossing side by side, the crook-manned cars nearly collided with a large automobile that was rolling in from the right. To avoid them, the driver of the big car yanked his machine to the left, turning the wrong direction on the one-way street. He cleared the passing cars, but shoved his huge vehicle right into the path of the cab that was on their trail.

The cab performed a whirligig spin, as Moe jammed the brakes and twisted the steering wheel. A stop on such short notice seemed impossible, but Moe managed it despite the cab's mad sway.

He couldn't avoid a crash, but he lessened the impact. The cab leaped at the big car like a small beast attacking a large one. It jolted as it sprang, cutting its lurch as fenders locked at an angle.

It was the cab that took the brunt. Built light for quick pickup, it couldn't wreck the massive vehicle it hit. The cab's hood telescoped, as the radiator smashed back upon the motor. Braced against the steering wheel, Moe escaped injury, as he was jammed deep into the front seat.

Doors crumpled; the rear seat crackled. The Shadow was pitched to the floor. That was the last Moe saw of him for the next two minutes, while men were springing from the big car, to reach the half-wrecked cab.

Moe gave a bewildered blink as he recognized the car that he had struck. It was the official car belonging to Police Commissioner Weston. The men who were asking if Moe had been hurt were Weston and his chauffeur. Slowly, Moe shook his head; then, catching a whisper from the rear seat, he nudged in that direction.

"I've got a fare in back," he informed. "Better see how he made out."

A man sagged from the door as Weston reached it. He looked groggy, but his pose was a pretense. The Shadow lacked his hat and cloak; he had disposed of them while on the floor. In his present guise, he was promptly recognized by Weston, who exclaimed:

"Cranston!"

"I was on my way to Warrendon's," explained The Shadow, in Cranston's style. "I stopped elsewhere on my way, and Stanley had trouble parking the limousine. So I took this cab, hoping to reach Warrendon's ahead of you, commissioner."

FINDING that Cranston was not hurt, Weston invited him into the official car, leaving Moe to get the wrecked cab to a garage. They went on to Warrendon's, where Weston found a scene that amazed him.

Police cars had just arrived; the front door was wide open. Inside, the commissioner was greeted by his headquarters ace, Inspector Joe Cardona.

Swarthy of countenance, stocky of build, Cardona was a veteran of the force, always prompt to reach the scene of an important crime. With Warrendon giving coherent testimony concerning the deaths of Hector and Ambril, it wasn't long before Cardona had pieced a complete story which was so plausible, that its incorrect features passed unnoticed.

Actually, Cardona was not to blame for his faulty reconstruction; Warrendon's testimony was the stumbling block. The portly man knew only half the real story, and unwittingly led the law astray.

"They came in there" – Cardona pointed to the side door – "a mob of them, all masked. Hector must have opened the door when they knocked. They forced him into the den and made him pass over the key to the wall safe."

"A duplicate key," inserted Warrendon. "One that I lost a few weeks ago. Hector must have found it while I was away."

Weston was too busy listening to note the slight change of Cranston's expression. The Shadow was picturing Ambril as the man who really had the key.

"I heard Hector shout," continued Warrendon. "So did Ambril, who was there" – he pointed toward the front of the hall – "in the reception room. Ambril reached them just as they shot Hector. He must have snatched the murderer's gun, for he had it when I arrived downstairs."

Warrendon paused to mop his broad forehead with a silk handkerchief. He shook his head sadly.

"Poor Ambril," he said. "Hector died stopping the attempted robbery. Ambril was killed seeking vengeance on the assassins. He made a bad mistake, as I did later, when he took the man in black for an enemy."

"The man in black?"

The exclamation came from Commissioner Weston. In response, Inspector Cardona provided a wise nod.

"The Shadow," said Cardona. "He was after the mob. They put the blast on Ambril before The Shadow could save him. They'd have gotten Warrendon, too, except for The Shadow. He drove them off."

"And followed them," added Warrendon. "I heard cars speeding away while I was calling headquarters."

Commissioner Weston nodded slowly. Officially, he didn't like to recognize The Shadow. As Weston often argued, The Shadow might be anybody, until the black-cloaked fighter's identity became actually known. Still, The Shadow's handling of certain cases left little room for doubt; and this was one such episode.

THE WASP

It never occurred to the commissioner that his friend Lamont Cranston could be The Shadow; least of all, on such an occasion as this. Weston didn't connect the fleeing cars with the masked men who had sped from Warrendon's, because they had been too close to the scene of crime.

He regarded them merely as speeders who had forced his big car into a collision with Cranston's cab. By all common sense, Cranston himself had been coming to Warrendon's; not going away from there.

In nodding his acceptance of Warrendon's testimony and Cardona's summary, the commissioner did not give a further thought to Cranston, until his friend remarked that he intended to go home.

Using Warrendon's phone, Cranston called the Cobalt Club and summoned his limousine, which had returned there. When the big car arrived, Cranston entered it and rode away. He stopped briefly at the garage where Moe had taken the wrecked cab. But his purpose was not merely to learn how the cabby had fared.

From the cab, The Shadow took the cloak and hat that he had left on the floor. Thus regaining the garb that he ordinarily kept in the limousine, he returned to the big car.

The limousine was heading toward the Holland Tunnel, the route to Cranston's New Jersey residence, when Stanley, the chauffeur, heard a drawled tone through the speaking tube.

"I've changed my mind, Stanley." The tone was Cranston's. "I think I'll stop off and see a friend who lives at the Martillo Apartments. Wait; I'll give you the address."

At that moment, Cranston was no longer Cranston, except for his voice. He was The Shadow, fully cloaked. But the slip of paper that he produced was from Cranston's vest pocket.

It had an address that Cranston had written while calling the Cobalt Club from Warrendon's. The Shadow had taken it from the telephone book, rather than ask Warrendon for it.

The Shadow had looked up the address of George Ambril, to find it listed as Martillo Apartments. Elsewhere in the book, he had found the address of the apartment house. So far as the law was concerned, Ambril was Simon-pure; but The Shadow was definitely sure that the dead man had been the spearhead of tonight's crime.

Ambril's frenzy in aiming for The Shadow had been a give-away. In addition, The Shadow saw flaws in Warrendon's belief that Ambril had snatched a gun from Hector's murderer.

Masked men were merely entering at the moment when Ambril shouted that they were to blame for Hector's death. Ambril had sought an alibi; the others had accepted it as a double cross. The Shadow knew.

Therefore, The Shadow was seeking to retrace crime through the one man immediately responsible: George Ambril. Through such a lead, the cloaked investigator hoped to find a trail to crime's real head, an unknown master mind who had given orders to Ambril, as well as to the masked raiders.

The Shadow was already thinking in terms of a hidden plotter whose followers knew him only as the Wasp!

CHAPTER V. THE CLOSED TRAIL

THE Martillo Apartments were quite expensive, for the building stood in a restricted neighborhood. The building itself was not large, but the apartments were commodious. Vacancies were always filled with very little delay, by the superintendent who lived on the premises.

THE WASP

On this particular evening, the superintendent was showing an apartment to a very attractive young lady, who was not at all dismayed when she learned how high the rental was.

The inquirer was a blonde, whose bluish eyes carried an innocent stare. Her dress was tasteful as well as expensive; when she learned that the apartment would be rented furnished, she showed her first sign of annoyance.

"Of course, we can put in other furniture," the superintendent explained hastily. "As it now stands, the apartment was arranged as a bachelor's quarters. Mr. Ambril, the present tenant, is leaving tonight. We can refurnish and redecorate to suit you, miss –"

The superintendent paused. He hadn't yet learned the young lady's name. Nor did she give it at this moment, for she was busy looking about the apartment, as if picking places where she would like the new furnishings to go.

Through the half-opened door of the apartment came the distant tinkle of a telephone bell.

"Someone is calling my office," he said, apologetically. "I'll be right back, miss."

Ambril's apartment was on the third floor. By the time the superintendent had entered the automatic elevator to go down to the first floor, the blonde had lost her baby stare. She was at Ambril's telephone, dialing a number with a quick, darting forefinger.

A buzzed tone came from the receiver. It was a voice that the blonde recognized. Briskly, she identified herself and gave the Wasp a brief report.

"Velma Corl," she undertoned. "I'm up at Ambril's. The call just came to the superintendent; he's gone downstairs. Ten minutes is all that I'll need –"

Apparently, Velma was to have ten minutes. She smiled when she heard the Wasp's reply. The call to the superintendent had been arranged by the Wasp, and an expert was making it.

Whoever he was, the caller would keep the superintendent thoroughly occupied with questions about vacancies, rentals, various services, and all the other odds and ends that might interest a prospective tenant.

Finishing her call to the Wasp, Velma began new operations. Her red-lacquered fingernails had the speed of tiger's claws, as they went through Ambril's belongings, scattered about the apartment. Like claws, they were seeking what they wanted; swiftly, Velma was snatching up every bit of evidence that might link Ambril to the Wasp.

Her choice was clever. Velma did not disturb a single item that related to Ambril's regular occupation. She left most things as they were, to cover the fact that the place had been ransacked, which was easy, considering that Ambril had not been overly tidy.

What Velma wanted were names and addresses; letters and memos relating to persons who served the Wasp. Literally, she was cutting Ambril's name off from the organization, so that no trace of his double life would remain.

The bills were important. A flock of them would show that Ambril had lived beyond his means and therefore might have aligned himself with men of crime. Checking the bills as she stuffed them into a handbag, Velma noted that most of them could be paid in cash, which would facilitate matters.

THE WASP

Tomorrow, these bills would be off the books because of money delivered through friends of Ambril, who would state that he had asked them to take care of such matters for him.

Velma wasn't worrying about future problems; they could be handled by the Wasp. But she knew quite well that this present work was highly important. It was the equivalent of destroying evidence which, if found by the police, would supply a new angle to the Warrendon case.

VELMA was pleased because she had been the first to reach Ambril's. She had not worried about getting here before the law; her problem was The Shadow. Velma hadn't been very far from Warrendon's when the battle had begun there, because the Wasp had told her to follow Ambril.

When The Shadow pursued the fugitives, Velma had seen the chase go by and had reported promptly to the Wasp. Her chief had therewith ordered her to make this visit to Ambril's apartment.

Her work complete, Velma was stepping toward the door of the apartment, when she heard a clang from the elevator. Whipping clear about, the blonde made a quick trip across the living room, through the door to Ambril's darkened bedroom.

From the open bag where she had thrust the bills, she pulled out a small snub-nosed revolver.

As she crouched in darkness, Velma's entire figure quivered; not with fear, but with eagerness. She had become a jungle cat, anxious for prey, hopeful that this adventure might bring her an opportunity to kill. A creature of the Wasp, Velma Corl had learned to hate all persons who might interfere with schemes of crime.

Footsteps told that persons from the elevator were going to another apartment. Disappointed, Velma stirred toward the living room, when a chance sight caused her to crouch again. Through the crack of the door, she could see blackness entering Ambril's living room from the outer hall.

Velma remembered a stairway beside the elevator. The blackness must have come from that direction. It had waited, lurking, because of the persons who left the elevator; again, it was on the move. Its creepy approach reminded Velma of oily smoke; it might be any monstrous thing, but certainly not a human figure.

Momentarily, the blonde was unnerved; then she understood the illusion. She had mistaken the shadow of the entering figure for part of the form itself. What she saw now was no longer a mere shadow, cast ahead. It was the figure itself, a shape cloaked in black.

The Shadow!

Already through the door, the weird investigator was approaching Ambril's desk. A glowing lamp showed The Shadow in full detail; above the muffling collar of his cloak, Velma could make out the upper features of a hawkish profile. Not enough to identify The Shadow, for the brim of his slouch hat partially obscured the details of his visage.

What Velma noted most was a pair of burning eyes that reflected the glow of the desk lamp. Eyes that were probing for the very sort of evidence that Velma herself had stolen from this apartment. Of all persons, The Shadow was the one who could suspect that Ambril was a crook; that measures had been taken to cover up the fact.

Aiming her revolver deliberately, Velma pushed the muzzle through the crack of the bedroom door. She had a direct bead on The Shadow as he stood beyond Ambril's desk, his gloved hands fingering papers that lay in the light.

Velma's blue eyes took on a fiendish glitter. Her pose was murderous; her hand kept steady aim, while her finger tightened on the gun trigger.

This was the time to close the trail. It was Velma's chance to see that The Shadow would never meet the Wasp, to engage him in personal duel. Pushing her hand forward, Velma shoved the door a trifle wider without disturbing her aim. Her gun pointed straight for the heart of her cloaked target, the murderous blonde pressed the trigger.

The aim was perfect. No matter how swiftly he moved, The Shadow could never have flung himself from the path of the fiery stab that came from the muzzle of Velma's gun!

CHAPTER VI. THE WASP'S TOKEN

VELMA saw a swirl of black as she fired. The Shadow had heard the creak of the door; sensing a menace, he was trying to get clear.

His sideward dive was too late. The only thing that saved him was the action of his left hand. His fingers grabbed for the desk lamp at the instant the door creaked.

There wasn't time to fling the lamp toward Velma; her aim was undisturbed. But the lamp itself served The Shadow's purpose. It was heavy, constructed entirely of metal, from its squatty base to its mushroom-shaped shade. As The Shadow tried to scale the lamp, it tilted through sheer weight, coming upward as he grabbed.

The very accuracy of Velma's aim was the thing that spoiled her death thrust. Coming straight toward her tonguing gun, the lamp top received the bullet with a clang. Ricocheting from the metal, the slug skimmed The Shadow's shoulder and drove deep into the wall.

Madly, Velma fired more shots, which ripped the mahogany frame of Ambril's desk. She was starting out through the doorway, trying to locate The Shadow on the floor; but this time, Velma's own effort was belated. Hearing a mocking laugh, she recoiled as The Shadow appeared suddenly from the wrong side of the desk, a gun in his left hand!

Frantically, Velma dashed for the darkened bedroom before The Shadow could obtain a good view of her face. He saw the fluff of blond hair, heard the horrified scream that the girl gave. In that cry, however, The Shadow detected trickery. Once captured, Velma would claim that her shots were a mistake; she would deny all connection with crime.

Her shriek was a build-up to that later alibi. Velma hoped that it would win The Shadow's sympathy and thereby cause him to withhold his fire. It happened, however, The Shadow did not fire; as she fled Velma thought that her ruse had succeeded. Actually, she was rendering her position more hopeless.

Rising from the floor, The Shadow was starting a silent pursuit, planning to trap the blonde in a room which had no outlet. He recognized that Velma had come here to cover up Ambril's past; he knew, too, that she had fired to kill when her gunshot dented the lamp.

The Shadow wanted to capture the feminine assassin alive; she was one person who could talk, and provide a direct lead to the head of the mysterious crime ring.

As at Warrendon's, The Shadow's purpose was blocked by a misguided effort on the part of a new arrival. Halfway across the living room, The Shadow was flanked by an assailant who flung himself fiercely upon the fighter in black. The man was the building superintendent, returned from the ground floor.

THE WASP

Hastening at the sound of gunfire, the superintendent reached Ambril's apartment just as Velma gave her shriek. Seeing the girl in flight, with The Shadow beginning armed pursuit, the fellow took it that Velma was the person in the right. Believing that he was rescuing a helpless woman, he put real ardor into the fray, as he grappled The Shadow.

Together, they reeled across the room, knocking over the desk, along with chairs that they encountered on the way. Boxed in the other room, Velma heard the sounds of the furious struggle and saw a chance for escape. Still carrying her gun, she darted out through the living room, toward the hallway.

She had no chance to aim for The Shadow. He was flinging the superintendent aside and was swinging from a corner, to aim a gun at Velma. The girl was in the living room before The Shadow was full about; but Velma saw the direction of his veer and did not pause.

Ahead was the automatic elevator, its lights shining through a little window in the steel door. Yanking the door open, Velma used it for a barrier as she dived inside.

The Shadow fired a warning shot to stop her; his bullet flattened itself against the door. Then Velma was inside the elevator, starting down, still hoping that the superintendent would delay The Shadow.

Velma's ally was totally out of the fray. He was sitting in a corner of Ambril's living room, the remnants of a chair wrapped around his neck. The superintendent was wondering how a tornado had managed to get into the apartment house. That was all he could remember of his struggle with The Shadow.

Nevertheless, luck still favored the woman who served the Wasp.

CHOOSING the stairs as a quick route to the ground floor, The Shadow counted upon overtaking Velma. He had hardly turned toward the steps, when two men in uniform sprang for him. They were policemen, on their way up to Ambril's.

The shot that The Shadow fired at the elevator caused him some immediate trouble. The officers had heard the shot; they saw The Shadow with a smoking gun. That was enough for them.

Pulling their revolvers, the cops met The Shadow. He straight-armed one, swung a gun-weighted fist at the other's jaw. Valiantly, the officers rallied, shouting for others to join them. During brief seconds, there was a whirl of blue and black, as police uniforms seemed to mingle with The Shadow's cloak.

Out of that melee came The Shadow, leaving the officers sprawled and dazed, trying to find the guns that they had lost. Head-on, The Shadow met a stocky man in plain clothes coming from the stairs. They collided, then parted, as the newcomer voiced a recognition.

The Shadow had encountered Inspector Cardona. Though Joe still believed that Ambril was a victim of crime, he had decided to come over to the dead man's apartment. In Cardona's estimation, crooks might have been seeking Ambril, as well as Warrendon. Like The Shadow, Cardona had come to look for clues.

Having met The Shadow in the past, Cardona avoided the mistake that the officers had made. Letting The Shadow continue down the stairs, Joe shouted to the bluecoats, told them to grab their guns and follow.

Joe was conscious of a rumble from the elevator and knew that The Shadow must be after someone who had fled to the street.

THE WASP

The rumble stopped before The Shadow reached the ground floor. Hurrying out to the street, the black-cloaked fighter saw a car swing around the corner; he glimpsed a blond-haired girl beside the driver. Not having Moe's cab, pursuit was out of the question; nevertheless, The Shadow sensed that battle was not over.

Wheeling about, he saw another car coming up, guns poking from its windows. Already in darkness, The Shadow could have dropped deeper and nailed those amateur gunners when they came along. Instead, he made a sudden drive back into the doorway of the apartment house. The crooks fired, too late to reach the fleeting black-clad form.

The Shadow's swift drive was all the more remarkable, considering that he met a human obstacle just within the door. The obstacle was Joe Cardona, coming out to make himself a target for the sharpshooters in the cover-up car.

Flattening the ace inspector, The Shadow crouched low, while riddling bullets demolished the door of the apartment house. When the hail had passed, The Shadow made a quick departure just as the stumbling officers arrived from the stairs, to find Cardona seated on the floor.

In blocking off Cardona from harm, The Shadow had given up his opportunity to deal with the men who covered Velma's getaway. The Shadow's trail to the Wasp was closed; but he still hoped for clues that would lead him to the hidden master crook. He knew, however, such clues might be very frugal.

AS Cranston, an hour later, The Shadow stopped at the Cobalt Club, where he found Commissioner Weston in conference with Inspector Cardona. The commissioner told his friend about the new angle in the Warrendon case; as The Shadow expected, the details were entirely wrong.

The law still considered George Ambril as innocent. Cardona's search of the dead man's apartment had produced nothing of any consequence. Even more remarkable was the opinion concerning Velma Corl.

She was classed simply as what she represented herself to be – a young lady who had called to look at an apartment. The fact that Ambril's apartment was the only vacancy, made it natural enough that Velma should have been there when the trouble started.

In his report, Cardona stated that the building superintendent thought The Shadow had fired shots at Velma. That, of course, was ridiculous, in Cardona's opinion. He decided that The Shadow must have fired at some thugs, who were lucky enough to escape in the elevator. He took it for granted that the missing blonde, a chance factor in the battle, had gone out by a fire tower.

Naturally, Cardona didn't expect her to return. Whoever she was, she had probably had enough of the Martillo Apartments, and would not care to live there.

Cardona's theories were sensible enough, considering the gun fray that had taken place, later, in the street. Again, Cardona insisted upon including The Shadow in his report, and Commissioner Weston offered no objection.

When the inspector had gone, Weston remembered something that he promptly mentioned to his friend Cranston.

"I believe that we were right," declared the commissioner, solemnly. "That talk we heard this evening, here at the club, was the sort of thing that brought crime to Warrendon's."

THE WASP

Cranston showed immediate interest; something that he rarely did, when Weston talked. Encouraged, the commissioner resumed:

"Warrendon brought back some valuable mining options from his trip. He told me that they were worth much more than he paid for them. It may be that those raiders were paid to get them."

"By whom?"

"I don't know." Weston shrugged, in response to Cranston's question. "We must seek the answer tomorrow."

"From whom?"

"I asked Warrendon that question," replied Weston. "He suggests that we go with him to see Basil Gannaford, the business counselor who hopes to reorganize Consolidation Metals. Gannaford can certainly tell us the names of rival corporations that might have wanted to steal those options."

"Consolidation Metals needs those options, and Gannaford advised them to borrow all they could, to buy them. Whether or not someone was trying to block the sale, is a question. It may be that the crooks knew nothing whatever about the options, and were merely after Warrendon's cash. I don't like to commit myself, Cranston."

Reaching in his pocket, Weston brought out a memo pad and made a note to call Cardona in the morning, so that the inspector could go with them to Gannaford's. Replacing the pad, Weston found something else and brought it into the light. The article was a black wallet.

"Ambril's wallet," remarked Weston. "I should have given it to Inspector Cardona. It contains nothing but a few business cards and Ambril's automobile licenses."

Removing the items mentioned, Weston showed them to his friend. Reaching for them casually, Cranston was careful that Weston did not note his eyes. The Shadow's gaze showed a sudden gleam of interest.

The Shadow was intrigued by the owner's license that gave the make of Ambril's car. The car was a new and expensive model, according to the license card, and its plates had been issued very recently. The fact indicated that Ambril had spent money lately, in a big way.

"Was Ambril going on a trip?" inquired The Shadow, casually. "Did Warrendon say anything —"

"Why, yes!" interjected Weston. "How did you guess it, Cranston?"

The Shadow's response was an indifferent shrug.

"Ambril was taking over a Midwestern territory for a cigar company," explained the commissioner. "That is, he had the offer and intended to try it for a while. He was to leave for Cincinnati tonight."

"By train, I suppose?"

"I would say so, considering that he was starting so late. But it really doesn't matter, Cranston."

It did matter, although The Shadow did not press the point. Ambril's purchase of a new car indicated that he would certainly have intended to motor to Ohio. The fact that he was leaving late at night could be regarded as peculiar.

Mere indications, these, but enough to furnish The Shadow with a potential trail, considering that he had already identified Ambril with crime.

The Shadow passed the business cards back to Weston, along with the owner's license, which promised to be an important clue. The commissioner was rising, as he put the items back in the wallet; hence he failed to see the thing that Cranston noticed.

A tiny object fluttered to the table and lay there, a transparent wisp that only the keenest eyes could have detected.

Weston was gone when The Shadow plucked the object from the table and held it to the light. He identified it immediately as a wasp's wing, an odd thing for a New Yorker to be carrying in a wallet full of business cards.

A soft laugh issued from Cranston's lips; a tone so low that it was scarcely audible. The mirth was The Shadow's. To his eyes, the wasp's wing was a token of identity, symbolizing the master hand that had ruled George Ambril.

Out of a strange medley of adventures, The Shadow had obtained proof that pointed to the actual existence of a criminal creature called the Wasp!

CHAPTER VII. CRIME MOVES AFIELD

THE offices of Basil Gannaford occupied a high floor of the Wall Street Trust Building, a great skyscraper in the financial district. The main door bore the simple legend:

BASIL GANNAFORD
Business Counselor

Once inside, however, visitors were confronted by a rather remarkable scene. Gannaford's offices spread over the entire floor and were partitioned into many sections which bore the names of diversified companies.

A man of high finance, Gannaford had taken ailing enterprises under his wing and made them pay, to the benefit of the stockholders and himself.

How Gannaford managed it was no mystery. He was quite willing to divulge his system. He stated that he had applied the chain-store method to various enterprises, thus lessening the overhead of each individual company.

As an example, one office bore the title "Purchasing Agent." The man who handled that department was the buyer for all the companies that Gannaford controlled. Similarly, he had combined selling forces, research departments, and other groups, until all the corporations were somewhat interwoven.

The Shadow had often heard of Basil Gannaford, but he had never met the financial wizard. Gannaford's specialty was pulling companies out of the red, and such businesses were not the type in which Lamont Cranston invested.

Hence, when he called at Gannaford's in the morning, the leisurely Mr. Cranston had much to look at, while he waited for his friend, Commissioner Weston.

On one office, painters were marking the name of "Consolidation Metals," which was flanked by an oil company on one side and a steamship corporation on the other. Studying other doors, The Shadow readily

understood why the directors of Consolidation Metals were so pleased to have Gannaford take over their burdens.

The mere connection would make business. Gannaford could find new consumers and profitable accounts right among his own industries. Recognizing this, The Shadow looked forward to his meeting with the remarkable Mr. Gannaford.

Commissioner Weston arrived, along with Inspector Cardona. Joining them, Cranston was ushered through a door marked "Private." From a large inner office that contained half a dozen employees, they entered a door that was titled "Secretary to the President."

Beyond was another door, marked "President." After a brief wait, the visitors were conducted through, into the presence of Basil Gannaford himself. The directors of Consolidation Metals were also in the office, but they did not seem to count, when compared to Gannaford.

Physically, Basil Gannaford looked small, but that was not a disappointment. Visitors soon felt that they were unduly criticizing his size, because he happened to be seated behind an enormous desk that made everything about it appear puny.

Gradually, one came to regard the desk as part of Gannaford, and the effect was marked. Gannaford's mental stature became apparent and made him a dominating figure.

The Shadow recognized the illusion, and could feel its sway. By keeping a steady gaze on Gannaford, he managed to gauge the man in better style than could the ordinary visitor. He found Gannaford a remarkable personality, even without the benefit of his surroundings.

Gannaford was elderly; his smile was friendly, his voice mild. His eyes had a keen glance, but they were always ready with inquiry, as though he valued the opinions of his visitors.

He had one pose, which he scarcely changed at all; that of leaning forward on his elbows, his chin resting on his interwoven fingers. When he turned from one visitor to another, his head moved very slightly, for his eyes performed most of the shift.

GANNAFORD had finished most of his business with the directors of the metals company. He was ready to talk with Commissioner Weston. Nodding his head toward a stack of papers on the desk, Gannaford gave the visitors a view of his white hair, which was thick but close-cropped.

"Warrendon's options," stated Gannaford. "He was here a short while ago, and sold them to us. We have you to thank for their safe delivery, commissioner."

Weston gave silent acceptance to the compliment, though it did not belong to him. Rather than bring up the subject of The Shadow, the commissioner came briskly to business.

"About these options, Mr. Gannaford," he questioned, "who else could have wanted them besides yourself?"

With a smile, Gannaford shook his head.

"I did not want them," he corrected. "They were needed by Consolidation Metals to make the refinancing of that corporation a worthwhile undertaking, under my auspices."

"Who else could have used them?"

"No one," replied Gannaford. "Yet there are several companies that would have liked to acquire them."

"Why?"

"To put Consolidation Metals out of business," answered Gannaford, smiling at Weston's puzzlement. "The simple fact is this, commissioner. Without these options, Consolidation Metals would have gone into bankruptcy, leaving one less competitor in the field."

Weston began to understand. Eagerly, he queried:

"Can you give me the names of those companies?"

"They are all in the telephone directory," returned Gannaford. "You will find them listed in the red book, under the head of 'Wholesale Metals.' But I doubt that it would help you, commissioner."

"Why not?"

Patently, Gannaford explained. He was like a professor, lecturing a class of one. As he put it, no metals company would have tried to steal the options. Big business was not conducted in that fashion. The thing struck him more as an individual purpose on the part of some criminal with a flare for underhand transactions.

"Once bankrupt, Consolidation Metals could be bought up for a song," declared Gannaford. "I might have become a bidder myself. The same could apply to you, commissioner; or better, to your friend here, Mr. Cranston, who, as I understand, has been quite fortunate in picking investments."

Cranston smiled at the compliment, which was the only thing to do, considering that it came from so able a man as Gannaford. In return, Gannaford queried:

"Do you agree with my opinion, Mr. Cranston?"

"Quite," replied The Shadow. "It means that, had the criminal succeeded in stealing the options, he could have destroyed them, and later posed simply as a bidder for Consolidation Metals, with a chance of tripling whatever money he invested."

"Exactly!" agreed Gannaford. "Therefore" – he turned his eyes toward Weston – "your problem, commissioner, is to find a worthy criminal. One who possesses both money and genius."

The thing struck Weston as an excellent point. After twisting the points of his mustache, the commissioner queried:

"Could there have been a leak from this office, concerning the intended purchase of the options?"

"Possibly," replied Gannaford. "I must admit that I have left too much to my department heads and have not kept contact with the lesser employees. I intend, in the future, to interview each new man –"

Gannaford paused, his statements smothered by an increasing chorus of protests from the directors of Consolidation Metals. They couldn't listen to Gannaford's acceptance of the blame. The fault was theirs; they had talked too much about their company's affairs.

THE WASP

In trying to convince Weston of the fact, they had chosen the right man. Weston, himself, had overheard them talking about Warrendon's options at the Cobalt Club.

"I think that settles it," declared the commissioner, as he rose. "Thank you for the interview, Mr. Gannaford. Especially your opinion that crime has a brain behind it; a man with money and genius. It is something that I should have recognized long ago."

ALL during the sixty-story ride down to the street, Commissioner Weston was harping on the subject of big-time crime and the measures that must be taken to combat it. Inspector Cardona was an ardent listener, but Lamont Cranston appeared quite detached.

The Shadow was no longer thinking in terms of Basil Gannaford and the financial wizard's opinions. He was considering the case of George Ambril, the man whose past might furnish a lead to some hidden supercrook, already pictured by The Shadow without benefit of Gannaford's description.

Leaving the commissioner, Cranston rode in his limousine to a rather squalid section of Manhattan, where he knew a little cigar shop that furnished a special brand of panetelas.

When Cranston entered the shop, Stanley, the chauffeur, prepared for a long and patient wait. One of Cranston's hobbies seemed to be watching the manufacture of handmade cigars, for he often stayed in that shop a long while.

Stanley did not know that his employer simply went through the cigar shop, and out a side door that lead to a rear passage. Threading a course within the block, The Shadow eventually arrived at the basement entrance of an old building.

He entered there as Cranston, but immediately became The Shadow, as he stepped into the darkness beyond a hidden doorway in the basement.

Soon afterward, there was a sharp click in a pitch-black room. A bluish light gleamed upon the surface of a polished table. The Shadow was in his sanctum, opening envelopes that contained reports from agents. His long-fingered hands moved rapidly beneath the glow.

Clippings first. There were bundles of them, all pertaining to crimes. Most of them were out-of-town cases, that The Shadow had ignored, for they were petty compared to heavy crimes in Manhattan. But those clippings were taking on a new importance.

The Shadow had learned definitely that the Wasp was sending workers on the road. The Wasp could be responsible for crime elsewhere than in Manhattan.

The Wasp!

Already, The Shadow considered his superfoe by the name that the master crook actually used. The wasp's wing from Ambril's wallet had left no other choice. Just as The Shadow had gained his own sobriquet from his garb, so did the Wasp command a title that fitted him.

The Wasp could sting, with bullets that his followers delivered. George Ambril had felt such a thrust at Warrendon's after delivering a sting to Hector. The Shadow had barely escaped a similar fate, on two occasions in one night: first, when Ambril had been chopped down before he could trigger a fatal gunshot; again, when Velma Corl had ruined a metal lamp with a shot meant for The Shadow's heart.

The clippings, however, would come later. For the present, The Shadow needed local data. He obtained it from report sheets in other envelopes. The Shadow's agents had done good work. They had located the garage where Ambril kept his car; but that was not all.

Reports told that the car was gone, and named the man who had taken it: Jack Prenter. There was data on Prenter, too. He worked for an advertising agency and had been shifted to the Cleveland office, where he was to arrive within a few days.

The Shadow spread a road map on the table. He had a link, a definite one: Ambril's transfer to Cincinnati; Prenter's new job in Cleveland. He traced the routes that the two might have taken in the same car. He listed towns along those roads, calculating them all from a considerable distance outside of New York.

Next came the clippings. The Shadow weeded them out, while he referred to the list. He formed a scant group of piles that related to towns along the chosen routes. Of those heaps, only one looked promising. The clippings in that heap concerned a town named Richmond, too small ordinarily to be in the news.

THERE had been recent robberies in Richmond, and the town authorities were baffled. Richmond feared the thing that had happened in other places: a major robbery culminating a series of minor ones. Comparing the clippings with others from the past, The Shadow foresaw that Richmond was ripe for a large payoff.

Lesser robberies had totaled considerable profit to the perpetrators, when the sums were added; but if these deeds were maneuvered by the Wasp, the final blow would have to be a large one. The Shadow was gaining a deep inkling into the Wasp's ways.

Unquestionably, the master crook imported men to New York, used them for city crimes, then sent them to the sticks to aid in other illegal deeds. His flow of criminal talent kept up a steady stream, increasing in efficiency as it went along.

Gauged by previous experience, the final robbery in the town of Richmond would be far more baffling to the burghers of that village than any that had gone before.

The Shadow's forefinger rested on the map, squarely upon the town of Richmond. His other hand reached up, to click off the bluish lamp. Complete darkness filled the sanctum; with it, came the weird tone of a strange laugh, confined to those repressing walls.

Ghostly in tone, ghoulish in the echoes that repeated it, The Shadow's mirth promised ill to distant servers of the Wasp!

CHAPTER VIII. STEPS AGAINST CRIME

THE little town of Richmond squatted glumly amid surrounding hills, like a sullen creature basking in the afternoon sun. Richmond preferred daylight to night, and with good reason. Things happened at night that the inhabitants could not understand.

A gloomy group of men were discussing such events in the office of Burgess Wendel, which was located above Wendel's general store. Wendel, the burgess, and Wendel, the merchant, were one and the same, both represented by a dour, crab-faced individual who kept rubbing his bald head, as if seeking to add to its polish.

"It beats me," drawled Wendel, finally. "Sheriff Cady is coming over to town tonight, to give us what help he can. I allow I won't be here to meet him until late, considering that my granddaughter is having a birthday

party over to Northfield. But what I'm going to say to the sheriff, I don't know, unless Glenn Torbin, here, can give us a suggestion."

Finished with his speech, the burgess swung toward a dark-haired man of thirty, who formed a silent member of the group. It was obvious that Torbin did not belong in Richmond. His clothes were not only perfect in their fit; they lacked the mail-order touch apparent with the rest of the group. One word could describe Glenn Torbin. Sleek.

When he spoke, Torbin seemed apologetic. He did not want to interfere with matters in Richmond, and he said so. The statement won immediate favor with the listeners, particularly Burgess Wendel.

"You're from Richmond, Glenn," insisted the burgess. "Just because you've been in New York nigh onto three years, doesn't mean that we've forgot you. We're proud of you, Glenn. You're one of us. Mebbe, with your experience, you can help us."

Thus encouraged, Glenn Torbin began to express himself in a fashion that won him further acclaim.

"I'm rather glad I came home for a vacation," said Torbin. "It's given me a chance to see the old town in a new light. Things have changed a lot in the last three years. Richmond is waking up."

Approving buzzes passed around the group. Torbin continued with his theme.

"I was lucky in New York," he declared. "I started as a clerk in a travel bureau, and moved up to assistant manager within a year. I'm due to be manager when I go back. Things move fast in New York."

The listeners nodded.

"They're moving here, too," continued Torbin, "but not as fast. What's more, there aren't as many opportunities in Richmond. I'm wondering" – he paused, shook his head – "just how some of the local youngsters take it."

Burgess Wendel slapped the table.

"Exactly what I said!" he exclaimed. "Glenn, here, has hit the nail on the head! All the young folks do is listen to the radio, hoping to win some money on some of those cash-give-away programs. What's more" – he lowered his voice to a hush – "all these things that have happened hereabouts were done by somebody that knew the town. I ain't accusing anybody, but –"

As the burgess paused, others supplied the name, as with a single thought:

"Keith Ellerton."

"No, no!" It was Torbin who objected. "Keith isn't a bad kid. Don't judge him by his pranks."

"Whatever he does," reminded Wendel, "the others follow. Keith didn't hoist old Trelawney's jalopy up to the high-school dome all alone."

"That's just it," pleaded Glenn. "Keith doesn't do things alone. He knows the crowd in this town so well, that I think he's the one to help us. Suppose I talk to him."

THE WASP

The group showed doubt. Some of the listeners nodded; others shook their heads. Glenn Torbin finally settled the discussion with an indulgent smile.

"I'll talk to Keith, anyway," he said. "I might be able to get him a job in New York, which would take him off your hands."

"Good riddance," commented the burgess. "We won't have him shooting off the old cannon in the town square next Fourth of July. Talk to Keith if you want, Glenn. You'll find him down in the Central Pool Parlor, with all the other troublemakers in this town."

LEAVING the meeting, Glenn Torbin went to the pool parlor. He found Keith Ellerton engineering a successful jump shot over the eight ball, much to the disappointment of the others in the game.

Keith was a young man in his early twenties, recognizable by his broad smile and light, wavy hair. Greeting Glenn, he hurried through his game and left the poolroom.

They went to Glenn's room at the Richmond Hotel. Looking around the place, Keith admired what he considered luxury. Then, bluntly, he asked:

"What's it about, Glenn? Do the town fathers want me on the carpet?"

"Not exactly," laughed Glenn. "They're up against a problem. They think these recent crimes are local."

"So do I," returned Keith, frankly. He strolled to the window and gazed steadily along the main street. "I wish I knew who was in back of them. But I have a bigger wish than that. I'd like to be out of this burg."

"Perhaps you could have both wishes come true, Keith."

Glenn's words brought Keith from the window, his face beaming with eagerness. He put the question:

"How?"

"Let's analyze these crimes," suggested Glenn. "The crooks have knocked off about everything that's worthwhile, haven't they?"

Keith shook his head.

"They've missed the biggest thing of all," he stated. "You know old Titus Gorham, don't you? The crab-faced duck who lives up on the hill? He has a snooty daughter. Her name's Ruth."

Glenn smiled.

"I remember Gorham," he said. "But I thought he was away. When did he return?"

"A couple of weeks ago," replied Keith. "He's an old miser and won't trust the local bank, for which I can't blame him much, considering that somebody unscrewed the bars from a window and took a few thousand dollars from the place, last week."

"Anyway, old Gorham is sore on banks. Sore on the whole money question, too, ever since the government called in all the gold. They say he put most of his cash into jewelry, that he takes with him wherever he goes."

THE WASP

Motioning, Keith drew Glenn to the window and pointed out a heavy clump of trees on a distant hill. Tiny sun reflections indicated the roof of the Gorham mansion.

"There's where crime strikes next," assured Keith. "And you can take my word for it, Glenn, that it will hit soon. Why should anybody wait?" He paused; then, noting Glenn's stare: "Anybody that's crooked, I mean."

Glenn looked toward the woods, which were darkening amid the sunset.

"You know the place, Keith," he said. "Why not take a look up there tonight, and report back to me. Tell me all you can about it; any weaknesses that ought to be watched. The sheriff is coming over to see Burgess Wendel. I might give him some advice."

Keith nodded.

"You could, Glenn," he declared. "But I couldn't. They wouldn't listen. They say I'm too brash. What can I do about it, Glenn?"

"Come to New York, Keith. I'll find a job for you. We'll talk about it after you come back from Gorham's."

"You're sure, Glenn?"

"I give you my word." Glenn spoke seriously. "Tell your friends that you're going to New York. I'll stand by my promise. Say you're going soon. I mean it!"

GLENN extended his hand, and Keith returned a warm shake.

His grin wider than ever, Keith left the hotel and stopped at the poolroom, where he told his friends the good news.

They didn't seem to take it as enthusiastically as Keith had expected. He began to understand why, when he left the poolroom. His friends envied his good luck. Such was the answer.

Good luck!

Keith Ellerton hated the term. He was one person who had never agreed that Glenn Torbin had become successful in New York through good luck alone. Glenn was smart; he always had been. Whatever he gained, he deserved. Keith felt that he had found his reward in standing up for Glenn against the arguments of others. Glenn understood it and was prepared to pave Keith's way.

The streets of Richmond had darkened. A few wavering lights were twinkling at infrequent intervals. The town traffic light was actually operating again, after three days during which it had been out of order. With a future ahead of him, Keith began to realize that Richmond belonged in the past.

He was going to get out of this town, with its one traffic light that didn't work. The thought swelled him. Keith didn't have the illusion that the streets of New York were paved with gold. He knew they were paved, and that was enough. Most of the streets in Richmond weren't.

From now on, Keith Ellerton was through with Richmond. He was through tonight, dating from this very minute. True, he had a duty to perform, but it was one that he could accomplish alone. Keith smiled at the thought that tonight he might be able to forestall crime, through a proper survey of the Gorham premises and the house itself.

If he found things wrong there, he could tell Glenn Torbin. The rest would be up to Glenn; if anything came of it, Glenn would probably give Keith full credit. But praise from the populace of Richmond no longer interested Keith. He was thinking in terms of something much bigger – the New York job that Glenn had promised.

It was a proposition that Keith could not possibly lose. Tonight's test would be easy. Hoisting an old jalopy to the high-school dome and firing off the town-square cannon had been tasks far more difficult than paying a secret visit to the Gorham mansion and learning all there was to know about the place.

Keith considered it in the light of another prank; a harmless one that would insure his future. He was looking forward to his foray as a matter of mere routine; not as an exciting adventure. In that estimate, Keith Ellerton was wrong.

Tonight, he would be due for more excitement than any of his escapades had offered. The town of Richmond was marked as a place of coming action by the finger of The Shadow!

CHAPTER IX. FIGURES FROM THE DARK

THE Gorham mansion loomed dimly under a clouded night sky. It was discernible chiefly because of a few all-night lights that gleamed vaguely from its deep-set windows. Approach to the house was simple, however, considering the shrubbery about it.

Finished with his inspection of the grounds, Keith Ellerton began an advance from bush to bush, until he was in the very shadow of the mansion.

Along the curving driveway that led out to the hill road, Keith gained a distant view of bushes and trees. As he stared in that direction, he noticed the lights of a car, that swerved suddenly and vanished. The car's behavior was odd.

Keith could not tell whether it had entered the driveway or gone along the road. In either case, it would be traveling without lights, unless it had stopped, which was something even more suspicious. His gaze ranging the trees for further evidence of the mysterious car, Keith saw another glimmer, from a far direction, that cut off as suddenly as the first.

The new lights were from a narrow road that formed a rear entrance to the Gorham grounds. It wasn't possible that the first car could have reached the second position in so short a space of time. Two mystery cars, instead of one, was proof that Keith's visit to these preserves might bring unusual fruit.

Needing a better vantage point, Keith made for the house. He didn't want to be caught in blinding lights, should a car come openly along the driveway. Should the darkened cars represent marauders, the mansion itself would be their goal; once inside, Keith would be better able to confront them.

He was unarmed, but it did not matter. Quite convinced that recent robberies were the work of local malefactors, Keith believed that his mere presence would be sufficient to startle them. Once recognized, any of the town boys would wilt. Keith had seen them behave that way in the past.

A side door furnished the shortest route into the house. Keith tried it, doubting that the barrier would yield; but it proved to be unlocked. The matter was explained when he crept through a darkened hallway and felt the draft from an open window.

Probing the panes with his fingers, Keith found that one had been removed with a glass cutter. By entering the window, some invader had reached the door and unlocked it from the inside. To Keith, this smacked of small-town stuff.

Through the hallway, Keith stopped short at sight of a flickering light that made repeated stabs in darkness across the way. It was a flashlight, its beam showing lines of books along the walls. The room opposite was evidently Gorham's library, a likely place for the elderly miser to keep his valuables. The light steadied; listening, Keith heard a muffled voice.

The tone sounded like a servant's, for Keith could hear the word "sir" courteously repeated, though the voice had an anxious note. The speech ended, the light came out from the library and moved warily toward the front of the house. It passed beyond spread curtains, then blotted itself, as though the owner knew the route from there on.

Having gauged the distance to the library, Keith found it without trouble. Quietly closing a large door without clicking the latch, Keith used his own flashlight to find a switch. He turned on the room lights, to stare amazed at the chaos before him.

The few bookshelves visible through the doorway were undisturbed, but nearly all the rest had been ransacked. Hundreds of books lay rudely stacked upon the floor. Near a corner, some shelves were empty, others filled, and Keith immediately saw why.

On the last shelf from which books had been removed lay some tools: pliers, chisel, and screwdriver, that had evidently been taken from a tool box in the house itself.

Behind the shelf was a gaping space. A metal panel, painted an oak color to match the surrounding woodwork, had been pried from its secret hinges. Except for a few worthless papers, the hidden strong box was empty. Whoever the recent visitor was, Keith knew that he had found Gorham's strong box and rifled it.

Judging from reports of Gorham's wealth, the loot must have exceeded a hundred thousand dollars in the valuable antique jewelry which old Titus favored.

GRIMLY, Keith reached for a telephone, intending to put in a call for aid. Following that, he hoped to take up the trail of the man who had so recently left. But Keith did not even make the phone call.

Warned by a sudden creak of the door, he dropped the telephone and wheeled about. He found himself faced by two hard-looking men, who glared at him through masks formed by handkerchiefs.

They were armed with businesslike revolvers, that pointed in Keith's direction. One man gritted a warning in an ugly tone, which sounded forced:

"Lay offa the telephone, simp! It's been attended to. Come on; we're taking you with us!"

Argument was useless for the present. Hands raised, Keith placed himself in the custody of the masked men. While one nudged him with a revolver, the other turned off the library lights. Then two guns were pressing Keith out into the hallway; not toward the front, but in the direction of the side door.

They stopped, halfway, at sounds from the front door. The man who had taken Gorham's jewels was still there; the noise indicated that he was clumsily trying to draw the bolts, making so much clatter that the house would soon be roused.

"Don't move, boob," clucked a voice in Keith's ear. "You're the fall guy, get it? When the flunkies show up, you're going to run right into them."

"Yeah," growled the other masked man. "Either that, or you'll take a lot of slugs from these roscoes. We're here to see that you get nabbed, cutey-boy!"

The snarling tones carried an echo in the hallway. Oddly, the reverberations were sibilant, as though another voice had spoken an amendment. Despite his tenseness, Keith felt a flare of hope, as though some ghostly hand were present to aid him. He tightened, prepared to spring away; then withheld himself.

It would be better to wait until the servants arrived. Their quarters were at the rear of the third floor; perhaps they hadn't heard the sounds from the front door.

The clatter continued, somewhat as a signal, for it produced a roar of motors outside. The crooks were certainly trying to give themselves away, now that they had a "fall guy," as they had termed Keith.

They weren't local men. Keith guessed that they had come from far afield. He was picturing them as New York hoodlums, from their rough talk.

Like other persons, Keith was making the mistake of classing the Wasp's workers as ordinary thugs. He thought that he had learned something that the law ought to know; then, with sinking feeling, he foresaw reasons why his testimony could not count.

If shoved into the hands of Gorham's servants, Keith would be branded as the man in back of crime. Should he put up a fight against his present captors, the masked pair would kill him, thus ending his chance to talk.

Nevertheless, Keith was determined to make some struggle before his time was up. The darkness was giving him new confidence. It seemed like a shrouding shape, closing in upon Keith's captors. Perhaps it wasn't all imagination; there might be help from the gloom!

So suddenly that it startled Keith along with his captors, the scene was changed. A click from a light switch was responsible.

The sound took place in the front hall; through the wide curtains. Keith and the men beside him viewed an unexpected drama. The person who turned on the light was standing at the bottom of a broad stairway, facing the front door.

Keith recognized Ruth Gorham.

He had always classed the girl as a snob, never having seen her except when she was in a limousine, waiting while her cranky father went into the Richmond post office. Here, in a more intimate setting, Ruth presented a different picture.

She was a gorgeous-looking girl, and her courage had much to do with Keith's new opinion. Ruth had heard the sounds from the front door; she had come downstairs without calling the servants.

One slender hand pressed against the light switch, Ruth held a tiny automatic with the other. She was aiming the gun directly toward the front door, where a masked man had turned about. He was the crook from the library.

THE WASP

THE fellow was half crouched, making it impossible to determine his height. He was wearing a dark sweater, which made his bulk deceptive. He had a revolver, a large one, but it was only partially drawn.

Beside him, on the floor near the unlocked door, was a bulging satchel containing the loot from the library.

Seeing Ruth's face, the thief did not budge. The girl's determination impressed him. Her features were lovely, but firm. Brown eyes gazed sternly from a visage that a sculptor would have admired; it had the mold and whiteness of a statue's face. But Ruth's pallor did not indicate fear; quite the opposite.

Jet-black hair, streaming down upon her shoulders, formed a background that made her face look whiter than it really was. The thrust of her chin was a better index than her pallor. Her voice had firmness, when she told the masked invader:

"Stand where you are! One move, and I will fire!"

The cool, contralto tone reached Keith and his two captors. Watching Ruth, Keith was sure that she knew nothing of the other invaders. She had just come down the stairs, for her dressing gown trailed behind her on the steps above, like a long-trained dress.

Beneath the gown, she was wearing pajamas that reminded Keith of gossamer. Clinging to her shapely form, the thin garb quivered as she trembled.

Ruth wasn't shuddering. The shimmer of her silken garb meant simply that she was tense and alert, ready to carry out whatever threat she made.

Keith's captors recognized the girl's courage. They knew that the man at the front door was in a tough spot. With mutual accord, they suddenly shoved Keith forward. His stumble was loud enough to reach the stairs. Instinctively, Ruth turned.

The man at the front door whipped his gun upward, prepared to open fire on the girl. With a shout of warning, Keith lunged for the lighted hallway, hoping to bring the attack in his direction.

As he sprang, he expected prompt bullets in the back. Instead, he heard a thing that outdid his own imagination.

A mighty laugh came from the darkened hall behind him, a quivering tone that seemed from the throat of a taunting ghost. The weird challenge brought snarls from the men behind Keith; they recognized it, although he did not.

Keith heard the blast of guns as he stumbled through the curtains; but the shots were muffled. Snarls turned to groans; along with the latter, Keith heard a crook gasp:

"The Shadow!"

The man at the front door was turning with his gun; he had a momentary chance to shoot Keith point-blank. Ruth's intervention saved the heedless young man.

Remembering the man at the door, the girl swung toward him and opened a hurried fire. The shots were wild, but they sent the masked marauder dodging, while Keith was diving in the opposite direction to grab up a chair.

Then, as Ruth's fire stopped, Keith saw the girl's face, its amazement profound. The girl was gazing, large-eyed, toward the curtains through which Keith had come. Glancing in the same direction, Keith, too, was spellbound.

Through those curtains had come a figure in black, the ghostly conqueror who had settled Keith's captors in the hall. Only his burning eyes were visible between the brim of his slouch hat and the upturned collar of his sable-hued cloak.

From hidden lips still trailed the laugh that had startled the crooks in the darkened hall and made them turn to attempt hopeless battle. At present, that taunting tone was meant for another mobster: the masked burglar who was diving for a corner of the hallway.

The Shadow, master of justice, had done more than pick Richmond as a town where major crime was due. Arriving in the village, he had picked up the trail of crooks themselves and followed them to this mansion.

A living scourge of crime, The Shadow had begun new battle against creatures of the Wasp. Already he had settled two of the marauders, and in so doing had saved a pair of innocent lives: those of Keith Ellerton and Ruth Gorham!

CHAPTER X. THE LAW'S MISTAKE

THE lone bandit who had dodged to a corner was behind a massive chair, trying to get aim at The Shadow. But it was beyond his skill, the task of stabbing shots at the elusive being in black. The crook's gun spurted at blobs of blackness near the curtains and in alcoves. None of those blotches was The Shadow.

He was elsewhere, whirling to new positions, answering the useless shots with new taunts that seemed to come from the very walls. Keith and Ruth saw him, for they were closer, but their glimpses came only at intervals. They knew that The Shadow was baiting his adversary; that soon, the cloaked fighter would drive for a gunner whose revolver would be empty.

They weren't thinking of their own plight, until The Shadow delivered a sibilant hiss to Keith. The words were brief; he was telling Keith to get Ruth out of danger. Acting on that order, Keith sprang for the stairs, to point the girl upward.

Ruth gave a sharp cry. The man in the corner had bobbed up from behind his chair, hoping to pick off some human target – either Keith or Ruth – if he couldn't get The Shadow. Instantly, a big .45 exploded; its slug ruined the chair back. The masked crook flattened to the floor, luckily escaping The Shadow's quick shot.

As if actuated by the report of The Shadow's gun, the big front door flung inward. Four men with masks were on the threshold; they had come from cars parked down the driveway. They saw The Shadow, but their aim was far too late. He was vanishing like a smear of smoke.

Ready for any such invasion, The Shadow had selected the proper background – the upright oblong of blackness that marked the entrance to the rear hall. Once beyond the widespread curtains, he could snipe his assailants to perfection, while they were still in quest of him.

Unfortunately, The Shadow could not reach his vantage point, though the fault was not his own.

Ruth was breaking free from Keith. She wanted to aid The Shadow. With that intent, the girl was struggling to aim at the new invaders, forgetful that her puny gun was empty.

THE WASP

Keith had drawn her halfway up the stairs toward the second floor, when she wrenched loose; Keith found himself holding nothing but the dressing gown, from which Ruth had torn away.

Tripping on the steps, the pajama-clad girl somersaulted to the bottom, the slippers flying from her feet like fragile missiles, as the empty gun left her hand and bounded on the stairs. Diving after her, Keith saw men aiming from the front door, picking Ruth as their target.

They were out of The Shadow's range, those gunners, though he was swooping across the hall to reach them. Keith heard The Shadow's quick call:

"The light!"

The switch was right at Keith's hand. He snapped it with a quick sweep of his hand. He heard a fierce laugh from the gloom ahead, accompanied by the burst of guns. Bullets whined past Keith's ears as he flattened; he heard the slugs splinter the steps behind him.

Ruth was safe. Keith stumbled across her gun as he rolled her behind the shelter of the stairway. Dazed by her tumble, the girl sank back with a sigh.

Knowing that she would temporarily stay out of trouble, Keith grabbed the little gun, intending to use it as a cudgel. He considered himself capable of assisting The Shadow, who was engaging in a slugfest with the masked men at the door.

Starting forward, Keith ran into the man who had been in the corner. The fellow was grabbing up the bag of jewels. He slashed the heavy satchel against Keith's shoulder, jostling him aside. At a snarl from the masked robber, the others tore free from The Shadow and started through the hallway, toward the rear.

Driving in, Keith found the wrong fighter. He was grappling with one hand, slugging the little gun with the other, when he realized that he had fallen upon The Shadow. By then, they were pitching through the front door, and Keith gasped a recognition as The Shadow sent him headlong across the porch, where he struck against a pillar.

BEFORE The Shadow could turn to chase the men who had gone through the house, a car roared in from the driveway. A spotlight blazed full upon the porch, as the machine halted.

Before the arrivals could glimpse The Shadow as anything more than a shaded mass of blackness, he settled the spotlight with a single shot. Guns responded wildly from the car, while a hoarse voice shouted instructions.

The voice didn't belong to any crook. It had a rustic note. Keith, up from the pillar, was blurting an explanation to The Shadow.

"It's the sheriff!" Keith was breathless. "They called him... so he would find me –"

A flashlight bored in the direction of the porch. It showed Keith turning away, though not of his own accord. Sight of him was half blotted by The Shadow's form. Anxious to ruin another phase of the criminal-planned game, The Shadow was getting Keith away across the lawn.

The sheriff's men were spreading; their guns began to shoot. Keith heard a low-toned laugh from The Shadow as they raced among the shrubbery. Other guns were talking, too. Thinking that the shots were meant for them, masked crooks had entered the fray.

THE WASP

As he reached the clear, Keith heard the roar of starting motors far behind him. Then The Shadow's voice, telling him to get back to Richmond, where he evidently belonged.

With that, The Shadow was gone. Keith stood empty-handed; he had lost the little gun in his sprawl across the porch. Realizing that Ruth must be safe by this time, he took The Shadow's advice and began a jog down the hillside, to cut across the fields to town.

Meanwhile, The Shadow was taking a short cut of his own, toward the entrance of Gorham's driveway. He wanted to block off the escaping crooks, which would have been an easy task, had the sheriff's men provided any amount of delay.

But the deputies had been quite lax, as The Shadow learned when he reached the drive. The crook-laden cars were disappearing along the hill road, their taillights almost obscured by intervening trees.

Gunfire being useless, The Shadow skirted back toward the mansion, hoping to round up a few marauders who might have been abandoned by their companions.

There were none. Entering the side door of the house, The Shadow found the rear hallway empty. Even Keith's captors, the pair that The Shadow wounded, had managed to drag themselves away. Once again, servants of the Wasp had followed their chief's main rule; that of complete departure.

Some were wounded; perhaps mortally. What would become of them was a future problem, one that might furnish The Shadow a later trail. For the present, he decided to see how matters were in the Gorham household.

Men were coming from the library; they were deputies, reporting to the sheriff, who was in the front hall. Following, The Shadow saw the sheriff talking to Ruth, who was seated in a big chair, still a bit bewildered. From above, The Shadow could hear the excited voice of Titus Gorham. The sheriff sent a deputy up to quiet him.

"One of those fellows lost his mask," the sheriff told Ruth. "Maybe you saw his face, Miss Gorham."

"Why –"

Ruth stopped abruptly. Looking beyond Sheriff Cady, she caught the burn of keen eyes from the curtained doorway. She recognized their glow as a command for silence. Ruth tightened her lips. The action brought a suspicious glance from the sheriff, whose gaze, like his expression, was blunt.

"What were you going to say, Miss Gorham? Go right ahead; let's hear it."

RUTH proved herself ingenious. She looked about at the surrounding deputies; then she huddled closer in the big chair, tucking her feet into the cushions. Glancing at her pajamas, she seemed embarrassed because her attire was so flimsy.

"I'd like my dressing gown," pleaded Ruth. "I think I lost it on the stairs. Please look for it, sheriff."

Finding the dressing gown, the sheriff brought it to the girl, who draped it across her shoulders and drew it tightly about her. Brushing wisps of hair from in front of her eyes, Ruth questioned mildly:

"What were you saying, sheriff?"

Cady asked about the unmasked man. Deliberately, Ruth shook her head. She spoke in a truthful tone.

"All the robbers were masked, sheriff. Not one of them showed his face."

As she spoke, Ruth was picturing a very frank face topped by wavy hair. She knew that she would recognize Keith Ellerton if she ever saw him again, though she did not know his name.

She regarded Keith as one of her two rescuers; therefore, he was a friend, like The Shadow. As such, Keith could not be classed as one of the robbers, so she had no trouble putting the ring of truth into her statement.

Ruth's pretense of embarrassment had convinced Sheriff Cady. So did her statement of the facts. Sketchily, Ruth described a fray wherein a black-clad fighter had routed a large number of masked assailants. By adding that someone had turned off the lights early in the battle, she saved herself a further cross-examination.

Turning to the deputies, the sheriff ordered them to scour the grounds in search of wounded crooks. The deputies set out with flashlights and began to spread great glowing streaks amid the shrubbery.

Ahead of those streams of light moved a black-clad shape that came from the side door. Those deputies who saw the fading blotch took it for the shadows cast by trees and bushes. It was too flitting to be identified as a human form.

Fading from the Gorham mansion, The Shadow was seeking a new trail. Though murder had failed, thanks to The Shadow, robbery had succeeded despite his intervention. The law's mistake in going after Keith Ellerton was in some degree responsible.

Tonight, crime seemingly had paid, but its profits were still in jeopardy. Like the fruits of other evil deeds, Gorham's jewels would reach the hands of a single owner: the Wasp.

Sooner or later, The Shadow hoped to meet the Wasp and settle a division of those spoils. Either The Shadow would take all and restore the wealth to rightful owners, like Gorham, or the Wasp would retain the loot that he had gained.

The outcome was not The Shadow's present concern. His task was to find a sure trail to the Wasp. Oddly, such a trail was already in the making, unknown either to The Shadow or the Wasp!

CHAPTER XI. GLENN'S ADVICE

RICHMONT was a nine-o'clock town; the very hour was like a curfew that called the inhabitants indoors. It was after nine when Keith reached the main street and looked toward the little hotel, where a few lights shone.

There was none in Glenn Torbin's window, which troubled Keith at first, until he noticed a dim glow from Wendel's general store, with brighter lights in the office of the burgess situated directly above.

Local news was so infrequent in Richmond that all the residents were familiar with the most trivial items. Keith remembered that Burgess Wendel had gone to Northfield to attend a birthday party, and would not be back until late. Since Glenn expected to talk to the burgess, it was quite probable that he was waiting in Wendel's office.

THE WASP

The door of the store was unlocked. Entering, Keith walked past locked counters and entered a storeroom in the rear. There, on shelves, he viewed old stock that would probably never be sold until old Wendel died and the heirs put up the store for auction.

Old Wendel had a prejudice against bargain sales. As a result, his unsold merchandise had been called the "laughingstock" of his store.

One shelf in the storeroom had always impressed Keith as particularly funny. It contained a row of old-fashioned oil lamps that might have been used to illuminate Noah's ark.

The lamps had huge metal bases, to contain the oil. The bases were topped by burners that screwed into them. Above the wicks were antiquated lamp chimneys, with metal arms supporting clumsy, oversized shades. People often jested with Wendel about those lamps, suggesting that if he rubbed them, he might find Aladdin's somewhere among the lot.

Tonight, nothing seemed funny to Keith; not even the lamps. Warily, he stole up the stairway leading into Wendel's office and glanced past the door, which stood a trifle ajar. He saw Glenn Torbin reading a magazine in a corner of the room. Glenn looked up as Keith entered.

Glenn recognized instantly that Keith was in trouble. Without the slightest ado, Keith told his story rapidly, but with all the details. As Keith finished, Glenn pondered.

"So that's why the sheriff didn't come here," said Glenn, at length. "The burgess asked me to wait here for him, so I did. Cady must have received that call from Gorham's before he left Northfield."

Keith agreed. Northfield, a larger town than Richmond, was only a few miles beyond Gorham's hill. The sheriff could have made the trip in a mere ten minutes, by traveling at breakneck speed over the rough hill roads.

"You're sure those crooks weren't local boys?" queried Glenn. "Chaps who might have trailed you from town?"

Keith shook his head.

"Then they must have spotted you outside," decided Glenn, "From all accounts, they had the place well covered. When they saw you enter, they decided to trap you."

"That's probably the way it was," Keith conceded, soberly. "But who will believe such a story when I tell it?"

"I have believed you, Keith –"

The telephone bell cut Glenn short. Answering the call, he found himself talking to Sheriff Cady, who gave some of the details that Glenn had already heard from Keith, plus facts that Keith did not know about. Hanging up, Glenn turned to Keith.

"It's all right for the present," declared Glenn. "You weren't recognized, Keith. The sheriff is coming down here, to talk to the burgess when he gets back. I think your best plan is to admit that you were in the house and help them clear the mystery."

A different thought seized Keith.

"But since I wasn't recognized –"

"You weren't," interrupted Glenn. "The sheriff would have told me. But as a policy of strict honesty, you should tell your story. Things must have happened very rapidly up at Gorham's. According to the girl, everyone she saw was masked."

Keith came to his feet, snapping his fingers.

"Did Ruth Gorham actually say that?"

"Yes," replied Glenn. "The sheriff mentioned her testimony. She insisted that all the intruders were masked."

"She's shielding me!" exclaimed Keith. "There's the answer, Glenn. You're right; my story will be believed. Things did happen fast up at Gorham's, but two of us – Ruth and myself – saw a lot more than the rest. The fellow in the corner was too busy dodging The Shadow to see what happened to us. I put the lights out right after the other bunch came in.

"But Ruth and I were together on the stairs. I had my arms around her, Glenn, trying to get her away to safety. She wasn't scared a bit. You should have seen those eyes of hers, the way they looked into mine. The smile she gave proved she trusted me.

"She was gorgeous, Glenn! I don't have to close my eyes to picture her. She rather liked me, too. Well enough so she would not forget my face. Of course she said that all the crooks were masked. Ruth knew that I wasn't one of them."

FINISHING his happy outburst, Keith looked around as though hoping that the sheriff and half a dozen deputies would enter and clamp their hands on him. He could foresee their change of face when they summoned Ruth. Finding Keith in trouble, she would certainly give her full story and explain why she had withheld some of the important details.

The hand that did fall on Keith's shoulder was Glenn's. It came as a stroke of congratulation.

"I'm glad you told me this, Keith," assured Glenn. "It puts a different light on matters. You must leave here, right away, before either the sheriff or the burgess arrives."

"But I must vindicate myself –"

"You need no vindication," interposed Glenn. "You can prove your case any time, through Ruth Gorham. But it wouldn't be fair to make her change her testimony so soon. She has done a great thing for you, Keith. Why not let it stand?"

The logic impressed Keith. He connected it with the policy of honesty. Ruth had been honest in her statements; Keith could be the same, through silence.

"But suppose I should be questioned?" he said, dubiously. "The sheriff will certainly round up all the young fellows, myself among them."

"That can be handled," returned Glenn. "Take my car and drive to Northfield. Leave the car in the Apex Garage and tell them that I shall call for it tomorrow."

"But if I'm not in town –"

THE WASP

"I can tell the sheriff that you left right after dinner, which is quite true" – Glenn smiled – "because that was when you started up to Gorham's. I shall add that you went to Northfield, to take the train to New York."

"You mean the eight–o'clock train?"

"Yes. It left before the trouble started at Gorham's. Actually, you will take the midnight express. But that particular detail" – Glenn shrugged – "is something that I would not have to know about."

The faint roar of approaching motors became audible as Glenn concluded. Evidently two cars were arriving, one bringing Sheriff Cady, the other, Burgess Wendel. Hurriedly, Glenn started Keith down the stairs to a little back door that was bolted on the inside. Glenn was talking along the way.

"It's lucky that I promised you that job," he said. "I can testify that I told you to go to New York. Here's some cash" – he thrust a wad of bills into Keith's hand – "to keep you going until I arrive. Stop at the Hotel Metrolite; I'll look you up in a few days."

"And you'll have a job for me?"

"Certainly! Things will blow over, here in Richmond, and be forgotten. Meanwhile, you'll have a real chance in New York, which you wouldn't have if you became mixed in a mess here."

The door was open. Pushing Keith through, Glenn bolted the door behind his friend and went through the general store to meet the cars that were stopping in front.

In his turn, Keith took a roundabout course to the parking lot in back of the hotel. Climbing into Glenn's car, he found the key in the ignition lock and promptly started his trip.

Using a circling route, to avoid meeting any of the sheriff's men, Keith reached Northfield and left the car at the Apex Garage. He arrived at the station half an hour ahead of train time.

Buying a ticket and a berth, Keith paced the platform until the express appeared. On board the Pullman, he entered the smoking compartment and lighted a cigarette.

THE train was pulling out, when another passenger stepped in from the corridor. He was evidently from Northfield, too, and he had just managed to catch the train.

Keith noted the stranger quite closely, for his face was impressive. Its features were hawkish; its expression masklike.

In his turn, Keith was under a scrutiny that he did not recognize. The sequel came when Keith left the smoking compartment. Seated alone, the hawk–faced stranger delivered a whispered laugh that Keith would certainly have recognized, for he had heard it earlier, on a much louder scale.

The mirth of The Shadow!

Himself a passenger to New York, The Shadow, traveling in the guise of Lamont Cranston, had come across a most intriguing trail; that of Keith Ellerton, the unexplained factor in the robbery at Gorham's.

Whoever Keith might be, he was a person whose future would interest the Wasp, for Keith had escaped the toils of the master crook and knew too much for his own safety. In all certainty, the Wasp had plans for him. So did The Shadow.

By coming under the menace of the Wasp, Keith had thereby gained the protection of The Shadow. Through Keith Ellerton, The Shadow would seek the Wasp, and find him!

CHAPTER XII. IN NEW YORK

THREE mornings later, Keith Ellerton awoke to the tune of an alarm clock and took a pleased look around the tiny apartment which he occupied. He had moved here the night before at the suggestion of his friend Glenn Torbin, who had returned to New York the previous afternoon.

Glenn had provided Keith with more than an apartment; he had obtained a job for him, the day before. This morning, Keith was to report to Howard Brock, manager of the Tropical Steamship Lines. The office where Keith would find Brock was on the sixtieth floor of the Wall Street Trust Building.

Keith was dressed and ready to leave the apartment, when he heard a ring from the lobby door. Puzzled about how to admit a visitor, Keith went downstairs, where he found a young man pressing the button of 2B, which happened to be Keith's apartment. Keith gave him an inquiring look.

"You're ringing my apartment?"

The visitor looked puzzled. He pointed to the number 2B. Beside it, Keith saw a printed name cut from a calling card, which read: "Richard J. Brann."

"I'm trying to ring Dick Brann," said the caller. "Do you know if he is in?"

"Mr. Brann has moved," explained Keith, rather sheepishly. "I've taken the apartment that he used to have. I'm new to the city, and I never noticed these names down here on a rack. I guess I've got a lot to learn."

The visitor smiled. Keith liked his manner; the smile was friendly. He was older than Keith, but he did not look worldly-wise. If Keith had met him in Richmond, he wouldn't have taken the chap to be a New Yorker.

"You're a friend of Dick's?"

Keith shook his head at the query. Frankly, he stated that he had just arrived in New York, to begin a new job. He had one friend in town, Glenn Torbin, but no others. Hearing such details, the visitor extended his hand.

"My name is Harry Vincent," he said. "I'm something of a stranger in New York, myself. I come from St. Joe's County, out in Michigan, so I'm a long way from home. I guess it's the same with you."

Keith acknowledged that it was. He introduced himself, glad to make a new acquaintance. Noting that Keith had his hat and was going out, Vincent asked him where he was bound. Keith said he was going to take the downtown subway. Smiling, Vincent inquired:

"Which one?"

"I don't know," confessed Keith. "I thought there was only one. I guess I'm supposed to take the first I come to."

"Walking east or west?"

Again, Keith was puzzled. He remarked that he would inquire at the restaurant when he had breakfast, provided that he could find a restaurant to begin with. Vincent's laugh was even more friendly than his smile.

"Hop into my car," he suggested. "We'll have breakfast together, and I'll pilot you wherever you want to go."

WITHIN the next hour, Keith Ellerton came to regard Harry Vincent as a friend of the same caliber as a long-lost brother. Their introduction reminded Keith of the way people met in Richmond, where visitors often found someone else living in a house where a friend had been.

Keith didn't guess that Harry had never heard of Dick Brann until he saw the old card on the board beside the buzzer of Apartment 2B. Harry had simply been seeking a good wedge wherewith to make Keith's acquaintance.

It was true that Harry came from Michigan, but he had been in New York much longer than Keith supposed, and knew the city better than most natives.

Harry Vincent was a secret agent of The Shadow, a veteran in such service. He had been specially detailed to meet up with Keith Ellerton and learn all he could about the young man from Richmond.

Off to a quick start, Harry had obtained enough data for a thorough report by the time he dropped Keith at the Wall Street Trust Building. More than that, Harry had arranged to meet Keith after five o'clock, to learn how he liked the new job.

When Keith reached the sixtieth floor of the Wall Street Trust Building, he found his head ringing from the long ride in the elevator. He could see only one door, and it did not mention the Tropical Steamship Lines. It simply bore the legend:

BASIL GANNAFORD

Business Counselor

Noting persons enter, Keith followed. At an inquiry desk within, he learned that the steamship line was managed by the Gannaford organization. A guide took him to a far door and ushered him into the office of his new boss, Howard Brock.

A sad-faced, baldish man, Brock eyed Keith through a pair of glasses and gave a welcoming nod. Keith's job was the sorting of folders put out by the steamship company, a task which would require perseverance rather than genius.

There were only four types of folders, and they were to be bundled in batches of a hundred each; but the cartons in which they came occupied more than half the floor space in the office where Brock placed Keith.

When Keith had finished sorting a few thousand folders, Brock returned, his manner quite fluttery.

"Spruce up, Ellerton," he said. "We have to call on Mr. Gannaford. He wants to meet all new employees of the organization. A new rule, instituted this week."

Brock's manner indicated that a meeting with Gannaford was a rare privilege. Keith began to understand its importance after they had passed through the chain of sumptuous private offices leading to Gannaford's. He was tremendously impressed when they reached their goal and saw Basil Gannaford in person.

THE WASP

Keith had never believed that such an office could exist, except in a movie set. He received the immediate sensation of Gannaford's magnitude not only from the huge desk, but because the window in back of Gannaford provided a great panorama of all Manhattan, stretched out like a carpet, laden with toylike buildings and streets that were no more than ribbons.

Stooped far across his desk, Gannaford extended a welcoming hand that carried a strong grasp. His smile was pleasant, as he sank back to his chair; his modulated voice made Keith feel quite at ease in these titanic surroundings.

"We hope you will enjoy it here," spoke Gannaford. "We have a different system of efficiency than most organizations, Mr. Ellerton. We depend upon the individual efforts of our employees. We regard them as our motive power, not as mere cogs in a machine.

"Mr. Brock has reported that your recommendations are quite in order and indicate that you are the type of man who will rise in importance, while you remain with us. Since such a future will be to our mutual satisfaction, there is nothing more that I can say."

Gannaford leaned forward to deliver another handshake, indicating that the interview was ended. Keith felt the power of appraising eyes, that seemed to watch him, even when he had turned away with Brock. He was still thinking of Gannaford when he reached the sorting room.

Keith's job had taken on a new importance. It was the steppingstone to success. Gannaford had so indicated, in words that left no space for doubt. Keith's thrill at being in New York had increased threefold.

Beginning with Glenn Torbin as a friend, he had gained Harry Vincent as another. He regarded Basil Gannaford as a third; a man whose friendship could prove powerful as well as genuine.

By half past five, Keith was back in his apartment. He found a note from Glenn, asking him to stop over and see him. Keith waited, hoping that Harry would arrive. Soon, Harry did, and Keith insisted that he come along and meet Glenn.

They reached Glenn's apartment, a much larger one than Keith's, which was quite natural, considering that Glenn rated as the manager of a travel bureau. Shaking hands with Harry, Glenn heard Keith's story of how the two had met, and gave a pleased nod.

To Glenn's eyes, Harry Vincent looked like a small-towner lately arrived in New York, which was the very impression The Shadow's agent was trying to create. Therefore, it followed that Harry was the sort of acquaintance that Glenn wanted Keith to choose. Mixing cocktails in a large shaker, Glenn suggested that they both have dinner with him, and the invitation was promptly accepted.

They were about to leave the apartment, when a messenger knocked at the door, bringing an envelope that bore the name of the travel bureau where Glenn worked. Opening the envelope, Glenn scanned the message; crumpling it, he thrust the paper into his pocket.

Watching Glenn intently, Harry noticed a perceptible change in the sleek man's expression, something that Glenn promptly covered. Then, indifferently:

"I'll have to stop over at the bureau," said Glenn. "Suppose you fellows go ahead. Show Keith something of New York, Vincent, and meet me at the Hotel Metrolite cafe in about an hour."

THE WASP

Glenn took a taxicab, while Keith and Harry were getting into the latter's car. They had started in the direction of Central Park, when Harry noted that Keith was plucking something from his coat sleeve. Observing Harry's interest, Keith said:

"That's a funny thing to find in New York."

"What is?" queried Harry. "Where did it come from?"

"I saw it drop from Glenn's envelope," replied Keith. "It looks like the wing of a hornet." He held the tiny object toward the car window. "No, I'd say it was a wasp's wing."

Indifferently Keith let the transparent token flutter from the window as something of only passing interest. But to Harry, Keith's discovery was of the utmost consequence. It proved a truth that Harry had begun to suspect; a point that would prove of high value to The Shadow.

Glenn Torbin, the "friend" who had brought Keith Ellerton to New York, was a worker for the Wasp, that hidden hand of crime whose lair The Shadow sought!

CHAPTER XIII. THE WAY OF THE WASP

To Glenn Torbin, the message that contained the wasp wing was something of a jolt. Like George Ambril, Glenn had received a summons to meet his insidious chief. To Ambril, the note had seemed a death warrant, which it had proven to be.

To Glenn Torbin, the threat was not so great, yet it smacked of ill. This was the first time that he had ever visited the Wasp. Suite 810, at the Hotel Trentine, promised to hold much in store for him; much that might be in the nature of an inquisition.

Dusk filled the suite when Glenn entered it. The sleek young man lost his poise, as he advanced to the inner door. Face to face with the Wasp, he halted. Like Ambril, Glenn wanted to recoil from the waspish creature with the oversized head that showed such venom in its leering countenance.

The Wasp buzzed words in the tone that Glenn had often heard over the telephone, but the buzz was sharper, strongly ominous.

"You had instructions," spoke the Wasp. "You failed to follow them, at Richmond. Others did their proper duty. Why not you?"

"I framed Ellerton," explained Glenn, "exactly as I planned it. The others trapped him while I was getting away with the jewels. It worked perfectly!"

"Except for the Shadow!" The Wasp spoke with venom. "I have heard enough of The Shadow! I refuse to accept excuses, when his name is concerned."

Thrusting a long hand forward, the Wasp clamped it on Glenn's shoulder. Like Ambril, Glenn felt a sharp sting. Slatted light from the Venetian blinds showed the Wasp's mouth, wide in an ugly leer that revealed a mass of ill-shaped teeth.

Recoiling, Glenn voiced a plea, hoping to withhold the Wasp's command for servitors who would destroy his hapless worker.

THE WASP

"It wasn't The Shadow!" Glenn's tone was ardent. "We managed to get clear of him. I got back to my car with the loot; the others made their getaway. There was something else that spoiled the frame-up; something that can still be remedied."

The Wasp paused to listen. Weakly, Glenn explained how Ruth Gorham had testified in Keith's behalf, by not mentioning his presence at the house. As Glenn talked, the Wasp's evil eyes glittered. He was catching the thread of all that was to come.

"Ellerton never suspected me," declared Glenn. "He was ready to do anything I told him, and still is. But I couldn't let him give himself up, not while the girl was still around to clear him. I took the only out, sending him to New York."

"They're still baffled, out in Richmond. The swag is right where we can collect it, any time. If we can put Keith Ellerton through the mill the way that I –" Glenn caught himself; then added: "the way that others went through, whatever testimony Ruth Gorham gives won't help him."

The Wasp was stepping to the window. Glenn saw him rest his grotesque chin in a thin cupped hand. Long fingers, moving like crawly things, had the appearance of a beard in the increasing gloom. Those fingers writhed viciously with the evil contortions of the Wasp's face.

"You are right," commended the Wasp, in his harsh buzz. "We can reverse our usual policy with Ellerton. When he has played a part in crime, he can be sacrificed to the law, instead of belonging to our organization. Tell me: how have you handled him since he reached New York?"

GLENN became gleeful, now that he shared the full confidence of the Wasp. He explained that he had placed Keith with the Tropical Steamship Lines, through the manager, Howard Brock. The travel bureau where Glenn worked had done some important favors for Tropical, and Brock had granted Glenn's request for a job for Keith.

His chin still in his hand, the Wasp nodded approval. Then he remarked:

"I have never heard of the Tropical Lines. Who controls the company?"

"It's a new corporation," explained Glenn. "A combine arranged by Basil Gannaford."

The Wasp's eyes took on a sharp glow. Evidently, he had heard of Basil Gannaford. Glenn would have understood more, had he known that one of the Wasp's recent crimes, the attempted theft of Warrendon's options, had involved Consolidation Metals, another company under Gannaford's control.

Then, shaking his big head, the Wasp decided in the negative.

"Ellerton could hardly help us," he said. "I was thinking of a way to reach Gannaford and deprive him of some surplus wealth. But a new man like Ellerton could have no contact with Gannaford, himself."

Glenn remembered something that Keith had told him. He stated that Keith had actually met Gannaford; that the bigwig had instituted a new system of meeting all new employees. The information pleased the Wasp.

"All this can prove profitable," he decided. "In snaring Ellerton, we can use him as a tool against Gannaford. As for the testimony of Ruth Gorham, there is another way in which we can suppress it entirely, should ordinary measures fail."

THE WASP

Glenn hoped that the Wasp would continue with his theme. The Wasp did, but from a different standpoint. He concentrated entirely upon Keith's weaknesses, asking Glenn many pointed questions.

During the conversation, Glenn made mention of Keith's new acquaintance, Harry Vincent. In Glenn's estimate, Harry was another "hick," like Keith, but with a trifle more experience in the ways of city life.

The Wasp decided that the two made a perfect team. From Glenn's details, he analyzed Keith as a young man with two weaknesses. Keith trusted friends almost on sight, as in the cases of Glenn and Harry. He also could succumb to a woman's wiles, judging from the way he had changed his opinion of Ruth Gorham.

As he had done with Ambril, the Wasp clapped a stingless hand upon Glenn's shoulder, while conducting his visitor to the outer door. But when Glenn had gone, the Wasp made no efforts to keep check upon him. Instead, the thin-bodied crime master indulged in a satisfied chuckle. Glenn Torbin was thereby certified as a worthy member of the Wasp's widespread organization.

On his way to the Hotel Metrolite, Glenn proved that worth. He calculated the factors in the case of Keith Ellerton, and thought of them in specialized terms. Usually, the Wasp picked prospects who were easily induced to take up crime. This did not apply to Keith. He was honest, which made Glenn secretly detest him. Keith wanted opportunity; not easy gain.

Furthermore, he was to be framed, as originally intended. Putting him in a jam, then offering him a way out by serving the Wasp, would not apply in Keith's case. It had worked with Glenn and many others, but it wouldn't do with Keith. The Wasp had mentioned a reverse twist, in this instance, and Glenn was trying to figure its proper application.

Dining with Keith and Harry, Glenn found himself bothered by the problem, only to learn that his effort was wasted. As they were finishing dinner, an attendant informed Glenn that his office wanted him on the telephone. When he reached the booth and spoke across the wire, he heard the buzz of the Wasp.

The master of secret lures had solved the entire situation. Glenn had merely to turn the proposition over to the proper hands, and they would do the rest. After repeating the Wasp's verbal instructions, Glenn returned to the cafe.

"I'll have to run over to Club Sixty-six," he said, in an annoyed tone. "The manager, Ken Dallas, wants to book some talent for a cruise. He insists on seeing me, although I've told him it's no use. So I'll have to leave you, unless" – Glenn looked from Harry to Keith – "you'd like to get a brief glimpse of Manhattan night life."

Keith showed himself eager, and Harry acquiesced.

ON the way to Club Sixty-six, Glenn explained that the place was a clip joint, but that neither need be worried, once they received a proper introduction.

When they reached the place, Keith was impressed by its glitter, but Harry promptly recognized it as an all-night speak-easy that attracted throngs after the usual closing hours. Club Sixty-six occupied a basement well suited for undercover operation.

Glenn introduced his friends to Ken Dallas, a burly man who wore a tuxedo and had a manner which Keith considered pleasant but Harry regarded as oily.

Since he wanted to talk business with Glenn, the proprietor suggested that the others take a table and have some drinks on the house. As an added favor, Dallas conducted Keith and Harry to a table where two persons

were already present and introduced them to the pair.

One was a man named Jack Prenter, just back from Cleveland. Keith liked Prenter on sight, for the fellow's manner was pleasant. The other customer intrigued him even more, being of the feminine variety. She was an attractive blonde, and Dallas introduced her as Velma Corl. Soon after all were seated and having their first round of refreshments, Glenn stopped at the table.

"Sorry, fellows," he told Keith and Harry. "I'll have to go back to the office. Stay here if you want, and leave when you like. I'll see you tomorrow."

Glenn grinned as he left. He had followed the Wasp's instructions. The victims were in the proper hands. Dallas, Prenter, Velma, all were workers for the Wasp, fully instructed in the coming scheme. It didn't occur to Glenn that in smoothing matters for the Wasp, he had likewise paved a way for The Shadow.

The man who knew that fact was Harry Vincent. He had recognized Jack Prenter by name, and Velma Corl by description. Prenter was the man who had taken Ambril's car and aided in crime at Richmond. Velma, the fluffy-haired blonde, was obviously the woman who had disposed of evidence at Ambril's apartment, and who had tried to assassinate The Shadow.

It was a dangerous game, mixing with this pair; one that Harry Vincent would have dropped, had he been entirely on his own. But Harry was working under auspices that would prevent ill consequences both for himself and Keith Ellerton.

Harry was serving The Shadow; and so, in a sense, was Keith. The farther they advanced into the toils of the Wasp, the greater would be The Shadow's final gain!

CHAPTER XIV. CROSSED SCHEMES

CRIME was at a standstill, not only in New York, but elsewhere. The newspapers were favoring the public with an explanation which was correct, to a degree. Crime had stumbled twice, although it had not failed entirely.

The raid at Warrendon's was one instance. There, crooks had escaped with their skins, but with no monetary profit. Again, crime had been balked in Richmond. Evildoers had gotten Gorham's gems, but had paid a heavy price.

Sheriff Cady and his deputies had found two mutilated bodies in an old quarry not far from Richmond. The dead men were evidently members of the masked band that had fled the Gorham mansion. They had died in transit, and their pals had disposed of them, after disfiguring their corpses beyond recognition.

However, accounts of crime lacked all mention of the two leading factors, The Shadow and the Wasp, rivals in the recent strife. Their struggle still continued deep beneath the lulled surface.

Clippings, report sheets, other data enabled The Shadow to size the Wasp's game thoroughly. It was plain how crime's new overlord worked. There were dozens of hidden workers in his organization. Scouts, sent to distant towns, picked out restless young men and brought them to town with promises of jobs. Once established in Manhattan, the rural youths were coerced into ways of crime.

The method was to saddle them with debts, or to involve them in some crooked task. To hold the legitimate jobs which they had obtained, the young men listened to the buzz of the Wasp and became accomplished workers in his criminal games. Sometimes they slipped, as George Ambril had when he incurred extra debts

on his own; but the Wasp always found an antidote.

It was quite evident that these imported crooks later graduated into roving workers like Glenn Torbin, who had done the crimes in Richmond, or Jack Prenter, who had been with the cover-up crew that The Shadow battled at the Gorham mansion. But there was something even more insidious behind the schemes of the Wasp.

Young men, like Keith Ellerton, were framed at will, and at this very moment The Shadow could list names of those who had gone to jail, branded for crimes in which they played no part. The only way to release these innocent victims from prison was to uncover the Wasp and expose his machinations.

Along with profits from many crimes, the Wasp doubtless held the real evidence of such frame-ups, for he would need it as a whiplash over his own workers. Thus, The Shadow preferred to avoid combat with the Wasp's tribe, for the present. Instead, he wanted to ferret out the Wasp, in person.

Such opportunity seemed at hand. While the Wasp was holding his masked mobs in abeyance, to lull both The Shadow and the law, another game was in process. Through his most competent workers, Velma Corl and Jack Prenter, the Wasp was enmeshing Keith Ellerton in a web that would incriminate him in the Richmond crime, and therewith square Glenn Torbin.

All this reached The Shadow through reports from Harry Vincent, who was playing the part of dupe, along with Keith. The Shadow was watching, to see what the subtle stroke would be.

The base of present operations was Club Sixty-six. Ken Dallas, notorious proprietor of the dive, was obviously on the Wasp's pay roll. Like others, he might, or might not, be in direct communication with the Wasp. The Shadow preferred to ignore the Wasp's workers themselves, for past experience had proven that they were too well watched.

The question was: where would Keith and Harry go from Club Sixty-six?

Waiting to learn the answer, The Shadow was prepared to follow along, silent and invisible, whenever the time arrived. Subtle, hidden tactics would be his surest policy.

NEARLY a week had passed since Keith and Harry had begun to see New York together. Every night had found them at Club Sixty-six. They were getting thick with Velma and Prenter, and they had already run up debts. It was the old game of getting the dupes in deep. But it wasn't working fast enough to suit The Shadow.

Tonight, Keith and Harry had gone to the night spot again. It might be that this evening would bring a hurry call from Harry, summoning The Shadow. But, meanwhile, the police, spared the task of battling major crimes, had begun to clamp down upon some of the all-night dives.

Legitimate complaints had been coming through, that such spots were the breeding places of crime. Chances were that Club Sixty-six would not be touched for a while, for it was being skillfully managed by Ken Dallas. Nevertheless, The Shadow wanted to keep close tabs on the situation.

That was the reason why Lamont Cranston strolled into the Cobalt Club a while after midnight, to chat with his night-owl friend, Commissioner Weston.

"So you are keeping late hours, too," spoke Weston, in a patronizing tone. "I hope, Cranston, that you do not intend to visit any places that stay open after the closing hour."

THE WASP

"I might," was Cranston's reply. "It would be a good way to meet you, commissioner. I understand that you have been patronizing those spots, lately."

Weston appreciated the jest. He had been conducting most of the raids in person, although Inspector Cardona had been doing most of the heavy work. Privately, The Shadow believed that Weston liked to hear the crash of bottles and the splintering of mahogany bars when his squads demolished the streamlined speak-easies. He avoided such comment, however, preferring to let the commissioner talk.

"We've been knocking them over, Cranston," boasted Weston, "and tonight will be the greatest coup of all! In a short while" – he glanced at his watch – "I must join inspector Cardona. We intend to raid a place called Club Sixty-six."

The statement struck like a thunderbolt. Why Weston had picked the Wasp's prize pet so early in the game was actually a mystery to The Shadow. There was only one way to solve the riddle. In Cranston's most casual tone, he inquired:

"You have had a complaint?"

Weston shook his head.

"Better than a complaint," he replied. "We have received a tip-off, and a most reliable one."

From his pocket, the commissioner produced a folded paper. It was quite thick and it bore a typewritten statement, to the effect that Club Sixty-six was the worst of illegal night clubs and should be raided at once. The Shadow returned the paper to Weston, with a shrug.

"Flimsy evidence," he said. "I wouldn't give much attention to an anonymous communication, commissioner."

"Nor would I," clucked Weston. "But this note happens to be signed. Observe its thickness, Cranston. It made me presume that it was a double sheet, so I held it to the light –"

Weston paused to demonstrate. The Shadow saw plainly that the sheet was not of two-ply structure. But the same light which showed the paper ordinary, did something else. It heated the paper and caused brownish letters to appear, in the form of a signature which had been written in invisible ink.

Cranston's eyes became fixed in an expression that Weston took for astonishment. The mysterious signature was a title, rather than a name. It said:

THE SHADOW

Of all persons, one could certainly testify that the signature was a fraud. That person was Lamont Cranston. Actually The Shadow, Cranston knew that this forgery must be the work of the Wasp. But it was impossible for The Shadow to convince Commissioner Weston of the fact, without revealing his own identity.

In Cranston's casual style, The Shadow congratulated the commissioner upon having so cleverly discovered the signature, though he knew that the Wasp had foreseen that such would happen.

Since it was almost time for Weston's meeting with Cardona, Cranston decided to go home. But when he reached his limousine, outside the Cobalt Club, he immediately became The Shadow.

THE WASP

WORK lay ahead for The Shadow. Proof of it was present at Club Sixty-six, where Ken Dallas, the hard-boiled proprietor, was drawing some tough-faced waiters to one side. Before speaking to his husky bouncers, Dallas cast a practiced eye along the bar, where customers were lined up three deep.

Beyond, Dallas saw tables filled with other patrons, who preferred the portion of the club that was called the "lounge." The lounge had walls made of large mirrors, that made it appear huge in size, though it was actually quite small. One table of four was where Dallas looked.

Keith and Harry were there with Velma and Prenter; they had come early to get a place before the club filled, which it always did as soon as other spots closed.

Velma had brought along a camera with an automatic flash and was taking pictures of funny scenes about Club Sixty-six, much to the amusement of her companions. Dallas caught the blonde's eye and gave a nod, which she returned. Then, to the waiters:

"The blowoff is coming," Dallas confided. "The police commissioner got a tip that this joint was phony. It was all in a letter sent him by the Wasp." Dallas paused, noted the surprised looks of his men; then added: "But the Wasp signed it with The Shadow's name!"

Surprised looks changed to grins. Still, the huskies couldn't quite understand the matter, until Dallas explained that the hot spots had been having too much trouble lately. The Wasp, with his usual craft, had decided to pull the unexpected.

"This dump is through, anyway," said Dallas. "Rather than have the bulls bust in at the wrong time, the Wasp is using them to help a special job that's being done for him. Never mind what the job is. You fellows have your own work.

"The cops are due soon" – Dallas looked toward a clock – "and they're going to get plenty, without knowing that it came from us. The barkeeps have been spiking the drinks heavy; most of those simps at the bar are about three sheets gone.

"Get down to the other end, all of you, and start shoving hard when the raid hits. Head the herd for the door, and they'll stampede. Start shooting, and plant the roscoes on the dopes; then shove your dukes up and let the chumps get blamed."

By the time the waiters had rounded the massed crowd at the bar, Dallas was turning in response to a rap from the main door. He opened a peephole, looked through at an eye on the outside. The eye winked, and Dallas understood.

The man outside was the lookout. He had let the police capture him. The wink meant that they were right behind him, ordering him to give the countersign that would give them entry into Club Sixty-six. Coolly, Dallas pressed the switch releasing huge bolts that held the door.

Plans were perfect. New victory was scheduled for the Wasp, at the expense of The Shadow. Such seemed certain to Ken Dallas, who knew too little of The Shadow's ways!

CHAPTER XV. DOUBLE CAPTURE

THE stout door to Club Sixty-six lashed inward under the shouldering drive of four burly plain-clothes men. The barrier slammed Ken Dallas before he could get clear, and sent him flying to a corner at the near end of the bar, where he sank back with a half-genuine groan, jolted, but not badly hurt. Dallas was right where he

wanted to be: away from the path of the stampede.

Before the detectives were far past the threshold, the rush began. Shoved by the waiters, customers at the far end of the bar put pressure upon those nearest the door. There were shouts to stop the men who were coming in to spoil a big night.

Not recognizing that the invaders were police – for that matter, not caring – the drink-roused customers of Club Sixty-six grabbed improvised weapons and surged to the attack. The handiest things were bottles that stood along the bar, placed there in plenty by order of Ken Dallas. Thus armed, two dozen men were out to stop the law's attack.

Hurling their reeling antagonists aside, the detectives were hewing into the night club, when guns began to talk from deep in the milling crowd. To all appearances, those shots were supplied by the angered customers.

The first shots were wide; the detectives dropped back, to take aim on their own, the worst thing that they could have done.

Teeming faces were their only targets. It meant that if the detectives fired, they would kill mere brawlers, not actual gunners. Meanwhile, cool marksmen – Ken's bouncers – intended to chop down the hated detectives under circumstances which would later afford a perfect alibi.

The detectives never opened fire. In from the entry behind them came a human whirlwind, a figure that had the power of a twister and the same color. Cloaked in black, The Shadow was scarcely visible against the yawning darkness of the door. He was swinging his fists hard and wide; gloved fists, that carried automatics to give them weight.

Under his onslaught, the headquarters men went sprawling, scattered. They landed as Dallas had when the door hit him. Of the four, three lost their guns temporarily; the last man was too dazed to use the weapon that he managed to retain.

Out of the howling mass that still surged forward came raucous shouts of recognition:

"The Shadow! Get him!"

Ken's bouncers couldn't get The Shadow. They no longer had him as a target. Divining what was under way, basing his guess on the fact that the Wasp, himself, had planned this raid, The Shadow chose a shelter that shielded him from every gun. Keeping low as he drove, he lunged straight into the mass of customers, who were by this time in full surge.

The whole swirl heaved like a bowl of porridge stirred by a big spoon. Men were swinging bottles at a head beneath a slouch hat; a head that was gone when their strokes landed.

Drunken brawlers were bashing one another, instead of The Shadow, whose fierce, mocking laugh, issuing from their very midst, encouraged them to wilder tactics that resulted in more of their self-devastation.

The Shadow was hewing a path to the men he wanted, those gunners who were still trying to spy him. The path that he cut remained, for the patrons who hit the floor were too groggy to get up again.

Back by the door, the plainclothes men were coming to their feet, regaining their guns, as another wave joined them. Blue-clad patrolmen were arriving, to view the dizzy mass of brawlers spread along the floor.

THE WASP

A loud voice bawled orders. Inspector Cardona had come into the place with the bluecoats. Behind the surge was Commissioner Weston. He didn't know, at first, why Joe Cardona had shouted; then the picture cleared.

At the far end of the long bar, near the steps that led up to the lounge, Weston saw the cloaked figure of The Shadow whipping suddenly from the clutch of two sagging drunks, to fling himself upon a batch of armed men who looked like waiters.

The Shadow had found the real trouble-makers, exposing them so suddenly that they had neither time to aim at him, nor get rid of their incriminating guns.

Alarmed by resounding mirth that shuddered in their very ears, the balked assassins turned to dodge the slugging strokes of big guns swung by black-gloved fists.

With a sweeping dodge, The Shadow went beyond his foemen, bringing them about with elated shouts, for they thought they had him on the run. But before they could aim their revolvers, they learned that the shift was a ruse, meant for their own destruction, not The Shadow's.

Police guns barked, Cardona spouting the order for a general fire. The Shadow was beyond his foemen, leaving them as targets for the law. Detectives and patrolmen had an open path of fire above the heads of the crawling customers, most of whom were interested only in salvaging the remaining contents of bottles broken in the fray.

SEEKING sure shelter where stray police shots would not reach him, The Shadow reached the top step of the short flight leading to the lounge. Turning as he arrived there, he was prepared to drop any lucky adversary who might be taking aim at him, when shouts warned him of another danger.

The menace lay in the lounge itself, a thing that The Shadow had foreseen, for he didn't stop his momentary turn in the direction of the waiters, but completed a full pivot, with both guns at aiming level.

The shouts were from Keith and Harry; similar warnings were voiced by a few chance patrons in the lounge, men who happened to consider The Shadow a friend. They were trying to tell The Shadow what the others were about. Velma and Prenter were not the only workers that the Wasp had placed in this vantage spot.

At least five guns were aiming in The Shadow's direction. Two were pointing from a corner, as the cloaked fighter swung that way, stumbling as his foot hooked a chair. Out of that falter, The Shadow held an advantage.

Thinking that he was sprawling, guns and all, the marksmen steadied to deliver sure shots. Before they pulled the triggers, The Shadow spun himself upright with a wide kick, that scaled the chair ahead of him.

Dodging the flying missile, a pair of sleek gunners fired wide. Knowing that The Shadow could aim before they could, they dived beneath tables, preferring refuge rather than battle.

In another corner, Harry Vincent was wresting a gun from a snarling man who looked the part of a rat, despite his tuxedo attire. Punching the fellow, Harry turned to see how The Shadow was faring. In the foreground was Keith, disputing with Prenter for possession of another revolver.

By then, police were driving through. Velma had reached a corner where there was a light switch, set in a frame that held a huge mirror. She pressed the switch, extinguishing the lights in the lounge and producing a vague dimness, which proved more to the advantage of The Shadow than that of the opposition.

THE WASP

There was still enough light from the front of Club Sixty-six to show rats scurrying for cover though The Shadow's figure, suited to shrouding gloom, was quite invisible.

Harry made out Keith beside a table. A bit bewildered, Keith was aiming the gun that he had captured from Prenter. At present, the only possible targets were policemen, blundering up the steps. Harry shouted for Keith to get rid of the incriminating revolver.

Before Keith could respond, there was a puff of light from Velma's corner. The blonde was taking another candid-camera shot, despite all the excitement. Harry heard her call quickly to the others. As Keith chucked his gun, two men fell upon him: Prenter and the fellow that Harry had punched in the corner.

They were dragging Keith away!

With The Shadow elsewhere, searching for crooks in the darkness, it became Harry's task to prevent Keith's capture. Since they had both shown their hands, it seemed to Harry that he and Keith would be due for destruction, if taken away by agents of the Wasp.

Harry wasn't concerned about himself; he had fought through many tough situations, with The Shadow's aid. Keith was the problem.

Flinging himself to the rescue, Harry arrived just as Keith sagged from a punch that Prenter gave him. Another camera bulb flashed, giving a brilliant glimpse of Harry as he pulled Keith from the clutching hands. Then, with darkness, came a shivery laugh.

The Shadow had arrived.

THE thing that followed gave Harry Vincent two seconds of absolute amazement. Harry was actually shoving Keith into The Shadow's clutch, when he saw Prenter come lunging in, despite The Shadow. A gloved hand made a backward swing, a stroke that should have brushed Prenter aside like a troublesome insect. But the heavy fist did not reach Prenter.

Instead, it landed hard against Harry's jaw. With that blow, Harry learned why The Shadow's enemies went down so suddenly when they received a gun-weighted punch. But Harry did not think about the matter for the present. His senses left him just after the blow landed.

Strange enough was The Shadow's failure to rescue Keith; but the amazing accident whereby he had slugged Harry into submission was even more outlandish. Instead of rescue, The Shadow had turned over a pair of prisoners to the Wasp.

As The Shadow wheeled away in search of foemen that he could not seem to find, Prenter and others snatched the stunned victims and hauled them to Velma's corner.

The police were shooting in the darkness, commanding crooks to toss away their guns. Clattering glass was echoing from all directions, for the bullets splintered the mirrors. Reaching the darkened scene, Cardona yelled to stop the fire. He found the light switch, pressed it.

Except for a few puzzled patrons who had tried to help The Shadow, the lounge was empty. Velma, Prenter, and their tribe were gone. The captives – Keith and Harry – had vanished with them.

Looking about, Cardona caught a glimpse of The Shadow leaving the front door of Club Sixty-six, through which Ken Dallas had managed a lucky escape a short while before.

Commissioner Weston had come through the door. He was rubbing his chin, for Dallas had given him a punch in passing. Weston hadn't seen The Shadow when the cloaked fighter took the same route.

The police hadn't identified any of the people in the lounge, but Cardona saw that the place was no longer crowded, and knew that quite a few were gone.

Looking at the broken mirrors, Cardona saw something in the corner by the light switch, and approached. One mirror had been a door; its glass facing gone, the barrier revealed a hidden catch that the mirror had concealed.

It made a trick panel, bolted from the other side. A few bullets from Cardona's revolver settled the catch. He and his men pushed through to a passage, where another barrier blocked them. By then, Cardona conceded that there would be no chance to overtake the crooks who had fled.

Half a block from Club Sixty-six, The Shadow was watching the flight of two cars that had pulled away from an alley in back of the raided premises. He caught a glimpse of a blond head at a car window, knew that Velma Corl was in charge of the fugitive band.

The Shadow made no effort to stop the flight; he seemed quite disinterested in the fate of Harry and Keith. In fact, The Shadow's only indication of his presence was a whispered laugh, heard by himself alone, as he turned and faded into darkness!

CHAPTER XVI. CRIME'S TERMS

FACTS were drilling through Harry Vincent's brain, along with throbbing aches, as he propped himself up on a couch and stared at Keith Ellerton, who was slumped in a chair. It was morning; they were no longer prisoners. They were in Keith's apartment, alone.

"I made a fool of myself, last night," groaned Keith. "Grabbing that gun from Prenter and starting places with it! No wonder Jack grabbed me! He had sense enough to get rid of the gun before it made trouble for him. He wanted me to do the same."

Despite his headache, Harry became alert. What a perfect dupe Keith was! The fellow still believed that Jack Prenter was a friend. On the point of setting Keith right, Harry suddenly refrained. When it came to folly, Harry had supplied his own share.

It was Harry's part to play the dupe, along with Keith. Their actions last night had not classed them as persons leagued with The Shadow. In jumping on persons with guns, Harry and Keith had done the natural thing.

The raid at Club Sixty-six had been instigated by the Wasp, a fact which Harry had not understood at the time. It was part of the deep-laid scheme to put Keith Ellerton in a tight spot.

As a new friend of Keith's, Harry was slated for the same medicine. The Wasp still regarded them as babes in the woods. The fact that they were back in the apartment proved it.

Something more was due, however. What it was, Harry could not guess, but it would come from the Wasp. Probably very soon, because it was nearly time for Keith to start to the office, and he was in no condition to work today.

Rising, Harry walked to the window and looked out. He saw a cab stop in front of the apartment house; from it stepped Jack Prenter and Velma Corl, both looking spick-and-span.

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Harry turned to Keith. He wanted to tell his friend to brace himself for coming trouble; but again, Harry withheld an unwise impulse.

When the apartment bell rang, he answered it, and admitted the visitors in a manner of surprise, which he followed with a greeting. Keith, too, seemed grateful that their friends had arrived. He thanked Prenter for pulling him from a tight jam the night before.

"Thank Vincent," said Prenter suavely, with a sharp glance at Harry. Then: "How do you feel, Vincent?"

Harry thought quickly before he replied. It would not do to play too dumb.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I didn't like the way I was getting pushed around last night. I thought you were a good scout, Prenter; but, frankly, I'm no longer sure."

Prenter looked at Velma as though the comment pleased him. Ignoring Harry, Prenter spoke to Keith. From that moment, Prenter's gloss was gone.

"I called your friend Torbin," he told Keith. "Said that you'd gotten yourself in a jam. He said that he'd call Brock and give some excuse why you couldn't get to the office."

"Good old Glenn –"

"He'll be over here, later," continued Prenter, his tone hardening. "You two will have a lot to talk about, and you'll need your friend Vincent in the conference. You're in more of a jam than you think, Ellerton."

By then, Keith was astonished at Prenter's tone. His eyes went wider, when Prenter produced a photograph and showed it to him. The picture was an enlargement of the one that Velma had taken during the crucial instants at Club Sixty-six.

Unfortunately, it did not portray the mirror exit which Velma herself had opened as a route for flight. The picture had been snapped from that very quarter, the camera focused toward the front of the night club.

Keith occupied the center of the photo, and in his hand was the revolver that he had so unwisely grabbed. Beyond him were a pair of officers, stumbling up the steps to the lounge, and the muzzle of Keith's gun was trained in their direction.

"A picture like this is worth money," asserted Prenter, blandly. "A tabloid newspaper would pay plenty to get it for the front page. Of course, if someone wanted to outbid them –"

THERE was an interruption, from Keith. The lad from Richmond had changed countenance. His face showed understanding, even more than Harry's. As Keith broke loose, The Shadow's agent decided to play dumb.

"Blackmail!" blurted Keith. He flashed an outraged look from Prenter to Velma, and back. "Why, you... you –"

"Crooks," supplied Prenter, in an acid tone. "We don't mind admitting it, Ellerton. We've made a specialty of handling clucks like you. Suppose we talk terms."

Keith's answer was to snatch the photograph from Prenter and tear it to shreds. With a laugh, Prenter stated:

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"We still have the negative, Ellerton. We thought we ought to place it in trustworthy hands, so we sent it to an important friend of yours – to Basil Gannaford."

Indignation faded from Keith's face, to be replaced by horror. Harry stared, covering his rapid thoughts by a show of dumbness. Though Prenter and Velma pretended to be working on their own, Harry knew that they were following the orders of the Wasp.

How the master crook intended to collect through Gannaford, was a puzzle; but Harry was beginning to catch a glimmer of it, as Prenter came to the very theme.

"Don't worry, Ellerton," Prenter sneered. "You still have a chance to get out of your jam, and if Vincent is the good sport he claims to be, he will help you. We sent the negative to Gannaford's home in a registered package. The secretary always puts such mail in Gannaford's safe."

"We happen to know the combination of the safe, because it is our business to find out such things. We have also learned that Gannaford will not be home until late in the evening. It will be quite easy for you to go there, Ellerton, and get the package before he returns."

"But there are other things in that safe that we want. Some gilt-edged bonds, perhaps some cash. If you bring along whatever looks good and deliver it to us, we'll keep what we can peddle and send the rest back to Gannaford. Your share" – Prenter wore a smirk – "will be the package that contains your precious negative."

Prenter was shoving his face toward Keith. On impulse, Keith doubled his fist and drove it against his taunter's jaw. Prenter carried a table backward with him, but came rapidly to his feet, only to find both Keith and Harry lined up against him. With a scowl, Prenter sidled to the door, Velma following him.

On the threshold, Prenter tried to speak, but couldn't. He rubbed his jaw as he wiggled it sideways, to find it intact. Velma spoke for him.

"You heard what Jack said," reminded Velma, sweetly. "The offer still stands. Here is the combination" – with gloved fingers, she produced a slip of paper from her handbag – "and I advise you not to tear it up until you have really talked things over."

Outside, Prenter and Velma stepped into Moe Shrevnitz's cab, which had been parked in front of Keith's apartment house ever since dawn. As they rode away, Moe heard their conversation, because the cab was specially wired to make the talk of its occupants audible to the driver.

"Take the next plane to Northfield," Prenter told Velma. "You'll find my car in the Apex Garage there. You can drive over to Richmond and –"

"I know the rest," interrupted Velma, briskly. "I've heard from the Wasp, too. Handling that end of the game is my job, from start to finish."

"But when you get back here –"

"I'll meet you at the Tuxedo Club, the new joint that Ken Dallas has taken over. Stay in the back room, Jack, until I show up. Better get there early, because I won't waste time in Richmond."

AFTER the pair left Moe's cab, the shrewd hackie went for the nearest telephone booth, where he called Burbank, The Shadow's contact man, and put in a report of all that he had overheard.

Burbank, whose voice was always methodical, accepted the report in routine fashion. He had already heard from Harry Vincent.

Making a call from Keith's apartment had been simple for Harry, because Keith had gone for a walk around the block. His call made, Harry sat alone, considering the facts. Basically, Keith's trip to Gannaford's would resemble the one that Ambril had made to Warrendon's.

The Wasp was ever thoughtful of the future. His lesser workers, sneaks by profession, were obviously planted as servants, to acquire things like duplicate keys and learn safe combinations. After such informants were in the clear, the Wasp turned over actual robberies to men like Ambril, Prenter – or even Glenn Torbin.

Tonight's proposition, however, had a different touch. The Wasp had not enlisted Keith Ellerton. Indeed, Keith had never even heard of the Wasp. From what The Shadow had told him, Harry knew that the Wasp intended to frame Keith Ellerton. There would be an odd twist to this business before it finished.

The twist began while Harry was still pondering. The door of the apartment opened and Keith came in, accompanied by Glenn. The two had met outside, and Glenn seemed quite upset because of the phone call that he had received from Prenter, earlier. Seeing Harry, Glenn began to chide him, too.

"I hadn't any idea that you fellows were frequenting Club Sixty-six," asserted Glenn. "I was sorry that Dallas introduced you to Prenter and that blonde, whatever her name is. But Prenter appears to be a decent sort after all, pulling you out of trouble –"

"Out of trouble?" blurted Keith. "He's put us into it! Listen to this, Glenn."

Listening, Glenn let his face show fake amazement. He shook his head, as though he could not believe Keith's story of the blackmail proposition, until Harry corroborated all that Keith had said.

"You're both in it," decided Glenn, grimly. "You've got to be gotten out. There's only one way. I'll have to go to Gannaford's and get that package with the negative. Give me that paper with the combination, Keith. I'll do the rest."

"No, no, Glenn!" exclaimed Keith. "I can't let you commit robbery on my account."

"It won't be robbery," argued Glenn. "It's simply a case of recovering stolen property. The thing to do is take the package that contains the negative, but leave everything else where it belongs. The package is really yours, Keith."

Glenn's accent on the word "yours" was cleverly managed. Harry foresaw what Keith's response would be.

"It's mine, all right," asserted Keith, "so it's my job to get it. You're out of this, Glenn."

"But someone will have to be with you," Glenn insisted. "Someone outside of Gannaford's, with a car."

"Harry will handle that part," assured Keith. He swung to The Shadow's agent: "Won't you, Harry?"

Harry nodded. It was the only thing to do. Glenn had forced the issue perfectly. It was much like the case at Gorham's, though Keith did not recognize it. The play on Harry's loyalty, based on the fact that he and Keith had found trouble together, was just an added touch on Glenn's part.

Solemnly, Glenn Torbin shook hands with both and left for his office, keeping his smug smile to himself until he was out of sight. Glenn felt that in steering Harry into crime, along with Keith, he was performing an added service for the Wasp.

As yet, Glenn had no idea that Harry was an agent of The Shadow. As a server of the Wasp, Glenn was balking his own efforts, by choosing such a running mate for Keith. Coming events could bring more than the Wasp expected. If lesser matters took unexpected turns, the stage would be clear for a titanic struggle.

This night might bring an actual duel between The Shadow and the Wasp!

CHAPTER XVII. THE WEB INFOLDS

AT the wheel of a smooth-running roadster, Velma Corl was taking the hills that led from Northfield, in the direction of Richmond. It was early afternoon, and her schedule allowed time for the various things that she had planned.

Reaching the entrance to the Gorham estate, Velma swung the car between stone gates and slackened speed as she heard a car behind her. Through the trees, Velma saw the other car roll by without the slightest pause. She continued her trip to the mansion.

Out on the road, the other car stopped some distance down the slope. Picking a turning spot, its driver retraced his course. Once inside the gates, he left the driveway and parked the car on hard ground, beneath sheltering trees. Alighting, he started on foot through the shrubbery.

No one saw the prowling man. If they had, they would have recognized him. He had been in Richmond ever since the Gorham robbery. He was a newspaper reporter named Clyde Burke, who represented the New York Classic. In addition, Clyde was an agent of The Shadow.

Evidently The Shadow had foreseen some angle like the present one, for he had ordered Clyde to stay in Richmond and keep after the Gorham case.

It had been tough, impressing the editor of the Classic that the stay was worthwhile; but Clyde rated well enough to do it. Frequently, he had scored beats under the very noses of rival reporters, and Clyde had successfully argued that the Gorham robbery might lead to another scoop.

Sneaking up to the Gorham house was no longer difficult, even in broad daylight, for the place was quite unguarded, now that it contained nothing that thugs would care to steal. Moving from bush to bush, Clyde reached the veranda. Crouched low, he looked through an opened French window and saw Velma Corl in the living room.

Soon, Ruth Gorham appeared. A servant had informed her of the visitor, and Ruth, though cordial, was puzzled to see a girl that she had never met before.

They took chairs near the veranda door, and Clyde immediately found himself contrasting the merits of Ruth, the dark-eyed brunette, and Velma, the blonde with the starry stare.

The average viewer would have classed Ruth as the wiser. Her solemn gaze was probing, whereas Velma seemed a creature of babelike innocence. But Ruth's whole pose was honest, while Velma's was a sham. The problem was that Ruth, through her sheer honesty, failed to detect the craft beneath her visitor's pose.

"I have few friends in New York," Ruth was saying. "I am interested to learn who sent you here, Miss Corl."

"No one asked me to come," replied Velma. "It was my own idea, to help Keith Ellerton."

"Keith Ellerton?"

"Yes. Keith comes from Richmond. He told me that he met you here" – Velma lowered her tone – "on the night of the robbery."

Understanding dawned on Ruth, but she compressed her lips and said nothing, until Velma produced a photograph. It was a picture that she had taken at Club Sixty-six while all was gay there, prior to the raid. Ruth's eyes shone with recognition.

"Why, yes," she began. "I remember Mr. Ellerton." Pausing, she added: "But I am not sure where I met him."

Velma delivered a very charming smile, one that carried a grateful touch.

"You're a darling," she told Ruth. "But I know the whole story. Keith told it to me, in confidence, and that's why I came here. Wait; I'll convince you."

DETAIL for detail, Velma described occurrences of the eventful night at the mansion, which Ruth accepted as absolute proof. It never struck her that Velma could have learned the whole story from Glenn Torbin, a pretended friend of Keith's, who had been the masked robber responsible for the entire trouble.

Velma's naive manner, her collection of photographs – which included one showing her with Keith – were quite enough. Velma was glad that she had brought the extra picture, one that Prenter had taken during the evening at Club Sixty-six.

Speaking of Keith as she would mention an old friend, Ruth inquired:

"Is Mr. Ellerton in trouble?"

"Yes," replied Velma. "It's not his own fault, though. We were at Club Sixty-six when the police raided it. There was some shooting at the place, and the police are trying to find all the witnesses. When they quiz Keith, they will find out that he came from Richmond."

"The New York police are mighty sharp. They'll see a link to the robbery here, and make the most of it. Keith is doing all right in New York; he has a good job, and wants to keep it. But he will be through, if they hold him on a robbery charge."

Ruth arose and glanced at the clock. She looked out through the window, saw Velma's car.

"Would it help if I went to New York with you, Miss Corl?"

"It certainly would," assured Velma. "Keith could go right to the police and say that he was at Club Sixty-six. They would class him as a witness, just like the rest of us who were there, until he mentioned Richmond. If they should become suspicious, it would be your turn. With you vouching for him, they wouldn't think of holding him, Miss Gorham."

Ten minutes later, Velma's car was wheeling from the driveway, with Ruth as a passenger. The girls were too busy talking to catch the slightest glimpse of Clyde's car, parked deep in the trees. Clyde saw them swing in the direction of Richmond and hurried back to his car.

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As they neared the town, Velma decided that her roadster needed gasoline and oil. Stopping at a service station near Wendel's general store, she glanced at the store itself and became quite intrigued. Smilingly, Ruth agreed to show her through Richmond's principal emporium.

Passing from counter to counter, Velma saw the half-open door of the storeroom and noticed the collection of old stock. Much to Ruth's amusement, Velma decided that the items of junk were antiques. Velma insisted that the clerk show her some of the old lamps; learning their prices, she decided to buy a few.

Ruth had no idea why Velma selected the particular lamps she did. There was no real choice among them; all were hideously clumsy. If anything, Velma's choice seemed influenced by weight; apparently she thought that the heavier the lamp, the more she was getting for her money, since all were about the same in price.

The clerk offered to take the lamps apart and pack them, but Velma was in a hurry. She let him remove the shades and mantles and bundle them so they would not break, but the lamps, themselves, were simply wrapped and placed in the rumble of the roadster.

By then, Clyde Burke was strolling into the store. He heard Ruth and Velma discussing the best route to New York. Velma decided to make a long-distance call from a phone booth at the back of the general store.

Clyde wasn't close enough to overhear what she said. He used the same booth himself, as soon as Velma and Ruth were gone. Clyde's call was to Burbank, giving him the license number of Velma's car and the route by which it would reach Manhattan.

The car, it happened, was already marked, for it was the one originally belonging to George Ambril, and taken by Jack Prenter. Later, Glenn Torbin had let Keith Ellerton use it to escape from Richmond. Fully paid for, it was supposed to be in Cincinnati in the possession of Ambril's relatives. Agents of the Wasp had faked that story.

As the afternoon drifted, Clyde decided that nothing else could happen. His surmise was wrong; Richmond was due for a splurge of excitement.

Clyde was in the store when it began; he saw Burgess Wendel arriving from upstairs, shouting news that all could hear.

"REMEMBER that young snip Ellerton?" blared the burgess. "Sheriff Cady just learned that he played a mean trick on Glenn Torbin. Ellerton didn't take the early train to New York, like he said. He didn't leave Glenn's car in Northfield until nearly midnight!"

As the burgess paused, Clyde did some quick thinking. This was Velma's work. Clyde saw the link at once. Someone at the Apex Garage in Northfield must have been in the Wasp's employ, since crooks like Prenter had left their cars there. Velma had relayed word to start the blowoff involving Keith in crime.

"D'you know what that means?" continued Wendel, taking Clyde as the nearest listener. "Young Ellerton was traipsing around in Glenn's car all that evening. Why, he's the one who could have led that mob up at the Gorham house!"

"You know" – the burgess wagged a forefinger – "the sheriff found a heap of tire marks, ones with fancy treads, up near Gorham's. He made casts of them, too, being scientific-minded. Only, he never could find the car they belonged to. He didn't think to look on Glenn's car."

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"He's been up to the ground again, though, and he found something he didn't see in the dark, that other night. A sweater and a mask, stowed up in the branches of a tree. A sweater with the initials 'K. E.,' and if that don't mean Keith Ellerton, I'll bust my thirty-year policy and hold a bargain sale right in this here store!"

Clyde had heard many men swear solemn oaths, but this, coming from Burgess Wendel, was about as powerful as any could be. The Wasp had raised the lid, so far as Richmond was concerned.

Usually subtle, the Wasp had ordered simple tactics for this vicinity. Straight, direct evidence would count against a local lad like Keith Ellerton better than anything else.

"We've got to reach Glenn Torbin," concluded the burgess. "So far, we haven't been able. He's the one person who can tell us how to find Keith Ellerton, if the young rascal is still in New York."

Those words struck home to Clyde. He knew why Glenn could not be reached. The Wasp needed a delay, for a very important reason. Things still stood as they had before; all false evidence could be ruined, if Ruth Gorham testified in Keith's behalf. But if Ruth disappeared, as she might in Velma's company, Keith would have no friend in court.

Back at the telephone, Clyde put in another call to Burbank, hoping against hope that The Shadow could forestall new strokes of crime.

Outside, dusk had settled, bringing darkness that would lie over Manhattan, as well as Richmond. That fact, at least, was helpful.

Night would aid The Shadow, as the past had proven. But night, judged by recent events, could be useful to the Wasp as well!

CHAPTER XVIII. THE SHADOW MOVES

WITH dusk, Manhattan had become a jeweled carpet, its myriad lights a countless cluster of gems, when viewed from the sixtieth-story office of Basil Gannaford. But neither Gannaford nor his visitors were interested in the sight. The thing that concerned them was a letter which lay on Gannaford's great desk.

There were two visitors: Commissioner Ralph Weston and his friend Lamont Cranston. Gannaford's chin rested in the linked fingers of his elbow-propped hands, as he noted their interest in the unsigned communication, which was typed on heavy paper.

"It may be a hoax, commissioner," Gannaford declared. "After all, it is not very specific. It merely states that if I return home before eight o'clock, I shall surely discover a trusted man engaged in crime. But if the writer is so sure of it, why did he not sign his name?"

Weston picked up the sheet. Gannaford watched him curiously, as he held the letter to the light. Apparently, Weston was trying to read something through the paper. But the commissioner held the sheet so long, that Gannaford gave a puzzled look toward Cranston, as if questioning Weston's mental status.

Suddenly, Commissioner Weston gave an exclamation. He turned with the sheet of paper.

"Look! The signature of The Shadow!"

It had developed itself in brown, that telltale scrawl which Weston attributed to The Shadow, but which Cranston knew had come from the Wasp. As for Gannaford, his interest was aroused; not only because the

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message had gained a sudden import, but because the name of The Shadow intrigued him.

"The Shadow?" exclaimed Gannaford. "Who can he be, commissioner?"

"We would like to know, ourselves," returned Weston. "It is sufficient to state that we received a similar note, which tipped us off to trouble at Club Sixty-six. I am confident, Mr. Gannaford, that crime will strike at your house this evening much as it did at Warrendon's."

Gannaford sank back in his chair. His stare was far away, as though he sought to view the scene where crime might come.

"The note mentions a trusted person," reminded Weston. "Who could that person be?"

"I don't know," Gannaford replied. "Awhile ago I dismissed some servants, but I did so because I no longer trusted them. The only trusted person who knows anything about my private affairs is my secretary, Norlon."

"Where is Norlon at present?"

"He was called away, unexpectedly, this afternoon. He took a plane for Cleveland, where his aunt is ill."

Weston slapped the desk.

"That gives us two theories," he announced. "One, that Norlon is the person meant; that his trip is a fake. The other, that Norlon has answered a false call, so that someone, connected, perhaps, with one of your many offices, can enter the house unchallenged. We must go to your house, Mr. Gannaford. I shall instruct Inspector Cardona to meet us there."

Gannaford nodded agreement. Glancing at the note, observing its mention of eight o'clock, he decided that he had time to sign some letters. Weston and Cranston went out to the anteroom, to wait. There, Cranston remembered an appointment.

"I'll run along, commissioner," he said, "and meet you at Gannaford's house, later. I only hope we won't run into each other as emphatically as we did at Warrendon's."

RIDING in his limousine, Cranston turned the dial of a special shortwave radio hidden behind a panel at the back of the front seat. He was drawing on his cloak, reaching for his slouch hat, when he heard Burbank's voice, quiet and methodical.

It wasn't Cranston who responded over the two-way hookup. The tone that issued from the lips beneath the shading hat was the whisper of The Shadow:

"Report!"

"Report from Clyde Burke —"

Detail by detail, Burbank continued, giving the whole story of new developments in Richmond. Some hours ago, Burbank had informed The Shadow that Velma and Ruth had started for New York together. These news facts, threatening the good name of Keith Ellerton, simply fitted with The Shadow's expectations.

The limousine continued to its destination, a quiet East Side street. Alighting in the darkness, The Shadow took a course through gloomy passages and reached the basement entrance to the Tuxedo Club.

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A future night spot, at present it was little more than a hide-out for Ken Dallas and a few strong-arm workers who served the Wasp. Depending entirely upon smoothies, the Wasp always kept the toughs out of circulation.

A glimmer of a tiny flashlight, alternating red and green, brought stealthy figures toward The Shadow. Soon, the cloaked chieftain was speaking to a pair of agents who were quite competent to handle any flareup at the Tuxedo Club.

One was Cliff Marsland, who bore a reputation as a one-man mob. Cliff was a survivor of the period when gangs had roamed Manhattan almost at will.

Rumor had it that Cliff was still about because he had played the lone wolf, making it impossible for anyone to betray him. It never occurred to the rumor mongers that Cliff still roved because he was not a crook at all, but an agent of The Shadow.

Cliff's companion, Hawkeye, was about half his size. Crafty, wizened, Hawkeye could penetrate places and learn what was doing. With Hawkeye's eyes available, Cliff always held the advantage when battle came; and in such a crisis, Hawkeye, too, was a good hand with a gun.

Both agents had seen Jack Prenter enter the Tuxedo Club. Cliff had kept lookout on the ground, while Hawkeye found the room where Prenter had gone. It was on the floor above the club, and its windows, though shuttered, would be easy for The Shadow, in Hawkeye's estimate.

The opinion proved true. Scaling to a window, The Shadow wedged a thin instrument between the shutters and lifted a crossbar. Easing through, he saw Prenter at a table, grinning over a bottle and a glass. In this "back room," as he had termed it, Prenter was awaiting Velma's arrival and probably anticipating the horror that would overcome the blonde's companion, Ruth Gorham.

Below, Ken Dallas and his crew of unworthies would be available, when needed. Since Velma knew the route to the room where Prenter waited, Ruth wouldn't suspect the trap until she actually entered it. Then, Prenter would play the bigshot. A snap of his fingers, as he drew a gun –

He started to rehearse the part, but did not finish. A weird laugh whispered low in Prenter's ear; the muzzle of an automatic froze against his neck. His snapping fingers faltered; his moving hand failed to grip the revolver, as Prenter recognized his captor. The Shadow!

Disarming Prenter, The Shadow pushed him to the window. Shoved across the sill, Prenter lost his weak hold and plopped to the ground, six feet below, where another gun covered him before he could rise. Following, The Shadow closed the shutters carefully, with the crossbar lifted. A slight jolt at the final shutting brought the bolt down into place.

Should Ken Dallas come up to see Jack Prenter, he would assume that the polished crook had strolled out for a while, inasmuch as the shutter was barred from the inside.

The limousine was only a block away. Stowing Prenter inside it, The Shadow ordered Cliff and Hawkeye to intercept Velma and Ruth before they reached the Tuxedo Club.

Then, riding away with Prenter limp beside him, The Shadow fished in the prisoner's pocket and found a handkerchief mask, which Prenter had intended to wear when he met Ruth Gorham.

The Shadow's laugh gave Prenter the shivers. The crook stared when The Shadow compared the mask with one that he, too, had brought along. Deciding in favor of Prenter's mask, The Shadow pulled it over the prisoner's head, dragging it down below Prenter's chin, so that it fitted his neck like a noose.

Reaching a dull street in back of a bulky, old-fashioned house, the limousine stopped behind a parked coupe. Taking the knot of Prenter's handkerchief, The Shadow twisted it, tightening the noose until the crook gulped for breath. Shoving Prenter out, The Shadow pushed him into the other car, where another hand took over the strangle hold on the improvised noose.

His eyes bulging, Prenter recognized the man who now had the grip on him and was accepting Prenter's own revolver as an additional trophy from The Shadow. Prenter was in the charge of a man whom he had heretofore regarded as an absolute dupe: Harry Vincent!

WITH Harry holding Prenter helpless, The Shadow went away in the limousine. He had Stanley pull to a curb when a big car approached. It was the commissioner's official car, and tonight, The Shadow could not afford another collision.

From darkness, The Shadow saw Gannaford riding with Weston; when the car had swung the corner, he told Stanley to follow.

A stocky man was impatiently pacing in front of Gannaford's house. As the official car arrived, Joe Cardona met Weston and Gannaford, went up the steps with them, while Gannaford carefully unlocked the big front door.

The house was gloomy, for the servants were either out or in their top-floor quarters, since Gannaford had not intended to be home until late.

The front door had closed again, when a limousine pulled up in back of the commissioner's car. From the limousine stepped Lamont Cranston. He nodded a greeting to Weston's chauffeur. Mounting the steps, The Shadow found a large bell handle; in the slow style of Cranston, he gave it a long-drawn tug.

There was a clangor in the house, as The Shadow delivered that unexpected summons. With the resounding echoes of the big bell, Cranston's lips throbbed a softly whispered laugh. The Shadow had chosen the simplest of expedients to turn a situation into channels of his own choosing.

The loud clang of Gannaford's doorbell was, in a sense, The Shadow's open challenge to the power of the Wasp!

CHAPTER XIX. CRIME RIDES WIDE

UPSTAIRS, Keith Ellerton was crouched in front of a large open safe, which, though bulky, was old-fashioned in the extreme. Though the Wasp had furnished the combination to Gannaford's safe, his estimate as to its contents seemed sadly at a loss.

So far, Keith had found mostly title deeds, musty ledgers, and business reports concerning the Gannaford enterprises. The only stocks were old ones, that looked like the securities of defunct corporations. There was grim irony in the fact that Keith, the robber who did not intend to rob, was finding nothing that he could have stolen if he wanted.

The trouble was that Keith could not find Prenter's package. Perhaps Gannaford's secretary had failed to put it in the safe. With piles of useless documents stacked all about him, Keith felt himself in a serious dilemma.

But his worry over the missing package was suddenly rendered small by a more serious happening.

Loud, brazen, the notes of the big front doorbell echoed through the house. Its ringing was like an electric shock to Keith. He came to his feet, horrified; then, on rapid impulse, he whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and fixed it over his eyes.

Harry Vincent had insisted upon such a precaution, and Keith had promised to use the mask, should there be any chance of his discovery. Harry had put it logically, saying that Keith had two jobs on hand: to get the package, and to avoid recognition by any of Gannaford's servants.

Still, Keith needed the package. It wasn't in the safe, so he sprang to the desk and tugged at locked drawers. Right then, the truth struck him.

The package was not here at all; it didn't need to be. Crooks wanted him to be trapped in crime, to make up for his escape at Gorham's. The link between the two places was plain, in this emergency, for Keith was in the same position that he had been in before.

Among his quick mental flashes, Keith had an incorrect one. He supposed that an enemy was ringing the front doorbell, to bring calamity Keith's way. Actually, the clangor of the bell was started by a friend, The Shadow, who was thereby making Keith's escape immediately possible.

Downstairs, Inspector Cardona had reversed his course and was dashing madly to the front door, to find out who was making all the noise. Joe had been leading the way when the ringing began. As matters now stood, both Weston and Gannaford were ahead of him, and even they had paused.

Commissioner Weston was a few steps up, his broad face turned about, expressing annoyance. Gannaford was standing, puzzled, at the foot of the stairs. He, too, had turned.

Cardona yanked the door open. In sauntered Lamont Cranston, to greet the inspector with a nonchalant nod. Ahead, The Shadow saw Gannaford, wearing hat and heavy overcoat, a squatty figure at the bottom of the stairs. Farther up, Weston supplied an indignant scowl.

"So it's you, Cranston!" he exclaimed. "Well, come along with us. We're going to see if –"

The Commissioner suddenly forgot what he was going to see, because of something he heard. He started for the top of the stairs, and Cardona made a dash to follow him. Joining the rush, The Shadow was only a few steps behind Cardona, as they brushed past Gannaford, who hurriedly stepped out of their path.

At the top of the stairs, Weston waved a drawn gun at a masked man who was darting from a lighted room. Seeing the way blocked, Keith turned and ran for a rear stairway. By then, servants were pounding down from the floor above. Before they could grab him, Keith slugged his way through.

Weston was still waving the revolver, unwilling to risk a shot because of the servants, when Cardona arrived. Joe saw the masked man step back to punch a servant, and took prompt but careful aim with his own gun.

As Cardona fired, he was jolted sideward, his shot going wide. Again, the offender was Cranston. Overtaking Cardona, he was lunging ahead, and in the action he shouldered the inspector to one side.

Before Cardona could show anger at the interference, Cranston had justified it. With a swift lope, he reached the masked man and grappled with him. Together, they bowled a last servant from their path and went tumbling down the back stairs.

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As the pair disappeared, both Weston and Cardona saw Cranston yank the masked man's handkerchief down around his neck.

When the grapplers reached the darkened kitchen, they saw Gannaford coming through a swinging door. A foot hit the door and sent it flying back; despite his bulk, Gannaford was flattened in the hallway on the other side.

Cardona, too, struck trouble, as he pounded down from the back stairs. He tripped over Cranston, who stumbled in his path as Joe reached the bottom.

Out through the kitchen door, the route by which he had entered, Keith reached Harry's car. Two figures shoved out as he arrived. Keith saw Prenter, half strangled by a noose which Harry gripped. A gun in his other hand, Harry gestured Keith into the coupe, which had its motor running.

Then, Harry snapped an order, which both Keith and Prenter applied to themselves. The words were:

"Get going!"

KEITH sped the car away as Prenter stumbled along the sidewalk, trying to get back his breath. The noise of the departing car was drowned by loud revolver shots, which Harry discharged from Prenter's gun as he followed the stumbling crook. Harry was shooting in air, toward Gannaford's roof.

Men were coming from the back door as Harry overtook Prenter, made a wild swing at the fellow and lost the gun. A moment later, Harry was ducking for a space between Gannaford's house and the next, while Prenter was scooping up the weapon.

Turning, Prenter aimed the revolver at a tall arrival and pressed the trigger. The gun didn't fire; Harry had purposely emptied it.

Tricked by the very game that he had worked on Keith at Club Sixty-six, Prenter had no time for another move. Sprawling the crook to the sidewalk, The Shadow held him until Cardona arrived. Prodding Prenter with a revolver, Cardona marched him into Gannaford's kitchen, where the light showed Prenter's face.

"Is this the man? queried Cardona. "The fellow you grabbed before, Mr. Cranston?"

"Yes," was the calm reply. "The very man!"

The Shadow was referring to his grab at the Tuxedo Club, not the later grapple with Keith in Gannaford's upstairs hall. Prenter's sputtery protests were of no use. The handkerchief, hanging around his neck, was evidence enough to incriminate him, in Cardona's eyes.

Prenter's capture was to be an object lesson for the Wasp. Since the Wasp specialized in framing innocent men, The Shadow had demonstrated that guilty ones could be similarly handled.

With Prenter taking the brunt for attempted robbery, a mild charge considering the crook's actual crimes, Keith was safely in the clear. The Shadow had ordered Harry to meet him later, at the apartment. Nevertheless, The Shadow did not care to waste time at Gannaford's.

Up in the study, The Shadow played the passive part of Cranston long enough to learn that nothing valuable had been stolen. Still wearing his hat and coat, Gannaford was telling his servants to stack the bundles from the safe in a corner, where Norlon could sort them when he returned.

"I keep nothing of great value here," said Gannaford to Weston. "I suppose the criminal thought that I had valuables at home, like Warrendon. By the way" – he stroked his chin reflectively – "haven't most of these robberies been perpetrated by mobs? I wonder if other marauders are about!"

Since Cardona had already gone to headquarters, taking Prenter, the commissioner decided to search the immediate vicinity with the aid of Gannaford's servants. The Shadow strolled along with them; then, tiring of the hunt, he entered his limousine and left in it.

Weston was a trifle piqued to learn that Cranston had deserted him, but finding that the search produced nothing, he decided that his friend was probably right.

Sending the servants back into the house, the commissioner left in his official car, thinking that the night's excitement was over. The Shadow could have told him why there had been no mob in the attempted robbery at Gannaford's. Inasmuch as the game had been the framing of Keith Ellerton, the Wasp's men had purposely stayed away.

But to The Shadow, regaining his garb of black as he rode in the limousine, the evening's adventures had just begun. Other causes lay ahead; the trapping of more crooks, whose capture could bring a straight trail to the Wasp.

That trail was coming, sooner than even the Shadow anticipated it!

CHAPTER XX. THE WASP'S THREAT

ONCE away from Gannaford's, Keith Ellerton showed that he had acquired some knowledge of Manhattan, by taking a roundabout route to his apartment house. He was sure that someone would be trying to pick up his trail, so he adopted the same tactics that he had used the night when he left Richmond.

Whether he should fear crooks, police, or both, Keith did not know. Events were quite beyond him, and he could only hope that Harry would have the explanation. But in seeking facts for himself, Keith came on a few more glimmers of truth. He became mistrustful of Glenn Torbin. Twice, Glenn had encouraged him to steps that had nearly incriminated Keith.

Instead of going to his own apartment, where he was to meet Harry, Keith stopped at Glenn's. Having learned enough about New York apartment houses, he pushed various buttons in the lobby, until somebody pressed an upstairs switch and admitted him. Not having touched Glenn's button in the process, Keith was quite sure that he would surprise his false friend when he found him.

Outside the apartment, Keith could hear Glenn talking over the telephone. Pressing his ear close to the door, Keith overheard the conversation, for the simple reason that Glenn, having recently finished a long-distance call with a poor connection, was talking louder than usual.

"Yes, I heard from Richmond," Glenn was saying. "Velma fixed everything... What? A slip at Gannaford's?... But how did Prenter get mixed in it?... Yes, he knew he was supposed to wait for Velma... She's stopping at the Trentine on the way, isn't she, with the stuff?"

There was a pause; Keith heard Glenn deliver a gloating laugh. He finished by saying:

"Yes, I'll talk to Ellerton, and then come over."

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As Glenn opened the door, Keith drove through. He took the traitor's neck in a quick grab, bowling him halfway across the room.

Purple of face, Glenn was trying to blurt something, so Keith decided to hear him before pounding the fellow's head against the wall. He released his grip on Glenn's neck, but stood ready with his fists, should the crook try any treachery.

"So you guessed it," gulped Glenn. Finding his breath, he laughed. "Well, it won't do you any good to take it out on me. Yes, I'm crooked! I tried to frame you in Richmond, and I've been in on everything that's happened here."

Weakly, he pushed himself up from the floor. Keith let him rise, as encouragement for further confession. Glenn's tone became a sneer.

"They're looking for you in Richmond," he said, "and the only thing you can do is go back there and take the rap. Because you can't count on Ruth Gorham helping you out."

"I don't see why not," snapped Keith. "Anyway, why should I go back to Richmond?"

"Because we've got the Gorham girl here," returned Glenn. "And this racket of ours is run by a guy named the Wasp. I'm telling you, just so you won't feel his sting. It's a kind that generally proves permanent."

The reference to Ruth alarmed Keith. Noting it, Glenn elaborated the theme.

"Suppose something happened to Ruth Gorham?" he queried. "Where would you stand? Absolutely nowhere! But nothing will happen to her, if you admit those Richmond crimes. In that case we will simply hold her until you reach the penitentiary. After that, she can go and remain quite safe, unless you start to talk."

Keith's arms had dropped. He was staring, stupefied. Glenn stepped past him, to the door, and made a bow to start him on his way.

"Get packed, and head for Richmond," suggested Glenn. "The sooner, the better – for Ruth Gorham!"

DAZEDLY, Keith reached his apartment, to find Harry waiting for him. As Harry began asking questions, Keith shut his lips firmly and began to pack.

Through Keith's brain was drilling the repeated thought that Ruth's life was at stake, the burden of saving it upon him alone. He couldn't even talk to Harry Vincent, his one real friend.

Though Harry did not know the actual answer, he recognized that the Wasp must be behind it.

"You're afraid of the Wasp," spoke Harry. "Why should you be, Keith, when you know The Shadow is helping you?"

Keith wheeled, his lips unsealed.

"So you know about the Wasp!" he exclaimed. "I can talk to you, Harry, if you promise to tell no one –"

"Not even The Shadow?"

Keith's eyes widened.

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"Can you reach The Shadow?" he queried. "Could he help us save Ruth from the Wasp?"

"Give me the whole story," suggested Harry, "and I can answer any question you want."

Keith blurted all that he had heard from Glenn. Cross-examining him about the telephone call, Harry learned that Velma was stopping at the Hotel Trentine. That was enough for Harry. He put in a prompt call to Burbank, to state that he had learned where the Wasp had his headquarters.

Keith was on his way out before Harry finished. Hearing the door slam, Harry quickly told Burbank that Keith must have started for the Trentine. If possible, Harry would overtake him before he reached there. With that, Harry started in pursuit of his foolhardy friend.

Meanwhile, a trim roadster was approaching the Hotel Trentine. At the wheel, Velma was speaking to Ruth in a confiding tone.

"I'll leave the packages here," said Velma. "Then we'll pick up a friend of mine at the Tuxedo Club. Later, we'll probably see old Mr. Gannaford. Keith's working for him, you know. I think we can make him understand."

Velma smiled as she spoke. She had a reason. If everything had gone according to schedule, Keith would now be a prisoner at Gannaford's, implicated in robbery there. It might be that Prenter had orders from the Wasp regarding a trip to Gannaford's, on the theory that Ruth would really believe Keith crooked, upon learning that he was trapped in actual crime.

Having won Ruth's complete confidence, Velma felt equal to the coming task, should it be appointed to her. Swinging up to the entrance of the Hotel Trentine, she beckoned to a doorman and told him to remove the packages from the rumble seat.

"I am Miss Corl," said Velma, haughtily. "I live here. My suite is 810."

The number of the suite was a countersign for those who served the Wasp, and Velma, well acquainted with her chief, knew that the doorman was in the Wasp's employ. But the doorman had orders of his own. With a bow, he said:

"You'd better come in, Miss Corl. There was a long-distance call for you awhile ago. Perhaps" – he glanced at Ruth – "it might have been for your friend."

Catching the inference, Velma stepped from the car, requesting Ruth to come along. The doorman followed with the bundles; his back turned, he failed to notice a taxicab whip suddenly away.

The cab was Moe's; he had trailed Velma's car from the George Washington Bridge. Moe knew where he could reach The Shadow without taking time to call Burbank. It wasn't far from the Trentine to the neighborhood of the Tuxedo Club.

SUITE 810 amazed Ruth, when she saw its lavish living room. Inviting Ruth to be seated, Velma went through an inner door. Alone, Ruth glanced about and noticed the packages that Velma had brought, lying on a table, where a bellboy had placed them.

Ruth had wondered why Velma bought such junk. She wondered even more, when she contrasted the lamps, which were half-unwrapped, with the fine furnishings in the elaborate hotel suite.

Lifting one of Wendel's prizes, Ruth was surprised at its heaviness. Curiously, she unscrewed the top of the heavy base.

A glitter greeted her. With a gasp, Ruth tilted the lamp. From it poured a flood of antique jewelry, which she recognized as her father's. Those stones, set in heavy gold, represented the Gorham fortune, now in the hands of Velma Corl.

Mere chance? Ruth dismissed the idea. She could picture the entire process. The thief had deliberately stowed the swag in those lamps on Wendel's shelves, and Velma's task had been to acquire the lamps later.

To Ruth's mind flashed a name that she had heard; that of Glenn Torbin, the young man from Richmond who had been so successful in New York.

Fleeting doubts of Keith's honesty vanished, as Ruth weighed him against Glenn. Hearing the door swing open from the other room, Ruth turned indignantly, to confront Velma. It was too late; the blonde had seen the jewels. She flashed a small revolver into sight and stepped toward Ruth.

The gun was not necessary. Ruth was transfixed as she gazed toward the open door, where a man with body of waspish shape stood facing her, his sharp eyes glaring from an enormous head. The creature's face was livid, his big-toothed mouth spread wide with a leer that in itself was frightful.

Noting Ruth's horror, Velma supplied the one thing that the monster lacked: a name. With a mock bow to Ruth, the blonde declaimed in cutting tone:

"Allow me, Miss Gorham, to introduce the Wasp!"

CHAPTER XXI. WITHIN THE LAIR

EIGHT floors below, Harry Vincent had finally overtaken Keith Ellerton in the Hotel Trentine lobby. Gripping Keith's arm, Harry was trying to halt him short of the desk, where Keith was bent on making an inquiry.

"You can't ask for the Wasp!" undertoned Harry. "If they know who he is, they won't tell you. Don't be a fool!"

"I'll ask for Glen Torbin –"

"But he doesn't live here!" inserted Harry. "They won't even know about him!"

"There's Glenn, right now!"

Loud enough to be heard by half the lobby, Keith's words brought Glenn around. He had come in by a side door, and was halfway to an elevator. After a darting glance from Keith to Harry, Glenn hurried to the elevator. Keith made long strides after him, and Harry had no choice except to follow.

It was likely that Glenn had a gun. Harry tightened his grip on an automatic that he had brought for just such an emergency. But, like Keith, Harry was thinking in terms of Glenn alone. He paid no attention to two bellboys, who sidled from their bench and stepped into the car, just before the door closed.

Keith didn't have time to clutch Glenn, nor did Harry have a chance to cover the crook. Prodded suddenly by guns, both turned to find themselves in the power of the grinning bellhops. Promptly letting his automatic

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sink back into his pocket, Harry lifted his hands along with Keith's.

The gesture was sensible. Glenn hadn't learned of Harry's part in the capture of Prenter. All of Prenter's talk to the law had been sheer denial of any crime. Even in the Wasp's estimate, Harry ranked in Keith's class; both were dupes, lucky enough to have been befriended by The Shadow.

If either had owned a gun, so Glenn reasoned, Keith would have carried it to Gannaford's. Knowing, from his own tiff with Keith later, that the dupe was gunless, Glenn considered it unnecessary to frisk either of the prisoners.

When the elevator reached the eighth floor, it stopped; the operator, like the bellboys, belonged to the Wasp. Glenn ordered the gunners to march the prisoners to 810. He followed along, and the elevator returned to the ground floor.

The outer room was empty when they entered it, but on a table, Keith saw objects that he recognized – old lamps from the general store in Richmond. They had been opened, and were lying in sections. Keith stared at the lamps, until Glenn jogged him.

"You put the jewels in those," sneered Glenn. "Remember it, in case the Wasp still gives you a chance to take the robbery rap. But my guess is, he won't."

The inner door opened; prodded by guns, the prisoners were pushed into the Wasp's own lair. Lights were dim, but the room showed a glitter that came from an alcove, opposite. By the alcove stood the creature who called himself the Wasp. He was looking at shelves in the alcove; shelves stocked with wealth.

A treasure cave in miniature, the alcove contained more than jewels. Among the glittering array were stacks of currency, piles of bonds, even small models of inventions that the Wasp had pilfered during his career. The jewels, however, caught the eye, not merely because of their glimmer, but because additions were being made to the Wasp's stock.

Ruth Gorham was arranging her father's gems as a new display, placing them wherever the Wasp pointed. She was forced to the humiliating task, because Velma Corl was supplying nudges with a gun.

The Wasp, far from being pleased, was buzzing his contempt for the Gorham gems, which could not match the displayed spoils from some of his larger jewelry robberies.

By way of disdain, the spindly creature stepped forward and grabbed Ruth's arm. As the girl shrank away, he plucked a diamond ring from her finger, swept a bracelet from her arm. With his other hand, he snapped a slender gold chain from Ruth's neck and tossed its hanging pendant in with the ring and bracelet. Thus did the Wasp garner the last trifles of the Gorham fortune.

As on the night when he had rescued Ruth, Keith started an instinctive lunge. It was Harry's quick foot that saved him. Tripping Keith, Harry caused him to stumble, and thus escape a gunshot in the back. Glenn pulled Keith back to his feet, placing him back where he belonged – against a gun muzzle.

THE WASP turned at the sounds of scuffle. Glenn introduced the new prisoners, and the Wasp sank his big chin deep in the V of a thin hand. His eyes caught the light with a malicious sparkle, as he looked from prisoner to prisoner. Whether he was planning death or some horrible torture, was simply a question.

"I have no need for any of you," spoke the Wasp, in a harsh-buzzed tone. "While you lived, you were in some manner useful. Two of you" – he wagged a finger from Ruth to Keith – "were each dependent on the

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other, more than you supposed. The freedom of one was to be the price of the other's life."

Neither Keith nor Ruth quailed. Instead, their eyes meet, bravely. To Keith, Ruth was the same gorgeous girl that he had met upon a fateful night which had linked their destinies. Perhaps Ruth, too, had felt an inkling of that fate; certainly, she recognized it at this moment. The Wasp found ugly pleasure in the situation.

"Whatever of life remains to you," he told them, "will be spent together. I doubt, however" – his very tone seemed to carry a sting – "that your span of life will be long enough to matter."

He pressed a button set near the alcove. Harry knew that the monster was summoning an execution squad to take the victims away. Where, if ever, their bodies would be found, Harry could not guess. The shrouding of murder with mystery was no more than child's play for the Wasp.

As those thoughts flooded Harry's mind, he found himself under the Wasp's immediate glare. Vicious eyes, outvying the horrible grin, gave The Shadow's agent a thorough scrutiny. At last, the Wasp's teeth emitted an approving buzz.

"You are of good timber," he told Harry. "If you have qualms concerning murder, I advise you to forget them. You could do credit to my organization; therefore, we shall test you. On your account, the death's of these" – he gestured toward Keith and Ruth – "shall be a matter of exquisite torture. If you can watch it through, you will belong to the Wasp."

His hand, clamping upon Harry's shoulder, delivered a sharp sting. To the Wasp's relish, Harry did not wince. There was a reason that the Wasp did not detect. To Harry, the monster's decision allowed a choice that the Wasp had not considered.

Rather than see two victims racked to death on his account, Harry preferred a quick finish for himself. Through his own death, he might lessen the horrible fate in store for Keith and Ruth. Such was enough to inspire Harry into action, but he had even more at stake.

A gun still in his pocket, Harry was actually equipped to rid the world of this monster, the Wasp! That accomplished, other victims would face nothing more than an ordinary death. Perhaps Keith and Ruth would settle their own fate quickly, by giving Harry aid in his hopeless struggle.

On the very brink of suicide, Harry halted. He needed the slightest of reasons to take the plunge, and one was promptly given him. The Wasp, hearing the clang of an elevator door, turned, and pressed a button to admit the squad that he had summoned to remove Keith and Ruth.

Harry's forward spring took him away from the gun that covered him, so rapidly that he reached the Wasp before anyone could stop him. Grabbing the spidery creature, Harry flung the Wasp about and tried to get his own gun from his pocket.

Hands as slimy as the tentacles of an octopus grabbed for Harry's wrists. Glenn, Velma, and two other gunners, were leaping in to settle Harry, when the Wasp, striking a button with his elbow, opened the door to admit the execution squad.

Keith and Ruth, flinging themselves toward incoming guns to hold off the newcomers, were halted by a challenging laugh that stopped the other fray. All, Harry included, swung about to view the figure that dominated the threshold.

In the doorway, against the brighter light of the outer room, stood The Shadow!

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He had reached the elevator ahead of the summoned squad. Overpowering the operator, The Shadow had made the fellow tell him where the Wasp's lair was. The Shadow had gained mastery of the present scene; he was ready to brush aside all opposition, to meet the Wasp in duel!

TWO guns spoke: The Shadow's. With the double blast, he settled the two thugs who had trapped Harry and Keith. Another pair remained: Glenn and Velma.

Forgetting the Wasp, Harry sprang for Glenn and smothered him to the floor. Keith spilled Velma as she tried to fire; Ruth grabbed the toy gun that the blonde dropped in her fall.

From the midst of his floundering followers, the Wasp sprang to his treasure alcove. He wanted no duel with The Shadow. He was clawing among his baubles, like an ostrich seeking to bury itself by hiding its head; a thing which in the Wasp's case might have applied, considering the oversize of his head.

The Shadow's chance to drill the writhing, spindly body was postponed by a clatter from the outer room. Arrived in another elevator, the torture squad had heard the gunfire in the Wasp's headquarters; they were coming to take a part in the fray.

Wheeling, The Shadow gave them a bombardment from the one source whence they did not expect it – the Wasp's own lair.

At a shout from Harry, The Shadow swung again to the alcove. By then, the Wasp had found the thing he wanted: a lever, hidden by his stocks of treasure. As he pulled it, a steel barrier dropped in front of the alcove; a rumble told that the nook was an elevator, taking the Wasp downward.

The Shadow's bullets thudded the barrier as it fell. With the Wasp gone, The Shadow left the prisoners to the others. Heading out to the regular elevators, he took over one and went down to the lobby. Through a side door, he reached the street. By then, cars were coming from a garage at the rear of the Hotel Trentine.

Blasting away at frantic marksmen, The Shadow drove off the Wasp's reserves. Reaching the garage, he saw a light truck speed out through a farther door. Scrambling from sight in the back was the Wasp, among open boxes that contained his stolen wealth.

The boxes were the shelves from the alcove; they were removable, and served as coffers when set with the open sides upward.

Though safely away in flight, the Wasp was pursued by a foreboding tone of mockery, that promised him another meeting with his black-cloaked superfoe.

That taunt was the laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XXII. FLIGHT OF THE WASP

BY the time police arrived at the eighth-floor suite in the Hotel Trentine, Harry Vincent had sent Keith Ellerton and Ruth Gorham away. Only two prisoners were dangerous: Glenn Torbin and Velma Corl.

Harry held them under full control; the rest, a few who had survived The Shadow's fire, were too badly crippled to make trouble.

Battle in and around the hotel brought plenty of police, among them Inspector Joe Cardona. Hearing Harry's story, Cardona found it generally acceptable except for one detail, which had worried Harry in advance.

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Cardona had heard from Richmond. The authorities in that town wanted Keith Ellerton, in connection with robbery. Glenn Torbin, accused by Harry of crime, stood well in Richmond, which rather puzzled Cardona.

Smart as ever, Glenn promptly changed his tune, arguing that he had tried to fight on the side of justice, but had been misunderstood.

In her turn, Velma claimed friendship for Ruth, who was a missing factor in the case. When Harry pointed to the old lamps that had held the Gorham jewels, Velma declared that she had brought them from Richmond at Ruth's own request.

Preferring Harry's account, Cardona decided to hold Glenn and Velma in custody until he gained more evidence. The pair gave Harry triumphant glances as they were taken away.

He knew what the looks meant. The smooth crooks were hoping that the Wasp would still manage to get rid of Keith and Ruth, the witnesses who could prove Harry's accusations.

It happened that Harry had no need to worry about Keith and Ruth, for the present. The two were riding around Manhattan in Moe Shrevnitz's cab, taking advantage of an hourly rate that Moe offered, after picking them up outside the Trentine.

Behind the cab, Cliff and Hawkeye were following in a car, ready to give the alarm if the Wasp's forces found the trail.

When they gave alarms, Cliff and Hawkeye had a habit of annihilating the cause; hence Moe was unworried regarding Glenn and Velma. Considering the happiness of their reunion, he picked Central Park as the best cruising grounds.

Only half the hour was gone, when Keith decided that he and Ruth must go to Gannaford's. Remembering his first and only visit to the financial wizard's office, Keith decided that Gannaford would listen to his story. Ruth believed the same, having heard Keith's entire story.

When the cab stopped in front of Gannaford's, a big car was standing there. Recognizing it, Moe remarked that it belonged to the police commissioner. Entering the house, Keith and Ruth asked for Commissioner Weston, and were conducted up to Gannaford's study.

They found that Weston had just arrived, accompanied by a friend named Cranston. Weston, too, had received a report from Richmond, and had found out that Keith was employed by one of Gannaford's companies.

Seated behind his study desk, Gannaford looked quite as Keith had seen him in the office – a kindly man, whose lips held a steady smile and whose eyes twinkled understanding. When Weston started to place Keith under arrest, Gannaford shook his head, suggesting:

"Let us hear his story, commissioner."

Keith told it, with Ruth corroborating the details of the robbery at Richmond. Anxious to reveal all that he could about the Wasp, Keith hurried through the intervening parts and gave a graphic description of the final battle at the Hotel Trentine.

"Amazing!" exclaimed Weston. "Think of it!" He turned from Cranston to Gannaford. "A crime ring of such heinous caliber, its headquarters here in New York, reaching out to pluck new victims into its slime! Such an

organization would require a monstrous head, like this creature, the Wasp, that Ellerton has described.

"As I have said before, Cranston" – Weston turned to his calm-featured friend – "we owe a debt to The Shadow. He is our constant champion, when it comes to battling such superminds as the Wasp. Not that others are not entitled to credit; yourself, for instance. You did excellent work tonight, Cranston, when you captured that chap Prenter."

THE SHADOW arose, in Cranston's leisurely style; he strolled across the room and lounged by the stacks of papers that Gannaford's servants had piled near the big safe.

"Prenter happened to be the wrong man," declared The Shadow, idly. "So you can reserve your credit, commissioner."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Weston. "Prenter was in it, deep!"

"But he didn't attempt this robbery." Cranston's gesture indicated Gannaford's closed safe. "Ellerton admits himself to be the man that we discovered here. What about it, Mr. Gannaford?" The Shadow turned, with a smile. "Are you going to bring charges against the culprit?"

"Of course not!" exclaimed Gannaford. "Ellerton was justified in anything he did."

Commissioner Weston looked puzzled, as he watched Cranston stroll back to his chair. He knew Cranston well enough to understand that something odd was brewing. Usually, in such cases, Cranston directed his shots at Weston. He showed his usual form on this occasion.

"You are holding Prenter on a charge of attempted burglary," declared The Shadow. "I insist, commissioner, that you press the charge. I still believe that I caught the real culprit."

"No, no!" It was Keith who interrupted. "I have no love for Prenter, but I can't see him jailed for the one crime he did not do. I've had enough of frame-ups, Mr. Cranston."

"I understand." Cranston's tone was sympathetic. "Suppose you settle the matter, Ellerton. You claim that you know the combination of Gannaford's safe. Very well; open it for us."

Promptly, Keith stepped to the safe. Gannaford objected, on the ground that the demonstration was not necessary; but Weston, anxious to settle the argument with Cranston, insisted that Keith proceed. As Keith finished turning the dial, he reached for the handle of the door, to twist it.

"That's enough," declared Gannaford, sympathetically. "You have proven your story, Ellerton."

Keith turned away, feeling much like a real culprit. Cranston tested the handle, once or twice, to see if it actually turned. He gave a shrug, as if to step away; the gesture was so natural that Gannaford relaxed and started to swing his chair toward Weston.

The instant was enough. Had Commissioner Weston been observing Cranston at the moment, he might have known that his calm friend was The Shadow. But Weston was looking at Gannaford, and did not spy the swift, smooth moves until they were completed.

With one hand, the amazing Mr. Cranston whipped the safe door wide, at the same time performing a quick side step that carried him behind its sheltering bulwark. His other hand, with a flicking motion, produced the revolver that he had recently taken from Prenter and poked it past the edge of the safe door.

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"Stay where you are, Gannaford," came Cranston's tone. "I think it is your turn to offer explanations!"

From Gannaford's view, only two things were visible: the gun muzzle and an eye above it. Had Gannaford attempted to move, or reach for a gun, death would have been his immediate lot.

But the others, coming to their feet, were staring at a brighter sight than a gun muzzle. They were viewing the new contents of Gannaford's recently emptied safe.

There, arranged much as Keith and Ruth had described them, were the trophies that had been in the Wasp's alcove. The flash of brilliant jewels blended with the duller gleam of the Gorham antiques. Stacks of currency and bonds supported the model inventions that the Wasp had wrested from rightful creators.

The wealth, itself, seemed to shout the startling truth that Basil Gannaford was in reality the Wasp!

"SMALL wonder your enterprises profited, Gannaford," came the accusing tone of Cranston. "You could operate at a loss, if you chose, to cover your real business – crime. It was easy enough to write in as profits the wealth that came from another source.

"You said, yourself, that anyone could have found Warrendon's options useful. Unfortunately, the commissioner and myself failed to catch the real inference of your remark. From then on, you kept yourself well covered, even to the point of ordering your own workers to operate against yourself!"

Gannaford's answer was a low–buzzed snarl. His posture had changed; no longer hunched, his shoulders showed the thinness that characterized the Wasp. As for his features, Gannaford's eyes were ablaze with fury; his lips, wide open, revealed the hideous teeth of the Wasp.

"Odd, how rapidly news traveled," spoke Cranston, casually. "Tonight, the Wasp's workers learned that things had gone wrong here, before they should have found it out. Inspector Cardona had charge of Prenter at the time. Your servants, Gannaford, were with Commissioner Weston and myself. Only you were able to send out the word."

That statement told Gannaford that Cranston was The Shadow. But Commissioner Weston, supposing that Cranston had merely weighed facts and acted on them, still had no clue to the dual identity of his friend. The fact that Gannaford was the Wasp, was all that Weston could digest at one swallow.

His own gun drawn, Weston found another in Gannaford's pocket and handed it to Keith. Calmly, Cranston closed the door of the safe and turned the combination, to keep the treasure intact for its various owners while Weston was settling the Gannaford question. It was then that Cranston indulged in a whimsical smile.

"We are both forgetful," he said to Gannaford. "I should have remembered that this gun of Prenter's was empty, when I picked it up out back."

Tossing the useless revolver on the desk, Cranston strolled from the study and downstairs. His being "forgetful," as he had termed it, dispelled any idea that he was The Shadow, except with Gannaford. To the Wasp, the very things that made the others doubt stood as proof that he had met the one superfoe he feared.

No longer behind the desk that helped hide his scrawny form, the Wasp shuffled toward the stairs, covered by a pair of guns.

Weston realized why Gannaford had favored a heavy overcoat when riding in the official car. With such a garment, the Wasp had hunched his small body into the semblance of bulk.

THE WASP

Following down the stairway, Ruth watched Weston open the front door, while Keith stepped through to wait for Gannaford. The Wasp's whole attitude seemed pitiful, his position even more helpless, as a car pulled up in front, announcing the arrival of Inspector Cardona.

In shamblly fashion, the Wasp leaned toward Keith. Then, his face solemn, in the style of Gannaford, he said to Cardona:

"This is Keith Ellerton, the man you want. Arrest him, inspector!"

The Wasp's hand pressed Keith's shoulder. A metal disk flashed in his palm, the device that delivered the electric shocks from batteries laced to his belt. Keith gave a jolt, and Cardona, ignorant that Gannaford was the Wasp, leaped upon Keith, to bowl him from the steps.

His scrawny legs making frantic strides, the Wasp fled along the sidewalk, with Weston shooting wildly from the steps. Coming up with Keith's gun, Cardona saw what the commissioner was doing and joined the fire too late, for Gannaford was out of range.

From across the street, a taxicab shot forward; from its interior came a challenging tone that promised to stop the Wasp's crazed flight.

The laugh of The Shadow!

NEVER could the Wasp have eluded his waiting foe, without the aid of chance intervention. It came, at the one moment it was most needed. A big sedan rolled in from the corner, guns spouting from its windows. That car held the only actual mob that the Wasp commanded; workers that he never launched in any of his regular crimes: Ken Dallas and his crew.

They were looking for Keith Ellerton, and had decided that the best way to find him was by following Joe Cardona. They wanted to eliminate Keith, the man whose testimony would settle Glenn and Velma. They saw their wanted victim, with Ruth beside him. In their eyes, Weston and Cardona were good prey, too.

Before the murderous guns could blaze, The Shadow's cab twisted across the sedan's path. With a mighty laugh, the cloaked warrior fired into the oncoming sedan.

Up from behind the cab arrived another car, its two occupants siding with The Shadow. Cliff Marsland and Hawkeye were the supporters of their chief.

Dallas and his motley misfits came rolling from their car, flinging their guns ahead of them. With his agents covering the surrendering crooks, The Shadow sped on to the chase. By then, the Wasp had disappeared. The street beyond was vacant. The fugitive supercrook had found a waiting car, and gone.

SOME hours afterward, when Lamont Cranston was riding toward his New Jersey home, he saw the lights of a plane from some unknown airport. Tiny lights, heading out to sea, sending back a motor's tone – a buzz that murmured into silence, as the twinkles vanished.

Such was The Shadow's last reminder of the Wasp, evil creature of crime. His sting gone, the Wasp had called upon wings to flee from his conqueror, The Shadow!

Would the Wasp return?

There was speculation in The Shadow's whispered laugh; with it, a note of new challenge to the Wasp.

THE WASP

Whatever the future might hold, no one knew – not even The Shadow. But this case could go down in The Shadow's private annals as complete, its purpose accomplished. If the paths of The Shadow and the Wasp crossed again, that would be another story.

THE END