

THE THUNDER KING

Maxwell Grant

Table of Contents

<u>THE THUNDER KING</u>	1
Maxwell Grant.....	1
<u>CHAPTER I. OUT OF THE BLACK</u>	1
<u>CHAPTER II. MEN OF THE NIGHT</u>	5
<u>CHAPTER III. THE WRONG ROAD</u>	9
<u>CHAPTER IV. CRIME RETRACED</u>	13
<u>CHAPTER V. IN THE RIVAL CAMP</u>	16
<u>CHAPTER VI. TRAILS REVERSED</u>	20
<u>CHAPTER VII. CROSSED BATTLE</u>	24
<u>CHAPTER VIII. DEATH FROM THE HILL</u>	27
<u>CHAPTER IX. THE SHADOW TRAITS</u>	31
<u>CHAPTER X. CRIME'S RESULTS</u>	35
<u>CHAPTER XI. MARGO TAKES A TRIP</u>	39
<u>CHAPTER XII. THUNDER OVER MANHATTAN</u>	43
<u>CHAPTER XIII. MARGO'S MESSAGE</u>	47
<u>CHAPTER XIV. THE SHORTEST WAY</u>	51
<u>CHAPTER XV. THE MURDER MACHINE</u>	54
<u>CHAPTER XVI. JOLTS OF DEATH</u>	58
<u>CHAPTER XVII. TRAILS TO DISASTER</u>	62
<u>CHAPTER XVIII. THE SHADOW'S EXIT</u>	66
<u>CHAPTER XIX. RIVALS MEET</u>	69
<u>CHAPTER XX. MASTER OF THUNDER</u>	73

THE THUNDER KING

Maxwell Grant

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [CHAPTER I. OUT OF THE BLACK](#)
 - [CHAPTER II. MEN OF THE NIGHT](#)
 - [CHAPTER III. THE WRONG ROAD](#)
 - [CHAPTER IV. CRIME RETRACED](#)
 - [CHAPTER V. IN THE RIVAL CAMP](#)
 - [CHAPTER VI. TRAILS REVERSED](#)
 - [CHAPTER VII. CROSSED BATTLE](#)
 - [CHAPTER VIII. DEATH FROM THE HILL](#)
 - [CHAPTER IX. THE SHADOW TRAITS](#)
 - [CHAPTER X. CRIME'S RESULTS](#)
 - [CHAPTER XI. MARGO TAKES A TRIP](#)
 - [CHAPTER XII. THUNDER OVER MANHATTAN](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIII. MARGO'S MESSAGE](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIV. THE SHORTEST WAY](#)
 - [CHAPTER XV. THE MURDER MACHINE](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVI. JOLTS OF DEATH](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVII. TRAILS TO DISASTER](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVIII. THE SHADOW'S EXIT](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIX. RIVALS MEET](#)
 - [CHAPTER XX. MASTER OF THUNDER](#)
-

CHAPTER I. OUT OF THE BLACK

THE cafe lounge of the Hotel Metrolite was a quiet, comfortable place to wait for someone, but Margo Lane had been waiting too long. She was waiting for Lamont Cranston and he was ten minutes overdue, which meant that he had probably forgotten the appointment; usually, he was very punctual.

An added annoyance was the man at a near table, who kept ogling looks in Margo's direction. Perhaps he admired brunettes of Margo's type, but his appearance didn't impress Margo favorably. Though sleek and well dressed, the fellow had ratlike eyes that darted from his sharp, sallow face.

He'd given his name to a waiter, loud enough for Margo to overhear. He'd asked if there had been any calls for Harvey Quade, and the waiter had gone to find out. Just now, the waiter was returning to tell Quade that there were no messages.

Rather than appear interested, Margo let her eyes drift toward the door, hoping that Lamont would appear.

Her eyes riveted.

THE THUNDER KING

Coming through the door was a man she recognized by his stooped shoulders and the long face above them. The blinks of the man's colorless eyes clinched his identity. He was Louis Wilbert, private investigator working for Universal Industries, a concern with which Lamont Cranston was associated.

Margo had seen Wilbert talking to Cranston outside the Cobalt Club, a few days ago. At the time, she had been waiting in Cranston's limousine, hence Wilbert hadn't seen her. Later, Lamont had told her who Wilbert was, and had been rather noncommittal in his opinions regarding the investigator.

Margo had gathered that Wilbert might be capable, but that his methods were somewhat doubtful. Her opinion was strengthened as she watched Wilbert cross the cafe lounge.

Wilbert came directly to Quade's table. There, the long-faced investigator shook hands with the ratlike man. They ordered drinks from the waiter, and began a buzzing conversation. Margo was quite confident that their talk must concern Universal Industries.

Feigning indifference, Margo stopped the waiter as he passed her table and ordered a Mirage cocktail; then, with no change of demeanor, she strained to listen to the neighboring conversation.

Margo understood the set-up of Universal Industries. It was a huge, new corporation organized by a financier named Oswald Kelber, and Universal Industries had taken on tremendous contracts to build and equip new factory units that would turn out materials for national defense.

Universal Industries would lose those contracts if deliveries were not made within a specified time; hence Kelber, fearing unforeseen delays, had hired Wilbert to check conditions at the various plants connected with Universal Industries.

One man would probably be very glad if Universal Industries should fail to deliver. That man's name was Jerome Thorden, and he headed a large business group known as Thorden Enterprises. Thorden had been after the very same contracts but Kelber had underbid him. Should Kelber be forced to drop the contracts, Thorden would take them over.

Wilbert and Quade had finished their drinks and were ready for another round, when Margo's Mirage cocktail arrived. The Mirage was a pinkish concoction that looked like a very powerful cocktail, but it actually contained nothing stronger than grape juice. Margo could drink Mirages all evening without losing any of her wits, and at present, her choice of such a drink was bringing dividends.

Seeing Quade glance at Margo's table, Wilbert did the same. Both mistook the Mirage for a rum concoction, and they decided that the brunette wasn't in a listening mood. Unconsciously, they let their voices rise a trifle. Margo overheard them.

"I've finished most of the work that Kelber wants," said Wilbert "So far, it's been mostly a routine job."

"Has he paid you off yet?" inquired Quade.

"Not yet," returned Wilbert. "He's still expecting a final bill. Which makes me think" – Wilbert was stroking his long chin – "that if I showed him the correspondence you mention, it would be worth plenty – to both of us."

"It ought to be," grunted Quade. "It would give you proof of everything you suspect."

Wilbert nodded; then Margo heard him say:

THE THUNDER KING

"There's just one question, Quade: how much Kelber will pay. You see, I'm working for him –"

"But this comes outside your regular job," interposed Quade. Then, with a sharp laugh, he added: "Away outside!"

"Kelber may not see it that way."

"Let him make an offer," suggested Quade. "If it isn't enough, take it up with Thorden. I'll bet that he'd pay double."

Wilbert gave Quade an indignant stare, and queried:

"You'd want me to double-cross the man I'm working for?"

The question brought a guffaw from Quade, who seemed to consider honesty on Wilbert's part as worthy of a jest. The guffaw was overloud and caused Wilbert to glance in Margo's direction.

Fortunately, a waiter was passing the brunette's table, and she promptly pointed to her empty glass and ordered: "Another."

Nevertheless, Wilbert and Quade lowered their voices as they resumed their conversation.

Margo caught snatches of their talk as she sipped the next Mirage. They seemed to agree that they would have to acquire the correspondence that they had previously mentioned, before negotiating with either Kelber or Thorden. Margo heard Wilbert ask:

"How long would it take us to get out there, Quade?"

"About three hours," Quade replied. "We take Highway 95, over in New Jersey, and follow it as far as –"

He paused abruptly, flashed a ratty look toward Margo. Then, even though the girl didn't appear to be noticing, Quade buried the rest of his statement in a mumble that Wilbert could hear, but Margo could not. Wilbert nodded as he listened. He beckoned to the waiter and paid the check. The two went out.

Promptly, Margo hurried to a telephone. She called the Cobalt Club, to see if Cranston was there; but he wasn't. So she tried his home in New Jersey, and gave a pleased ejaculation when she heard Cranston's quiet, even tone across the wire.

"Sorry, Margo," said Cranston. "I was going to call you, to say I'd be late. Some business acquaintances stopped by, and I didn't notice the time until they left. We were talking about Universal Industries –"

"And so am I!" put in Margo. "Lamont, I've just seen Wilbert. He was making some sort of a deal with a man named Quade. Listen, while I give the details –"

Cranston listened, but seemed only mildly interested. When Margo emphasized the final point – that Wilbert and Quade were starting on a mysterious mission along Highway 95 – Cranston interposed with a tired drawl.

"I suppose you think that I should try to follow them," he said, "or have someone trail them for me. Very ridiculous, Margo. It would be nothing but a wild-goose chase!"

THE THUNDER KING

"Then I'm a wild goose!" snapped Margo. "I have my car here, and I still can overtake that pair. You'll hear from me later, Lamont!"

SLAMMING the telephone receiver, Margo flaunted from the hotel, took her coupe from the parking space that an obliging doorman had found for her, and started toward the Lincoln Tunnel. She was still boiling when she drove into the tube, but as she neared the New Jersey exit, she cooled.

Odd, thought Margo, that her appointment with Cranston should have enabled her to witness the meeting between Wilbert and Quade.

Perhaps Lamont had known that Wilbert was to meet someone at the Metrolite and had deliberately arranged for Margo to be there, in case he should be detained elsewhere. If so, it was natural that he should have pretended indifference later, for when Lamont Cranston played any part, he carried it to the full. For example, the matter of The Shadow.

Everyone knew of The Shadow, that strange, mysterious fighter in black who battled crime to its doom. But few suspected that The Shadow, in private life, posed as Lamont Cranston, wealthy New York clubman.

Margo was one of the few who did suspect it, but even she could not always be sure. The Shadow certainly had ways of appearing in places when Lamont Cranston didn't seem to be anywhere around!

Probably The Shadow wanted Margo to take up this trail, and therefore, when speaking as Cranston, he was true to form when he discouraged her. But the point was that Margo hadn't been discouraged. She was actually on the trail, despite Cranston. Things could work that way, where The Shadow was concerned.

Thus convinced, Margo glued herself to the task of picking up the trail, and was successful as she neared the beginning of Highway 95. She saw a car turn off ahead of her, just as a traffic light changed to green, and the glow from a service station gave her a view of the men in the other coupe.

Harvey Quade was at the wheel, and his companion was Louis Wilbert.

The night was moonless, and stars afforded very little light as Margo followed the other car along the devious turns of Highway 95. She was careful to keep well behind, so that if Wilbert or Quade noticed her headlights in their rear-view mirror, they would simply think that another car had chanced to take the same road.

Route 95 was an old one, and for once, short hills and sharp bends were Margo's idea of perfect driving conditions. Time and again, she was able to close in on the car ahead and spot it taking a slope, or a curve.

This was rugged country, and the highway followed the deep ravine of a creek. At times, it dipped and crossed the stream over bridges; more often, it skirted the fringes of the gorge, where heavy guard rails protected motorists from skidding into the threatening depths. At intervals, Margo noted great buttresses of ghostly gray that loomed to a higher level.

They marked the new superhighway that was soon to replace Route 95. Having driven the old road before, Margo knew that soon it would swing beneath the arch of a great concrete span that stretched across the deep ravine.

There would be a climb first, a steep side road to the left, a short level stretch, and then a gradual gradual left-ward curve that would take the old road under the new bridge.

THE THUNDER KING

A good place to gain on the car ahead. Margo recognized the upgrade as she neared it and gave her car a spurt. She was doing forty as she passed the side road, and she held that speed along the level.

At the curve, she let her foot go to the brake pedal, though she expected that the motor itself would sufficiently reduced her speed. Still, it was best to play safe, for the ravine was on her right and Margo didn't care to test the strength of the guard rail.

She caught the gleam of a taillight as she took the bend. There was only one car that it could be – the one containing Wilbert and Quade.

Just ahead of the other car, looming like a cavernous maw, was the archway of the great new span. The other car was curving into it, as though some monster were receiving it in a side-mouthed gulp. The thought gave Margo a momentary shudder. It was curious how she could imagine things.

But nothing, in all of Margo's wildest fancy, could have matched what did occur.

IT came before Quade's car even reached the harmless gullet of the bridge. Margo had heard of bolts from the blue; this was a bolt from the black. It struck downward from the blocked-off glow of the stars above the huge concrete bridge.

It was a flash of forked lightning, jagged, brilliant in its gleam, terrific in its stroke. A blinding flash, accompanied by a smash of thunder that seemed to burst Margo's ears and jar her from the wheel.

Her own car lurched over toward the guard rail, as her foot instinctively drove down on the brake pedal. But the jounce that she took was as nothing compared to what happened to the car ahead

Like a shaft of doom hurled by some ancient thunder god, the bolt struck the car containing Wilbert and Quade, made it twist and writhe like a living creature in agony.

Wrenched out of shape as the lightning lashed it, the car actually somersaulted toward the guard rail. It didn't have to bounce across the barrier, for the rail itself was cloven by the bolt, and with it went a chunk of roadway ripped up by lightning's power.

Margo had a momentary glimpse of the doomed car plunging into the ravine; then blackness was back again, in all its intensity.

Then, as a final touch to those loud, but short-lived peals, Margo heard a dull, metallic crash drift upward from the depths of the ravine.

It marked the final halt of the doomed car beside the rock-strewn creek, a hundred feet below. A token of double death that had come to Louis Wilbert and Harvey Quade, whose scheme for mutual profit had perished with them!

CHAPTER II. MEN OF THE NIGHT

MARGO'S car was perched against the guard rail, some thirty feet short of the spot where the barrier had broken to let Wilbert and Quade take their plunge from the old highway.

Probably the drop hadn't been needed to seal their doom, for Margo's recollection of the lightning stroke was vivid enough to include a picture of a car so twisted that death could have come instantly to the occupants.

THE THUNDER KING

There was something else that Margo remembered, though it came back to her gradually. The concrete bridge had been plainly shown in the glare that had turned blackness into something more brilliant than daylight. She recalled tall towers, skeleton structures, on the bridge itself, and a truck parked beside them. She wondered if the truck had occupants, too; if so, how they had fared.

Her own plight didn't bother her, chiefly because it did not seem serious. She was safe – alive; that much was certain. She couldn't wonder what to do next because she felt too dazed. Besides, her eyes still saw jagged flashes – after-images of the lightning – and she was wondering, vaguely, why no thunderclaps accompanied the brilliance.

Her eyes tightly shut, Margo pressed them with her hands, and gradually the forked light faded. Then, oddly, she thought she heard the thunder rumbling from somewhere up above her. It didn't come with a loud burst, nor did it echo as it had before, and very suddenly, Margo realized that it wasn't thunder at all.

The noise was the motor of the truck that she had seen on the bridge. It was pulling away from the span above.

Margo reached for the door of the coupe. She couldn't find it at first, because she was lying on it. At last, she recognized the tilt at which the car had stopped. Pulling herself up against the wheel, she groped for the door handle.

The door gave of its own accord and Margo rolled out into the arms of two men, who had opened the door from the outside.

She couldn't see their faces, even though there was a slight trace of starlight, for her eyes were just recovering from the ordeal of the lightning. But Margo, taking these arrivals for friends, thought she must tell them what had happened.

"One car went off the road," she gasped. "It had two men in it! The lightning struck it! There was a truck... up on the bridge –"

One man was hauling Margo to her feet. The other pushed something cold against her neck. The pressure, plus the man's growl, told Margo that the object was a gun.

"All right, wise dame," the man said. "You're coming with us, and no squawks!"

Margo made no squawk. She was too dazed even to stay on her feet. The road wasn't tilted the way her car was, and she lost her sense of balance. Before gripping hands could halt her, she slumped back into the car. Her head rolled away from the gun and angled across the wheel. The first man was trying to haul her out through the door again, when the fellow with the gun gruffed:

"Hold it! Here comes a car the other way."

The tone was half gloating, and Margo saw why, when she half opened her eyes. Headlights were swinging from beneath the arch of the concrete bridge, and only by a sudden maneuver did the arriving car escape disaster.

The lightning had carved the narrow highway almost to its center, and the left wheels of the car just missed the fissure, as the driver swung the right ones against the embankment.

THE THUNDER KING

Chunks dropped from the center of the road as the car pushed past. It veered slightly and its headlights fully illuminated Margo's coupe and the men beside it. With a glance, the girl observed the pair.

They looked rough, but fairly respectable; more like a pair of truckers than the thugs that Margo knew they must be.

Half hidden by his companion, the man with the gun was sliding the weapon away, but Margo saw that both were keeping their hands in their coat pockets.

As the other car arrived, a clatter told that the door had opened on the driver's side. The two thugs couldn't see the man who was getting out, because he was in back of the lights. Thinking that Margo had gone back into her daze, the pair stepped forward, rather affably. Margo heard one speaking to the man that he couldn't see.

"You'd better hop along the road," he said, "and warn people about the cave-in, so they won't come through. The girl's all right" – he was gesturing back in Margo's direction – "and we'll look after her."

Desperately, Margo raised her head.

"No, no!" she called. "I'm not all right! Look out; those men have guns!"

THE thugs were turning when they heard Margo's outcry, and she thought they were going to pounce back to her car, to silence her; hence, she sped the rest of the warning. But the mere mention of guns produced a reverse effect.

Wheeling, the thugs yanked their weapons and sprang for the driver of the rescue car, hoping to suppress him.

They were going into blackness beyond the lights; at least, so they thought. Instead, that blackness surged out to meet them. It came in the shape of a cloaked fighter, who already carried a drawn automatic; a figure whose challenging laugh was an added token of identity.

The Shadow!

How he had come here from the wrong direction, was as much a mystery to Margo as to the would-be captors who had hoped to suppress her. However, sight of crime's archfoe blotted trifling matters from their minds. Their guns already drawn, they tried to use them.

It was a foolish effort, considering that The Shadow already held them covered, and his speed with a gun trigger would easily have enabled him to jab two shots before either thug could supply one.

But The Shadow wasn't wasting bullets at this moment, nor did he care to deliver death where other measures would suffice. He made a slash at one crook's gun, while his other hand sped for the second man's wrist and plucked it upward.

The first gun flew to the roadway; the second spouted a harmless shot in the air. With a twist, The Shadow not only wrenched the gun from the hand that had fired it; his leverage on the man's arm somersaulted the thug a dozen feet from Margo's car.

The first man, scrambling to regain his lost revolver, was halted by The Shadow's laugh; while the other, on hands and knees, looked more dazed than Margo had when she rolled from the coupe.

THE THUNDER KING

It would have been an easy victory for The Shadow, but for the seemingly useless shot that one of the foemen had fired. That shot proved a signal.

Before The Shadow could huddle the two prisoners together, guns began to blast from down the road. Bullets whizzed past Margo's coupe wide shots, but close enough to prove that marksmen would soon find the range, with The Shadow as their target, if he remained where he was.

Oddly, The Shadow did remain. He seemed bewildered, as he wheeled toward Margo's car. The thugs close by grabbed up their guns and sprang for their black-clad foe, thinking that it was now their turn for victory.

Ending his bewildered pretense, The Shadow twisted hard upon them, giving a mocking laugh that told how ably he had tricked them. It was too late, then, for the pair to change their misguided tactics.

The Shadow was upon them. Slashing with his automatic, gripping with his free hand, he was knocking other guns aside, and at the same time hauling his foran into a grapple that they could not escape. The Shadow wasn't slugging them into submission, as he could easily have done; he was letting them continue a groggy struggle, so that they served as human shields against the distant gunfire.

Always, the two buffeted thugs were between The Shadow and the marksmen somewhere down the road; hence the spasmodic shots continued to be wide. Sharpshooters were yelling for their pals to wrest away, to allow clear aim at The Shadow; but the two thugs couldn't.

One person, alone, failed to realize The Shadow's strategy. That person was Margo Lane, at present back behind the wheel of her tilted coupe. From Margo's restricted viewpoint, The Shadow's grapple with two foemen looked legitimate enough. Indeed, the way he reeled to turn his antagonists toward the gunfire, made it seem that they were gaining the upper hand.

They were swinging their guns, those thugs, and Margo didn't realize that The Shadow was letting them. Each time he parried a wild stroke, Margo thought that luck was partly responsible. The grapplers were at the very door of the car, and Margo valiantly tried to equalize the struggle by grabbing at the first man she could reach.

At that moment, The Shadow was voicing a sharp command, apparently meant for someone in his own car. Too late to countermand the order, he hurled one thug aside and lunged for the other, who was turning to beat off Margo's clutch.

The lights of The Shadow's roadster were suddenly extinguished, a result of his command, bringing a blanket of absolute blackness upon the scene.

THINGS happened quickly, and blindly. The Shadow hooked the second thug as the fellow's swinging gun was descending toward Margo's head. The action would have fully diverted the stroke, if Margo, thanks to her tenacious grip, hadn't come along.

As it was, she took a glancing blow that gave her the sensation of bursts of light amid the darkness, a miniature reminder of the lightning flash that she had seen earlier.

Margo's grip was gone. She rolled back into the car, while the slugging thug, caught by the full fury of The Shadow's fling, took off for the other side of the road in a spinning plunge that landed him headlong.

Hurled like chaff, The Shadow's two antagonists were gone, while Margo's moan, coming from within the coupe, revealed that she was not too badly hurt. With darkness laying its deep shroud over all, The Shadow

had attained the setting that he needed.

Again, The Shadow's laugh; this time a taunt that carried its sardonic mirth to distant men who had halted their useless gunfire. The challenge that only The Shadow could utter, a tone that carried prophecy along with its note of triumph.

A relentless laugh, promising victory in the greater fray that was to come. Victory, not for those marksmen who no longer had a target, but for the avenger who opposed them, The Shadow!

CHAPTER III. THE WRONG ROAD

THE SHADOW'S gun was talking from deep darkness, its stabs directed toward the enemies who had tried to clip him from long range. Uncannily, he had gauged their position from their earlier fire and was placing shots too close for their comfort. They began an immediate retreat, supplying a wild return fire as they went.

The thing that baffled that crew completely was the way The Shadow's fire shifted. The spurts of his gun came from varied angles, in a style that they could not fathom

At one moment, he seemed to be shooting from the rail that bordered the ravine; at the next, from somewhere on the other side of the road. The range of his fire also fluctuated, making it impossible to guess where he had gone.

It didn't occur to those retiring gunners that they were dealing with two opponents, instead of one. Having lost sight of The Shadow during his struggle beside Margo's coupe, they supposed that he had gotten back to his own car and turned off the lights himself.

Actually, the lights were blotted out by Harry Vincent, one of The Shadow's secret agents, who had accompanied his chief on this expedition. Harry had simply awaited The Shadow's order.

Once given, the order was also Harry's cue to join the fray. He was out of the car, pumping shots along with The Shadow's. Perfectly teamed, The Shadow and his agent were alternating their fire, each picking up where the other left off. Such sporadic gunnery bewildered the opposition, making them think that The Shadow might be anywhere – or everywhere.

Indeed, The Shadow intended to further that impression. Drawing a fresh automatic, he delivered two quick shots – a signal for Harry to continue the fire alone. Crossing to the inside of the road, The Shadow was ready to move in rapidly upon his foemen, to reveal himself among them while they still believed him to be elsewhere.

He had calculated their number to be no more than four, and a surprise attack from their midst would be sufficient to scatter a group of that small size.

But before The Shadow could make his advance through darkness, his opponents received a warning. It came from the two thugs who had taken those sprawls in the road.

Finding their feet and their guns, they were too chary to attempt new combat with The Shadow. Instead, they crept to the inside of the road and began climbing up among rocks and slender trees, to reach the higher level.

Loosened stones began to tumble down, while saplings crackled as the fugitives gripped them. Realizing that they were giving themselves away, they went the limit.

THE THUNDER KING

"Look out for The Shadow!" yelled one. "He's moving in on you!"

"He's got other guys with him!" howled the other. "A bunch of them –"

The rest was drowned by the burst of guns. Turning, The Shadow was shooting in the direction of the voices, largely for Harry's benefit. The Shadow's own position was unknown; that of his agent could be spotted. The thing was to spur the flight of the two fugitives before they could get in deadly work. The Shadow succeeded – and more.

Not only did his bullets ricochet among the rocks; those slugs nicked the fleeing men, for the wild shots that they sent back were interspersed with howls. After that, they fired no more; the only sounds from their direction were stumbling clammers toward the top of the steep slope.

They wouldn't have taken that precipitous route unless it offered safety, and The Shadow promptly linked their flight with the calls that they had given.

Down the road, four other men were in rapid retreat past the shelter of the bend. Unquestionably they had a car awaiting them; hence, there was only one way to overtake them, along with the crippled fugitives who had scaled the height.

Springing toward his roadster, The Shadow met Harry on the way. He sliced a flashlight's gleam toward Margo's tilted coupe, revealing the half-stunned girl behind the wheel. He gave quick orders to his agent, then leaped to the wheel of his own roadster. Big lights glimmered; The Shadow shot the car into gear and was away with a roar.

By then, Harry was at the coupe, pushing Margo to the high side of the car. Backing the coupe, Harry worked it to the middle of the road, then started forward. Since The Shadow's car was gone, the way was clear.

Bearing to the left, Harry avoided the cleft in the road and continued beneath the great arch of the concrete bridge, carrying Margo off to safety.

MEANWHILE, The Shadow, speeding in the opposite direction, caught the shine of lights off to his right and above. Crooks had reached their car and were starting it up the steep side road that Margo had noted when she passed it earlier.

Veering hard to the left, The Shadow skimmed the guard rail, applying the brakes after yanking the wheel hard to the right. The sudden jolt actually put the big roadster into a skid that enabled him to make the hairpin turn. Then, accelerator shoved to the floor board, he was spurting up the steep slope of the narrow side road, on the trail of the car that carried the fugitive mob.

Crooks couldn't have supposed that The Shadow would make the U-turn in one sweep; otherwise, they wouldn't have slackened their flight to take on the two men who had clambered up from the rocky slope.

Those two were hardly on the running board, before The Shadow's lights loomed into sight from the rear, fully disclosing the fugitive car as a rakish sedan, the very sort that mobbies would prefer.

The man at the wheel of the sedan did not wait for others to open the doors and take the wounded thugs on board. He gave his car all the speed he could, took it over a sharp rise, and made a sudden turn to the right.

Perhaps he hoped that the swerve would deceive The Shadow, but it didn't. The pursuing roadster was too close to lose the trail.

THE THUNDER KING

Therewith, The Shadow made a valuable discovery. In cutting off to the right, the sedan was picking a road not yet opened for public travel. It was leading The Shadow across the great span that formed a link in the new superhighway that crossed above Route 95.

Where one car was going, another could have preceded it. And that fact told its own story. The Shadow knew, without Margo's testimony, that the disaster that overwhelmed Wilbert and Quade must have come from the bridge top.

There was no sign of the truck that Margo had observed coincident with the lightning flash, for it had gone; but The Shadow recognized the existence of such a vehicle and knew that the fleeing sedan was nothing but a cover-up car, that had come along Route 95 to make sure that murder was properly delivered.

The roadbed of the great bridge was a level of rough concrete that had not yet been surfaced, hence it could not show telltale tire marks. But by forcing the sedan along that route, The Shadow was driving it on the trail of the truck. The farther such a trail continued, the better; so, to spur it, The Shadow leaned from beside his wheel and fired after the sedan.

Beyond the big bridge, the other car swerved. Apparently, its driver wanted to cut away on another dirt road, but was afraid to take the risk while harried by The Shadow's shots. He kept straight ahead, hoping to outspeed the roadster; but The Shadow kept the distance constant.

Gunners were firing back, without avail, for The Shadow had already gauged the limit of their accuracy and was keeping just beyond it.

The superhighway was tricky, sometimes broad and finished, at other stretches no more than a single lane. At the end of a mile, the sedan went smacking through a barrier, knocking it to splinters and keeping right ahead.

Flimsiness of the blocking fence made The Shadow assume that murderers, in fleeing earlier, had paused to replace the barrier. He could still force the sedan to keep to the right track.

The sedan took a sharp jerk to the left, so suddenly that one of the wounded thugs was flung from the running board on the right. The sedan was gone, down a ramp that led from the superhighways, and in its place The Shadow's headlights showed the rolling figure of the fellow who had been thrown off.

Braking his car, The Shadow heard a wild scream as the sliding man reached the road edge; then the human figure was gone, and the shriek was a trailing cry of hopeless horror.

Coming to a stop at the very brink, The Shadow saw a great gulf below. This was another ravine, not yet bridged. The unhappy thug had gone into its depths.

The road barrier was explained. Its purpose had been to keep cars from this stretch of unbridged highway. It followed, therefore, that the murder truck could not have continued this far along the route. It must have turned off earlier, before the barricade, and the sedan, in keeping straight through, had diverted The Shadow from the trail he really wanted.

There was only one course: to go after the sedan and overtake it, forcing its crew to tell whatever they knew.

REVERSING the roadster, The Shadow guided it down the ramp, hitting a terrific speed along a slope of white concrete that might end nowhere. As the slope leveled, he saw dirt at the end; beyond, the lights of the sedan, which was darting toward a narrow bridge.

THE THUNDER KING

The Shadow struck the dirt with a jolt that bounced his roadster like a test plane making too sudden a landing. He righted it skillfully, but one great bound landed a front wheel against a jutting rock that encroached upon the road.

The front tire burst, hurling the car half over. The lights produced a whirl of green and gray – trees and rocks – toward which the car was lurching.

To another driver, they might have signified calamity; but The Shadow's reverse twist of the steering wheel averted disaster. The roadster seemed to balance on its good front tire as its cloaked driver pivoted it full about, halting it straight across the road, with its rear toward the craggy embankment that had threatened to receive the crippled car.

Even as the headlights made their rapid sweep, The Shadow observed the scene ahead. He saw the fleeing sedan swing past the buttress of the old bridge and dart across, taking itself beyond gun reach. It swerved as sharply as when it had left the superhighway, and with the same result, for The Shadow caught a kaleidoscopic glimpse of a flinging figure that could no longer cling to the sedan's running board.

The fugitive sedan had lightened itself of the second wounded thug. Like the first, he had gone from sight, but his tumble was a shorter one, for the bridge was a low one, not much above the level of the creek.

To The Shadow, that one man, discarded by his fellow fugitives, might be as valuable as all the rest. Dropping from the disabled roadster, The Shadow hurried to the bridge.

From beside the bridgehead, The Shadow flicked a flashlight's beam to the creek bed. He saw a crazily sprawled figure, half in the water, half reclining on sharp rocks that bordered the bank. One look was sufficient proof that the victim was past recovery. Only a closer view would tell if he still had life in him.

The Shadow obtained that view by a quick drop from the abutment. Reaching the sprawled form, he tilted the thug's head upward and saw a face that was streaked with blood from a gash above the temple. Eyes opened, as if impelled by the focused flashlight. Tilting the beam, The Shadow let the dying man see his own hawkish visage, just above.

A shudder seized the dying thug. It might have been a natural spasm, but it seemed inspired by the burn of The Shadow's eyes and the whispered tone that reached the fellow's fading hearing.

There was accusation in The Shadow's whisper, but it was not directed toward this recent enemy. Instead, The Shadow's wrath was meant for those who had abandoned their companion. His words promised vengeance, and the dying man responded.

"We were covering up," the thug gasped. "For... for Bayruth. Oliver Bayruth... the guy in the truck... on the bridge –"

"Bayruth," The Shadow repeated. "The man who murdered Wilbert and Quade."

Dying eyes were glaring, as their owner tried to nod; then, half raised from The Shadow's propping arm, he gulped:

"But it wasn't Bayruth who wanted them croaked. He isn't the big guy. I'll tell you who the brain is –"

A choke halted those all-important words. For a moment, it seemed that the dying crook would say no more, until, with a convulsive effort, he added:

"His name... is Thor –"

There was a click from a rattling throat. Lips failed, as they sought to form a further phrase. Instead of closing, those lips widened in a death grin, as a dead weight settled back against The Shadow's arm.

Strange, sibilant, was The Shadow's mirthless laugh, when he eased the dead form to the rocks and turned to pick his way back to his car. A low-toned laugh, that blended with the chatter of the creek that licked the dead figure on the bank and continued its tumultuous path beneath the old and silent bridge.

CHAPTER IV. CRIME RETRACED

THE next afternoon Margo Lane still had a headache, which didn't help her recollections of the night before. In fact, the more that Margo thought about the happenings on Highway 95, the hazier they became. By three o'clock, she had managed to forget them, when Lamont Cranston called her, inviting her to lunch.

Usually, Margo lunched earlier than three, but today the late hour pleased her, for the cafe where she met Cranston was quiet and deserted. Cranston did not question her regarding the preceding evening, nor did his impassive features betray any curiosity about her adventures.

Margo stood it as long as she could, then emphatically opened her handbag and brought out some penciled notes.

"In case you're interested, Lamont," she said, "I'll tell you just what happened. I wrote it down this morning, at ten o'clock, which was when I woke up. Wilbert and Quade were getting along all right, until the lightning struck them –"

"The lightning?" came Cranston's query. "There were no thunder showers last night."

"I saw the lightning," Margo insisted. "A great flash of it! Right out of the sky, down past the bridge."

"Odd that it didn't strike the bridge."

"The bridge was made of concrete," reminded Margo, "and that's probably why it didn't attract the lightning. Don't try to tell me that there wasn't any bridge, because I saw it, too, with a truck on top of it, between the towers."

Cranston gave a slight smile.

"I suppose that the truck was made of concrete, too."

Margo hadn't considered that detail. She began to puzzle why the lightning hadn't struck the truck on the bridge, instead of the car coming beneath. Then, noting that Cranston had not relaxed his smile, she ignored that little matter and stuck to her story.

"Wilbert and Quade went off the road," declared Margo. "I nearly ditched my own car, and I was still in it when two men came along. They were very tough, or would have been, if The Shadow hadn't shown up. He was fighting them, and I was trying to help, when something hit me on the head."

"And you saw a lot of light?"

"Yes. Lots of it."

THE THUNDER KING

"Which probably explains the lightning flash you mentioned," decided Cranston. "Maybe you dreamed the whole thing, Margo, because it doesn't fit with the newspaper account. Here – you can read it for yourself."

Margo spent the rest of the lunch hour reading the newspaper version. It stated that the car containing Wilbert and Quade had gone to its destruction because of a cave-in on Route 95. There was no mention of any lightning, nor of a mystery truck.

As for thugs, two dead ones had been found, but they were far removed from the scene of doom that Margo had witnessed. So far removed, that the police believed them to be victims of a mob feud that had carried from Manhattan out to the hinterlands of New Jersey.

"Maybe The Shadow does know something about it," remarked Cranston in a musing tone. "Someone called the house last night and said that you were in your car a few miles from where the accident occurred. I sent Stanley to take you back New York."

Stanley, was Cranston's chauffeur. Vaguely, Margo could remember being in her car, near a crossroad, when Stanley arrived with Cranston's limousine. She recalled the trip into Manhattan, now that Cranston mentioned it. Watching her changes of expression, The Shadow observed that she was still unable to piece events in between.

It didn't occur to Margo that Cranston had come from his New Jersey estate and sped along Route 95 in the opposite direction, hoping to pick up the trail of Wilbert and Quade before they turned off from the old highway. Even though she identified Cranston with The Shadow, the arrival of the cloaked fighter seemed, as usual, something bordering upon the marvelous.

Nor did she guess that Harry Vincent had been with The Shadow. The fact was that Harry had called Stanley before Margo came out of her daze, which accounted for her being found a few miles from the scene of tragedy.

"We know, at least, that Wilbert and Quade are dead," declared Cranston, finally. "Suppose you let me look into the rest of it, Margo. I'm going over to see Oswald Kelber and find out what he thinks about it. I'll call you later."

THERE was just one place to see Oswald Kelber during business hours: namely, at the offices of Universal Industries, which were located on the fortieth story of an uptown office building.

Very few visitors were admitted to Kelber's private office, but Lamont Cranston was one of the privileged. Passing a battery of secretaries, he was finally ushered into Kelber's presence, to receive an enthusiastic welcome.

Bulky, fat-faced and bushy-browed, Kelber wasn't the sort to show much enthusiasm; but on this occasion, he did. His warm, high-pressure handshake proved that he regarded Cranston as a friend in need.

"You've come to talk about Wilbert!" exclaimed Kelber in a booming tone. "You don't have to tell me, Cranston. You're one man, at least, who understands how serious this tragedy may prove. I wish that others could, particularly those whose own interests are concerned."

The Shadow gave a typically Cranston nod.

"You mean your associates in Universal Industries?"

THE THUNDER KING

"Certain of my associates," specified Kelber. "Sit down, Cranston, and let me give you a picture of the situation. I want you to judge for yourself whether I am right."

Seated, The Shadow watched Kelber pace back and forth. After a few pauses by the window, where he studied the panorama of Manhattan, Kelber swung about in his brusque but ponderous style.

"I have certain contracts to deliver," boomed Kelber. "I must equip important plants, so that they can turn out defense armaments. The total of those contracts amounts to some fifty million dollars, and they hinge upon certain key industries.

"For example, we need fireproof materials that can only be supplied by the Asbestile Co. The new plants must be bombproof, and I am depending upon the Orvis Engineering Corp. to design them. The government demands that every unit be protected against poison gas, which can only be done by installing air conditioning equipment manufactured by Vortex Circulators.

"Asbestile – Orvis – Vortex" – Kelber was counting them on his fingers – "they are the three bottlenecks. If any one of the three should fail me, my contracts will be lost. That is why I had Wilbert inspect their plants and make sure that they were safe. Wilbert's report was favorable."

The Shadow gave a nod. It was obvious that the reports would be favorable. Companies that manufactured fireproof materials, cantilever girders, and metal air circulators were not the vulnerable sort. On the surface, Kelber's worries seemed unfounded, but evidently his thoughts went deeper.

"Wilbert's reports were favorable," repeated Kelber. "But Wilbert is dead!" He stopped by his desk, to pound it. "Dead, I say! Killed by some unexplainable accident, in company with a man named Quade. Do you understand, Cranston?"

"I understand," replied The Shadow, calmly. "I have read all about it in the newspapers."

"You know who Louis Wilbert was," declared Kelber. "But did you ever hear of Harvey Quade before?"

The Shadow shook his head. Kelber picked up a sheaf of Wilbert's reports and thumbed through them. Finding the page he wanted, he raised his eyes and studied his visitor from beneath bushy brows

"You haven't heard of Harvey Quade," Kelber stated. "Tell me: do you know of Oliver Bayruth?"

That name meant much to The Shadow. Only the night before, it had been coughed by a dying thug upon the rocky bank of a creek. Moreover, The Shadow had looked into the case of Oliver Bayruth and knew quite well who the man was. Nevertheless, in playing the part of Cranston, it was better not to recognize the name. Therefore, The Shadow gazed questioningly at Kelber.

"I'll tell you who Bayruth is," confided Kelber, leaning across his big desk. "He is an inventor, an electrical wizard, once in the employ of Jerome Thorden. I don't have to ask you who Thorden is" – Kelber's tone became bitter – "because everyone knows that he is the one man who would profit if Universal Industries lost fifty million dollars in government contracts."

The Shadow's eyes look on a steady gaze. They lacked their habitual burn, but they had a strength that suited Cranston when his keen mind was aroused. In even tone, The Shadow stated:

"You mean there was a link between the dead man, Quade, and the living inventor, Bayruth."

THE THUNDER KING

"Precisely," affirmed Kelber. "My investigator, Wilbert, reported it. He was using Quade to find out what he could about Bayruth. What happened? There is your answer!" Kelber flung a newspaper across the desk. "Both Wilbert and Quade were killed!"

IN his ponderous style, Kelber resumed his pacing. He paused by the window, to turn around. The features of his heavy face had tightened; his tone was hollow, with a deep tremolo, as he declared:

"Wilbert and Quade, dead by accident. It was no accident, Cranston! Believe me, when I declare that it was death by design. Oliver Bayruth, the man who puts crazed inventions into the realm of reality, is responsible for the double murder!"

The Shadow gave statement long consideration. It was impossible for Kelber to trace the thoughts behind the impassive mask of Cranston, even though the glow of the late afternoon sun was shining through the window, directly on the visitor's face. But the very calmness of Cranston's features, the length of time before he spoke, were proofs that he was tracing the case to a further conclusion.

At last, The Shadow spoke.

"Bayruth could gain nothing through such murders," came Cranston's verdict. "But Thorden could –"

He paused, awaiting Kelber's reaction. When it came, its note of caution was accentuated by a query.

"Can I accuse Thorden?" Kelber asked. Then, with an impatient headshake: "I can't even go to see him, nor can any of my associates. But there is one man, Cranston, who might."

Kelber's eyes narrowed as he spoke, and a faint smile crossed Cranston's lips. Very calmly, The Shadow nodded. Eagerly, Kelber questioned:

"You will, Cranston?"

"This afternoon," replied The Shadow, rising. "I am quite sure that Jerome Thorden will receive me. Perhaps, Kelber" – The Shadow's tone was casual – "I may be able to bring back the rest of Wilbert's unfinished report."

The two parted with a handshake. Turning toward the door, The Shadow let his lips relax into a smile that Kelber did not see. The assignment was to The Shadow's liking. As Cranston, he was embarking upon new adventure which promised results far more startling than those of the night before!

CHAPTER V. IN THE RIVAL CAMP

IN every way except one, Jerome Thorden was the opposite of Oswald Kelber. Both were men of grandiose ideas, who thought in terms of business contracts that totaled many millions; but there, the similarity ended.

Kelber, big and brusque, heavy in appearance and manner, insisted upon skyscraper offices where he could pace about and bellow orders to subordinates. Contrarily, Thorden was a retiring man, smooth of guise and tone, though he could be crisp when occasion called. Furthermore, Thorden never went to his offices at all.

Thorden preferred the quiet of his old brownstone mansion. The house stood on a secluded street and had the appearance of a mausoleum, inside as well as out. In fact, the old saying: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here," was bound to occur to every visitor who entered the ominous brownstone portals.

THE THUNDER KING

Never had Thorden's mansion looked so forbidding as it did when Cranston approached it that afternoon. The Shadow had seen the place often before, but never at this particular hour. Daylight took some of the grimness from the mansion, and darkness softened the formidable aspect of the walls; but this happened to be an in-between time.

The sun had just descended beyond tall buildings to the west of Thorden's mansion, and the result was a preternatural dusk. Elsewhere in Manhattan, the sun was still shining, but not upon Thorden's residence. It was as if the occupant, himself, had personally designed the setting.

Sensitive to unusual impressions, The Shadow was quite sure that eyes were watching him as he approached. Eyes that could have been concealed within recessed windows, looking for anyone who entered by the gate.

Reaching the great front door, The Shadow could actually feel the bulk of the building above him, and when the door opened in response to his ring, he wasn't at all surprised to meet a cadaverous servant who looked like something that the house had hatched.

Such a welcome could not faze The Shadow. Preserving the imperturbable calm of Cranston, he gave his name and asked to see Mr. Thorden. After a few minutes wait in a big, gloomy hall, The Shadow was conducted up a grand staircase, into a front room that served as Thorden's office.

It was exactly the setting that suited Jerome Thorden. The man was seated in a corner, behind a desk of quartered oak that matched the other furniture and the paneled wainscoting of the high but gloomy room. The windows were adorned with curtains of a lacy variety, which produced the effect of an encircling cobweb, with Thorden as the spider in the center of the lair.

The Shadow noted that the curtains were transparent when anyone looked outward, which fitted his impression that Thorden, from the desk, could watch for any visitors who approached by the front walk.

Thorden was darkish and his black hair, parted at one side, gave him a Napoleonic appearance. His eyes, too, were black, sharp beads peering from his tawny visage, but they seemed curious, rather than challenging. He had met Cranston rather frequently, and did not seem surprised by the calm man's visit. Merely curious was Thorden, but not at all hurried in his effort to learn why Cranston had come to the mansion.

IN Cranston's style, The Shadow gave an ostensible reason for the visit. Cranston held a sizable interest in the Equator Importing Co., which brought in various products from Central and South America. He could supply anything from antimony to mahogany, and wanted to know if Thorden had any uses for special imports.

Thorden's eyes became very wise.

"Thorden Enterprises are marking time," he said in an oily tone. "We have no large contracts at present, though, being equipped to handle them, we expect some in the future. I would say, Cranston" – Thorden's voice became crisp – "that the man for you to see is Oswald Kelber, head of Universal Industries."

"I have seen Kelber," responded The Shadow, blandly, scarcely noting the gimlet probe of Thorden's eyes. "In fact, I have just come from Kelber's office. He has already ordered certain imports, but is not ready for more. Perhaps" – The Shadow gave a shrug – "he found my prices too high."

Thorden relaxed, chuckling dryly.

"Kelber would find prices high," declared Thorden. "He went overboard when he underbid me on those government products. Fifty million dollars seems a lot of money, but Kelber will be lucky if he realizes any

THE THUNDER KING

profit, at all."

Cranston's expression showed surprise; only a flicker of it, but enough for Thorden's sharp eyes to detect the facial change.

"Let me tell you something about Universal Industries," said Thorden, indulgently. "It is made up of a dozen corporations, some of which Kelber controls. But the key corporations, the real profit-makers, are in other hands. Kelber brought them into line, but he does not own them. He had to sublet contracts to them – on their terms.

"For example, Kelber needs a fireproof material called Asbestile, and he will have to pay for it. Jarvis Fralingham, who owns the Asbestile Co. is smart enough to insist upon his proper profit. So is Martin Orvis, head of the Orvis Engineering Corp. There is another company, too –"

Thorden paused, as though he couldn't remember the name of the concern. At last, he recalled it.

"Ah, yes," he remarked. "Vortex Circulators, which belong to Roy Darrison. He wants too much for everything, Darrison does. I know, because I once tried to make a deal with him, but had to acquire other air-conditioning equipment instead.

"Yes, Kelber will regret that he took those contracts." Thorden smiled smugly. "In fact, he has probably regretted it already. Those key companies will eat up all his profits. Possibly he mentioned the companies to you, Cranston. If he did, I'll wager he was worried."

Kelber had mentioned the three companies, expressing worry at the time, but not on the score that Thorden brought up. Kelber hadn't discussed profits; he was simply concerned because Asbestile, Orvis, and Vortex were vulnerable factors in Universal Industries.

It was obvious that Thorden must also recognize that point, but the oily man was either ignoring it, or preferred to conceal his knowledge. More than ever, Thorden was playing the spider, and he seemed to regard Cranston as a fly.

Absently, The Shadow tried to recall the things that Kelber had said; then, musingly, he remarked:

"Yes, Kelber was worried. Perhaps that was why we didn't get down to business. Kelber was quite upset over the death of some chap who worked for him. I believe that Wilbert was the fellow's name."

Thorden's eyes glittered. His head came forward, his hand drew up to receive his chin. His tone became crisp.

"Kelber should have been upset," Thorden declared. "Wilbert happened to be his prize snooper!. Did he tell you that, Cranston?"

"He said that Wilbert was an investigator –"

"Another name for snooper," interrupted Thorden. "Among other things, Wilbert was checking on my business. He wanted to find out how Thorden Enterprises worked, so that he could sell such information to Kelber and thereby help Universal Industries. But Wilbert found out – nothing!"

LEANING back, Thorden spread his hands as a token of emptiness. Then, regretfully, he added:

THE THUNDER KING

"I'm sorry about Wilbert's death. The poor chap was harmless. In fact, last night he was riding on some sort of a wild-goose chase, along with a man named Quade. I really believe" – Thorden inserted a dryish laugh – "that Quade was taking him to see Oliver Bayruth."

The name didn't seem to register with Cranston. Thorden explained that Bayruth was an electrical wizard whose ideas, originally sound, had gone completely haywire. Ruefully, Thorden admitted that he had invested some fifty thousand dollars in Bayruth's inventions before learning that they were impractical.

"When Bayruth began to talk about perpetual motion, it was just too much," declared Thorden. "I paid him off and let him go. I haven't seen hide or hair of him since. I've had a little correspondence with him, none of it important. I suppose that Bayruth has tucked himself away in some retreat, to work on his impossible ideas and squander what money he has left."

The mention of correspondence interested The Shadow, even though Thorden defined it as unimportant. Thorden had a way of making important things seem just the opposite, and vice versa. Correspondence happened to be the subject that Wilbert had discussed with Quade in Margo's hearing. Obviously, they had referred to letters which were in Bayruth's possession.

The Shadow would have liked, very much, to have a look into Bayruth's files, particularly to see what sort of letters Thorden had actually written to the inventor. To do that, it would first be necessary to locate Bayruth.

Thorden was one man who might know Bayruth's present whereabouts but he had smoothly disclaimed such knowledge. Nevertheless, The Shadow still believed that he might obtain a clue through Thorden.

Abruptly, The Shadow arose, dropping the calm pose that suited Cranston. Thorden was quick to mark the change, which was precisely what The Shadow wanted.

As they shook hands at the door, The Shadow felt the gleam of beady eyes upon him. When he went downstairs and out the front door, he did not look back, for it was not necessary.

The Shadow knew, without benefit of such a glance, that Thorden must be watching him, and he suspected that the sharp-eyed man by this time had a companion. In that surmise, The Shadow was entirely correct.

With Cranston's departure, a blunt-faced, rangy man had stepped into Thorden's office through a revolving panel in the wall of oak. The rangy man had accompanied Thorden to a window, and both were staring through the webby curtain.

"There goes Cranston," said Thorden dryly. "I'm glad you agree with me, Blandle, when I say that he was sent here by Kelber. I want you to follow Cranston and find out where he goes next."

Blandle nodded.

"Stay on his trail," advised Thorden. "If you have difficulty, summon others to help you. Cranston is a man who knows too much. I don't like people who know too much."

That remark could well have included Wilbert and Quade, who, only the night before, had demonstrated that they knew too much. Turning from the window, Thorden gestured Blandle toward the door. As soon as the rangy man had left, Thorden indulged in a dry, harsh laugh.

Like Kelber, Thorden was classing Lamont Cranston as a mere go-between in this duel between two rival business giants. It had not yet occurred to Jerome Thorden that Lamont Cranston could be crime's master foe,

The Shadow!

CHAPTER VI. TRAILS REVERSED

OUTSIDE Thorden's mansion, The Shadow stepped into his waiting limousine. From the moment that the big car pulled away, The Shadow knew that he was being trailed. The laugh that he gave was low, significant, yet carefully repressed within the confines of the car. The Shadow did not want Stanley to hear.

This happened to be Cranston's limousine, and to Stanley, the chauffeur, Cranston was Cranston only. Stanley regarded his master as quite eccentric, for Cranston liked to go to unusual places on occasion, leaving the car and returning to it whenever he so chose. But so far Stanley had never identified Lamont Cranston as The Shadow.

Others had: Margo Lane and Harry Vincent, for instance. Nevertheless, in a way, Stanley was more right than they were. Though The Shadow did appear as Cranston, there was another Cranston, also. The real Cranston was a globe-trotting millionaire who was seldom in New York. During Cranston's long periods of absence in foreign climes, The Shadow found it convenient to double for him.

Thus, to all intents and purposes, The Shadow was Lamont Cranston, and he was in such guise when he strolled from Thorden's. Hence, the laugh that he gave was especially strange, since it was The Shadow's laugh coming from Cranston's lips. The reason for the laugh was the car that pulled away from near Thorden's curb just as the limousine turned the corner. That car started just a trifle too soon to escape discovery.

Reaching for the speaking tube, The Shadow spoke in Cranston's tone. He instructed Stanley to drive in an aimless round-about fashion while traveling to the exclusive Cobalt Club, of which Cranston was a member. Accustomed to such orders, Stanley obeyed them without question.

Dusk had gathered during The Shadow's stay at Thorden's, a dusk much deeper than the imitation which had shrouded the old mansion at the time of The Shadow's arrival. Within the limousine, The Shadow set to work to eliminate the guise of Cranston. He did it very simply.

Drawing a secret shelf from beneath the rear seat of the limousine, The Shadow took out a black cloak and a slouch hat. From the moment that he slid into those garments, he was obliterated. Passing street lamps showed only darkness within the limousine.

That darkness contained The Shadow!

Packing a brace of automatics in holsters beneath his coat, The Shadow next drew on a pair of black gloves. He slid the secret drawer beneath the seat, and pressed a button in the partition that separated him from Stanley.

A panel came open, in the back of the front seat. From it, The Shadow took a pair of earphones. He turned a dial and spoke in whispered tone. A voice answered:

"Burbank speaking."

The Shadow had established short-wave radio contact with Burbank, the secret agent who forwarded instructions along to others. The Shadow's whisper continued; it brought a parting response in Burbank's methodical tone:

THE THUNDER KING

"Instructions received."

From then on, The Shadow sat back and waited. He didn't want the car behind to lose the trail; but it did, for a while. Stanley had a way of turning corners just as traffic lights turned red, and The Shadow's trailer had to wait, rather than show his hand. However, Stanley was a careful driver and the big limousine was very easy to identify, so the other car soon found it again.

When the limousine swung into the lighted area near Times Square, The Shadow drew back to a corner of the rear seat. He didn't want traffic cops looking in through the windows and noting the mysterious passenger.

Watching for a space beside a traffic island, where the street was not so brilliant, The Shadow eased forward and used Cranston's tone through the speaking tube.

"Six blocks north on Broadway," he told Stanley. "Then right. After you pass Sixth Avenue, look for the little cigar shop on the right. If it is closed, don't stop. Just keep on to the club."

AS the limousine crossed Sixth Avenue, other cars followed it. A taxicab, waiting on the avenue, swung in behind the procession. The cross-town street was quite dark and The Shadow leaned forward in the limousine, his hand upon the door.

Stanley was looking for the cigar shop, and he was going to find it closed. The Shadow happened to know that the cigar shop in question had closed out its business two weeks before.

Naturally, Stanley slackened speed and was moving very slowly when he saw the darkened front of the cigar shop. At the same moment, The Shadow opened the door on his right and made a quick slide to the curb.

He was twisting as he went, and he didn't lose a step, even though the limousine was in motion. His spin, moreover, enabled him to sweep the door shut just as Stanley stepped on the gas.

The limousine was away, gathering speed, while The Shadow, no more than a blur in black, was wheeling across the curb into the shelter of the store front. Other cars went past as he dissolved into blackness. The Shadow's blend with the gloom was so quick, so natural, that no eyes could discern him.

After a few cars had gone by, the cab came along. Its driver did not see The Shadow; nevertheless, the cab stopped.

Three quick strides and The Shadow was in the cab. The slam that he gave the door was a cue for the cabby to start again. The cabby happened to be Moe Shrevnitz, one of The Shadow's secret agents. Moe, or Shrevvy, as his fellow hackies called him, was one of the slickest drivers in Manhattan.

Leaning close to the front seat, The Shadow indicated two cars ahead and inquired in a whisper:

"Which was on the trail?"

"I'd say both," responded Moe. "Maybe it sounds funny, only –"

It didn't sound funny to The Shadow. His whispered laugh told that Moe was right. During the trip, The Shadow had observed two sets of lights behind him. Considering the peculiar route that Stanley had taken, one trailer could have signaled another to come along and help him; but The Shadow wasn't interested in that point, for the present. He was watching to see what happened next.

THE THUNDER KING

The two cars ahead were clinging rather closely to the limousine, as though they didn't care if they were noticed. However, in New York traffic, cars normally keep close together. The Shadow was sure that the trailers would ease a trifle when they turned a corner where traffic lessened.

They did, much to The Shadow's satisfaction.

That corner marked the Cobalt Club. By turning it, Stanley brought up squarely in front of the place.

The Cobalt Club had a very efficient doorman, who recognized the cars of members the moment that they turned the corner, and pounced for their door handles as soon as they stopped. He was up to form when Cranston's limousine arrived.

The doorman made his pounce, yanked the door open, and stood puzzled when he saw no sign of Cranston. Then, deciding that the limousine had come to pick up its owner instead of leaving him, the doorman closed the door and turned away.

He was closing the door when the trailing cars curved the corner, with Moe's cab behind them. It looked exactly as if Cranston had exited from the limousine and hurried into the Cobalt Club

The trailing cars kept on their way.

From then on, it was a different sort of chase. The first car sped its pace, and the second car dogged it. Moe kept to the rear, guiding by the second car. Both had trailed Cranston to his destination; now, Cranston, otherwise The Shadow, was following them.

But the cars were much farther spaced than before. Moreover, the trail was moving away from the better part of town, into a neighborhood that was quite unsavory.

Streets were dark and sullen, the buildings that lined them were squalid and dilapidated. A low roof between two houses marked the narrow entrance of a grimy garage. Nearing it, the first car turned suddenly into the opening. As soon as it had gone through, the garage door was slid shut behind it. The second car kept on and turned the corner beyond, but Moe's cab no longer followed.

At an order from The Shadow, the cabby pulled into a darkened place beside the opposite curb and extinguished his lights. Like a specter of the night, The Shadow stepped from the cab and glided across the street.

To Moe, staring from behind the wheel, The Shadow's departure resembled the elusive way in which a cloud of blackish smoke would vanish.

CLOSE by the door of the garage, The Shadow merged with its darkness. Someone had clamped the door from the inside, but The Shadow settled that matter very readily. The door gave slightly, enough to produce a crack. Through the crack, The Shadow inserted a thin wedge of metal and kicked the clamp from its place.

Inching the door wider, he squeezed through and slid the door shut behind him. Since no one was in sight, The Shadow left the door unclamped.

It was one of those typical garages that ran from street to street. This was the rear entrance, and the garage men had all gone to the front. The Shadow saw the car that had just entered; it was a coupe, and its driver had run it over a grease pit, probably to make it look like a car that had been in the garage for quite a while, undergoing repair.

THE THUNDER KING

The garage was very gloomy, and in the farther wall The Shadow saw a crack of light issuing from the edges of a door. It looked like an office; probably the place where the coupe's driver had gone.

Reaching the door, The Shadow pressed it inward. He saw a roughly dressed man standing beside a battered desk, using a telephone. The fellow was stocky, and his garb gave him a squatly look. His face, which The Shadow observed in partial profile, was ugly and thuggish.

No introduction was need to tell The Shadow that this man belonged to the cover-up crew that had patrolled Highway 95 the previous evening.

There was no way of telling what number the thug was calling, for the fellow had already obtained it. But it was easy enough to learn who he was, for he was stating his name across the wire, in a rough tone that fitted his appearance.

"Hello, chief," he was saying... "Yeah, this is Matt Mardan... Sure! It was a cinch picking up Cranston's car. It went right back to the Cobalt Club –"

There was a pause, which ended when Matt gave a gruff laugh.

"I'll say Cranston got wise," announced Matt. "You shoulda seen the way that big bus of his kept ducking... Yeah, like a dog shaking off water, only too slow to shake me. Maybe the chauffeur uses gas with too much lead in it!"

Matt was laughing at his own idea of a joke, when a query across the wire stopped him.

"Cranston ducked into the club," returned Matt. "Yeah, in a hurry... The chauffeur? He stayed right where he was... No, he couldn't have tailed me here to the garage... The boys? They're right here, chief – a couple of right guys, to make up for those two lugs we had to drop last night... Yeah, they're all set to join up –"

Ending the call rather abruptly, Matt started to turn about. The Shadow was easing back through the door, when the stocky man apparently remembered another call. Matt turned to the telephone again and began to dial a number. He had trouble, due to a newspaper that was sticking from his hip pocket and getting in the way of his elbow.

Annoyed by the newspaper, Matt tried to tug it from his pocket. It wouldn't come, so he dug deeper and gave a yank. The rolled-up newspaper came flying from his pocket and scaled toward a blotch of blackness that was fading from the floor, just within the office door.

But, though the newspaper had gone from Matt's hand, the thug's fist wasn't empty. Under cover of the newspaper, he had brought out something else.

The other article was a glittering revolver, that Matt Mardan aimed for the door with the same sweep in which he tossed the newspaper. A triumphant snarl coming from his lips, Matt added punch by tugging the gun trigger.

Bullets ripped the door as the murderous thug drove toward it. Shots meant for The Shadow, whose presence Matt Mardan had detected from the infringing blotch upon the floor!

CHAPTER VII. CROSSED BATTLE

REACHING the door, Matt Mardan yanked it open, expecting to see sprawled blackness on the stone floor of the garage. Such blackness, in a solid mass, would indicate the bullet-riddled figure of The Shadow.

The blackness was outside the door, but it was closer than Matt expected. Instead of being huddled, motionless, it proved very much alive. It came lunging up from below the step that formed the threshold of the office – a cloaked attacker who sprang with incredible speed.

Matt's shots had not been quick enough. His gesture with the newspaper was a give-away. The Shadow's fade was timed ahead of Matt's gunfire, and right now The Shadow's lunge was quicker than anything that Matt could produce.

A hand shoved Matt's gun upward as the killer tried to aim. Yanking his wrist free, Matt gave a swing that went a full foot wide, bringing his elbow against The Shadow's shoulder.

The Shadow had a gun, too; a heavy automatic that he swung sidewise at Matt's head. The thug dodged backward, which would not have helped him, except for the chance swing of the door.

It had a spring that brought it shut, and the door took some of the force from The Shadow's stroke.

Matt received the rest of the blow in glancing fashion, and reeled away, barely managing to retain his gun.

Though Matt's shots had failed to clip The Shadow, they did bring results. Those cracks from the revolver brought the garage men on the run.

As Matt's telephone conversation had evidenced, the garage was a hide-away for thugs of his own ilk, and the four men who appeared from around the corner were drawing guns as they came. They saw The Shadow, but he did not give them time to aim.

With his drawn automatic, The Shadow opened rapid fire that scattered his foemen instantly. He wasn't seeking results with those first shots, for he had the man he wanted: Matt Mardan. Other rats could flee if they wanted, but if any took to cover and tried to return the fire, it would be a different story.

One man attempted it. He dodged behind a stack of tires, poking his gun back as he went, hoping to blaze shots at The Shadow.

It happened that The Shadow's hand was quicker and his show of marksmanship amazing. He jabbed a shot for the only target that offered – the thug's revolver – and found it, along with the fist that gripped it.

There was a shriek as the crook came floundering forward, knocking the stack of tires ahead of him, sending them rolling on the floor. His companions, turning to wage combat with The Shadow gave up the idea and thought in terms of a getaway, instead.

One was beside Matt's car; the fellow jumped to the wheel and started the coupe ahead. The others, including the wounded man, were diving beyond the car, and they sprang on board it as it went by.

One fired wildly back. Wheeling to another angle, The Shadow clipped him in the shoulder, sagging him half into the ear. Hearing the shot and seeing the result, the driver did not wait for anyone to open the front door, toward which the coupe was headed. He smashed right through the flimsy barrier and kept on going, carrying his three companions with him.

THE THUNDER KING

The Shadow turned to meet Matt, expecting to settle him easily. Matt had looked very groggy after The Shadow sideswiped him, but the sudden departure of his yellow companions had come like a douse of cold water. Matt was fully on his feet, driving in so viciously that The Shadow had barely time to wheel aside.

Matt's gun blazed shots at the spot where The Shadow had been; then, sighting his foe in black, the desperate thug changed direction and flung himself squarely on his cloaked foe.

The Shadow met the onslaught with a grapple that should have curbed an opponent of Matt's caliber. Trapping Matt's gun hand, The Shadow sledged a hard blow with his automatic, but Matt not only warded it, he hooked The Shadow's arm in a hard grip of his own. The earlier stroke that Matt received had evidently knocked all caution from his brain.

DESERTED by the recruits that he had sought to enlist for future service, Matt knew that his own career depended upon escape from The Shadow.

To Matt, his taste of The Shadow's slugging skill was indication that he would be completely through if he lost this struggle. Moreover, The Shadow's efforts to take Matt alive, that he might talk, were misinterpreted by the thug. He thought that he had found The Shadow's weakness.

Grimly, the pair reeled across the garage floor, The Shadow as determined to take Matt alive as Matt was to see The Shadow dead.

To an ordinary observer, the grapple would have appeared a toss-up; if anything, Matt seemed to have the edge. As they tightened, Matt was actually forcing The Shadow backward, straining to get in a slug at the cloaked fighter's head, and at moments, almost succeeding.

Moe Shrevnitz, however, was no ordinary observer.

Popping suddenly into sight from the rear of the garage, the cabby viewed the clutching fray. Generally, Moe stayed in the offing, at The Shadow's order, but the time lapse since the gunfire and the flight of the thug-manned car had brought Moe to the scene.

Moe was carrying a monkey wrench, and could have hurried across the floor to land it on Matt's head; but he didn't. Moe recognized The Shadow's game.

The cloaked grappler was letting Matt carry the fight, and Matt was doing it, to such a strenuous extent that shortly he would be exhausted. Every twist, every lurch, was tiring him. Soon, he would wilt suddenly, as Moe had seen others do. The cabby relaxed, watching with quick, understanding eyes, until he spotted something else.

Matt's efforts were not all sheer folly. In pressing back The Shadow, Matt could see beyond his adversary. Over The Shadow's shoulder, the gunman had spied a perfect pitfall for The Shadow. It was the grease pit over which Matt had driven his car. Matt's car was gone, taken by the men who had deserted him, and the pit yawned wide!

Yielding purposely, The Shadow was only a few yards from the menacing hole when Moe saw the danger. About to spring forward and steer the pair away, Moe halted, hearing another clatter. A door in a corner of the garage had opened; through it was coming a rangy man who flourished a .38 revolver.

Moe guessed instantly that this was the driver of the other car that had trailed The Shadow to the Cobalt Club, and later continued along the path that Matt had furnished. Moe was right; the man was Blandle.

THE THUNDER KING

Determinedly, Bandle pointed his revolver at the pair of strugglers. At that moment, it was difficult for him to pick his target, for The Shadow and Matt were twisting, swaying, as they neared the grease pit.

It wouldn't make sense to allow Bandle to insert a shot, so Moe, monkey wrench in hand, went after the rangy man. But as he went, Moe remembered the gaping grease pit and shouted the words: "Look out!" to The Shadow.

It wasn't a well-timed yell. The Shadow, with a sideward glance, saw Bandle and naturally supposed him to be the menace that Moe indicated; hence, all reference to the grease pit went unheeded. But Moe, in calling to The Shadow, had also warned Bandle of coming interference, and the rangy man, instead of lingering with his aim, began to speed it.

If ever things looked black for The Shadow, it was then.

Still, The Shadow was master of blackness.

He did what in Moe's opinion was the worst thing possible. He took quick back steps, hauling Matt with him. In his turn, Matt lunged all the harder, and so swift did it happen that the pair were actually at the pit before Bandle could fire. But where Moe's warning of the pit had failed, The Shadow found one of his own, which Watt – like Moe had overlooked.

The grease pit had a raised metal rim, a guide to keep car wheels from sliding into the hole when people drove across it. The Shadow's heel encountered that flange. It told him exactly what was to be expected.

The Shadow twisted. His strength was suddenly at the full. Matt came flying about like a straw figure, as The Shadow, his heel actually hooked to the pit's rim, made an incredibly swift pivot.

Moe was hurling the monkey wrench, but the flying missile didn't stop Bandle. He tugged his gun trigger more than once, in quick succession. But his bullets did not reach The Shadow. Instead, they found the body of Matt Mardan, for The Shadow had wisely whirled his human burden in Bandle's direction.

The shots almost ripped Matt from The Shadow's grasp, but their jolts only increased Matt's hold. Instead of shying on the pit brink, Matt took the plunge, and The Shadow had no choice except to go with him, which wasn't a bad one, considering that Bandle was still at large with a very active gun.

MATT landed first in the bottom of the pit. His own fall buffered, The Shadow sprang upward and around, coming over the top of the pit, automatic first. He wanted to aim for Bandle, in case the rangy man started shooting at Moe; but all The Shadow saw of Bandle was a slamming door.

Chance of pursuit was gone. Before The Shadow could climb from the pit, the roar of a motor outside told that Bandle was leaving in his car. The Shadow called to Moe, telling him not to attempt a useless chase. Stooping, The Shadow then bent above Matt Mardan.

The crook's eyes opened. Words croaked from his lips.

"Hello, Shadow!" Matt's clucking tone was ugly. "I know what you want... the name of the guy you heard me call. I'll give it... to you. His name is Thor –"

With the broken croak, Matt's eyes went shut. Climbing from the pit, The Shadow studied the crook's prone form. Matt looked dead, but he might be faking. With a gesture, The Shadow ordered Moe down into the pit, to make sure.

THE THUNDER KING

With rapid strides, The Shadow crossed to the office and picked up the newspaper that Matt had dropped there. Moe was climbing from the pit, shaking his head, when The Shadow returned.

Matt was dead; Bandle was gone. Sounds of approaching sirens meant that police had been attracted by the gunfire and that rapid departure would be the only way to avoid much trouble and delay.

Beckoning to Moe, The Shadow hurried the cabby out to the rear street. They made a swift start in Moe's cab, while the police were coming through the front of the garage.

Crossed battle had produced regrettable results. The fact that Bandle had revealed himself meant little, because the rangy man had staged a getaway. Offsetting it was the death of Matt Mardan, which might prove very serious. Matt had deserved what he received, but he was no longer an informant. The words that Bandle's shots had stifled on Matt's lips were but a part of what The Shadow needed to know.

Turning on the reading lamp in the cab, The Shadow studied Matt's newspaper as he rode along. It was a small-town newspaper from a place called Krons skill, not far from New York. The Shadow recognized the name, for the town was where the Asbestile Co. was located.

Thumbing through the thin newspaper, The Shadow found what he expected – a story that concerned the Asbestile plant.

It stated that Asbestile had increased the daily shifts; that the factory would be working until nine o'clock every night, including Sundays.

That item had significance for The Shadow. The Asbestile plant, though owned by Jarvis Fralingham, was a key company in the set-up of Universal Industries, a weak link in the chain that Oswald Kelber controlled. Certainly a suitable target for Jerome Thorden, should he seek to ruin Universal Industries.

Nine o'clock.

It wasn't far to Krons skill. The Shadow could be there before nine. Nothing could happen within the Asbestile plant before the closing hour. It was well guarded, and it would be difficult for anyone to start destruction among fireproof materials. The danger, as The Shadow saw it, would be after nine o'clock. The clue in Matt's newspaper, therefore, could be a valuable one.

It happened that The Shadow had let one clue distract him from another. He was to learn that fact later.

CHAPTER VIII. DEATH FROM THE HILL

IN his race to Krons skill, The Shadow made much better time than he had anticipated. Before reaching the limits of Manhattan, he stopped to put in a call to Burbank. It was an order for Harry Vincent to follow Moe's cab in The Shadow's roadster, on the chance of overtaking the cab.

The roadster was a road-burner. Given any breaks in traffic, it would show its superspeed. Harry found the breaks, and he overtook the cab halfway to Krons skill. Transferring to the roadster, The Shadow took the wheel. He kept Harry with him, but ordered Moe back to Manhattan.

Shortly after eight o'clock, The Shadow swung in sight of Krons skill. Beyond the glimmering lights that strewed a sizable valley, he saw the glow from the Asbestile factory, off to the left at a slightly higher level.

THE THUNDER KING

It wasn't necessary to go through the town to reach the factory, and the shortcut would further reduce The Shadow's running time. By the dashlight, Harry picked out the route, and the distance indicated that they could get to the plant by quarter-past eight.

Curving along a paved road, The Shadow asked Harry about other routes, close by. Harry found that a connecting highway passed just beyond the Asbestile factory.

Considering that The Shadow had plenty of time, it would be easy to swing to the connecting road and pull up on the other side of the plant. However, since terrain was rough, it seemed better not to approach the factory on foot, since delay would be inevitable. The Shadow decided to drive directly to his destination.

He revoked the decision as soon as he had made it.

The Shadow's change of mind came when a great sweep of light illuminated the sky, revealing the entire landscape. It was sheet lightning, followed by a rolling peal of thunder.

Lightning!

Most potent of all the angles that concerned current crime was Margo's report of a mysterious lightning stroke the night before. The Shadow had not seen the shaft that destroyed the car that carried Wilbert and Quade, but he credited Margo's story.

The lightning that The Shadow saw tonight was real, and seemingly distant, at least to Harry, who regarded sheet lightning as indication of a far-away storm. But the glare that brightened the sky told another story to The Shadow, as did the prompt response of the thunder.

The storm was quite close. The reason why the lightning showed in a sheet, instead of streaks, was because of a high, intervening hill. The view that the lightning gave disclosed the entire slope, and The Shadow saw that the Asbestile plant was located on the near side of the hill, while the blackish clouds were approaching over the brow!

There was menace in that lightning.

The Shadow knew.

Quick in his conclusions, The Shadow recognized a menace coming from the hill, and he saw but one way to offset it. That was to reach the hill, instead of the Asbestile plant, before the storm really arrived.

From Harry's report of a road beyond the factory, The Shadow knew that the highway in question must skirt the brow of the hill. He promptly changed his course and increased the roadster's speed.

AS they swung into the cross highway, the lightning ripped anew. This time, it was closer, and directly visible. It was forked lightning, and the storm was coming with real fury, much closer to the hill.

Why The Shadow had suddenly decided to run a race with a thunderstorm, especially to a spot beyond his intended goal, was quite a mystery to Harry.

In fact, Harry was thinking of the factory, not the storm. The lightning flash gave him a sideward view along the slope. He saw the factory at closer range, and recognized what it must be.

THE THUNDER KING

The Asbestile plant was an old and rather decrepit mass of buildings that had been taken over for new industry. It looked like the sort of plant that might experience trouble from a thunderstorm.

Still, Harry couldn't quite size the menace.

Lightning could knock shingles from a farmhouse roof, but it could hardly damage an industrial plant, even an old one. As for starting fires, lightning was noted for that sort of business, but a plant that made fireproof materials would certainly prove immune.

The trouble was that The Shadow did not seem to agree with those opinions. Harry stared questioningly at his chief. As if reading his agent's thoughts, The Shadow spoke.

"Somewhere along this road," he told Harry, "we are going to encounter enemies. Men who are working with a strange design. Last night, they struck from a clear sky. Tonight, they hope that the storm will cover up their work."

There was another flash of lightning, much closer. The storm was almost at the hill, yet The Shadow was outracing it. In a very few minutes, he would be at his new goal: the center of the hill on the slope above the Asbestile factory. Harry heard The Shadow's whispered laugh, strangely sinister. He knew that his chief foresaw success.

"We shall meet a man named Oliver Bayruth," declared The Shadow. "An almost forgotten man, once famed as an electrical wizard –"

Another flash of lightning interrupted. Vivid, it outlined the entrance to an old dirt road less than a hundred yards ahead. The road was steep, for it came down from the hill. It also revealed the paved highway, with The Shadow's car hurtling along it at a speed which seemed amazing, considering that the motor's tone was a smooth purr, not a roar.

In fact, any noise of the engine was completely drowned by the roll of thunder that followed close after the lightning. But no one had to hear The Shadow's car. Sight of it was enough.

Like a thing produced from nowhere, an old sedan shot down from the dirt road. Hurling itself into the glare of The Shadow's headlights, the ramshackle heap of junk blocked off the speedy roadster from the highway ahead!

The Shadow performed double miracles with brakes and steering wheel. He couldn't possibly get past the blocking car, for it went clear across the road; but what he did do left Harry awed and breathless.

A jab of the brake pedal lifted the roadster over a slight hump, on what seemed a take-off. A twist of the steering wheel pointed the car toward rocks and trees, but this time there was no jagged obstruction to receive the bounding front tires.

Another application of brakes, with a deft swing of the wheel, and the car was pivoted the other way. Again, The Shadow diverted it in bouncing fashion.

The roadster was doing ninety when The Shadow went into those gyrations. How he ever managed to cut down that breakneck pace was something that Harry never did understand. But the final result was a shriek of tires, a heave that almost toppled the stout car over.

Then, with a jolt, The Shadow and Harry were right beside the sedan, so close that they could almost touch it.

THE THUNDER KING

THE junk pile was disgorging men from the far side. Men with guns, who thought that The Shadow would wreck his own car against their sedan and make himself a helpless target for their weapons.

Instead, The Shadow completely reversed the situation. Not only did he avoid the fatal crash; he came to his stop before the thuggish clan had time to turn around and aim.

The Shadow had a gun talking before others could begin. The menace was the other way about, and had happened so quickly, that foemen had no time to scatter. Harry saw figures plunge, as another glare of lightning lit the scene. The Shadow plunged, too, but not to the ground. He sprang from his own car to the hood of the sedan, to shoot across it. The stabs of his gun sent more men sprawling

Out from his own side of the roadster, Harry rushed around the front, to find The Shadow on the far side of the sedan. Oddly, The Shadow seemed to be overrunning his mark. He was beyond his opponents, giving those that could a chance to get back into their car.

But it proved to be part of The Shadow's strategy. He wanted thugs to get back into their car, and flee in it, so that the road would be clear for him.

Men did reach the car. They started it, but not along the road. A wounded man was at the wheel; his sagging hand couldn't turn it, though his foot was strong enough to push against the accelerator. The sedan shot forward with its load of desperate thugs, whose ardor was only on escape.

It made a slight swerve, then crashed a flimsy fence on the far side of the road and went plunging through, to roll down a jagged slope, sending back a chorus of shrieks.

Lightning showed the sedan's plunge. Thunder, hard upon the flash, drowned the cries of crooks who had made their own rocky bed of death. The Shadow leaped back to the roadster, and Harry followed him, but they reached the car too late.

By then, the storm was full upon the hill. New shafts of lightning were rending the sky, and thunder was blasting with them. Through a clearing in the trees, The Shadow and his agent saw the devastation that occurred.

Those shafts of lightning were not coming from the sky. They were being hurled from the brow of the hill itself, at some point farther along the road, as if some thunder god were throwing them!

Down came a lurid flash, a man-made arrow of ten million volts. Like The Shadow, Harry was a witness to its effect. The lightning struck one corner of the Asbestile plant, just down the slope, and ripped away a chunk of wall. Another of those shafts broke loose and cracked the very center of the brick-walled building!

Like a giant among pygmies came another flash of genuine lightning, with a mighty smash of thunder, directly overhead. But it was nothing but a cover-up for the man-made efforts that immediately followed it. The real lightning did not strike the red-brick plant; the human product did.

Crash – crash – crash!

Bolts smashed from the brow of the hill with the power of great volleys loosed from howitzers. Each stroke ripped walls to chunks, showed staggering human figures coming from the Asbestile plant. That horror was followed by other roars, not crackly like the thunder that accompanied the man-made volts, but hollow, sullen, the smothery tumble of collapsing walls.

THE THUNDER KING

Those sounds kept echoing; they had almost ended when a glare spread across the sky.

The flash told that the storm had passed. All that it did was give a view of the location where the Asbestile plant had stood. Instead of closely cluttered brick-walled buildings, the illumination from the sky showed a pile of sagging ruins. The first of Kelber's key industries had found its finish.

Quiet came again, broken only by the occasional rumbles of the departing storm. Drenched by a torrent of terrific rain, Harry Vincent stood stunned amid the blackness.

From beside him came a strange, solemn tone, chilling and mirthless, carrying one theme only: vengeance.

It was the laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER IX. THE SHADOW TRAITS

HARRY wondered what The Shadow intended to do next. The answer came, quite promptly. Reaching from the roadster, The Shadow drew his agent into the car; then backed into the dirt road from which the sedan had come, only a few minutes before.

Only a few minutes.

In that short space of time, Harry had witnessed events which passed belief. He had seen destruction wrought so rapidly that he felt he needed another look to make sure that the Asbestile plant was really gone. Harry couldn't take that look, for it was his task to remain with The Shadow. So he used his imagination, instead.

He tried to imagine what the Asbestile plant would look like if lightning had struck it repeatedly, and with directed force. From that picture, Harry recaptured the scene that had actually been on display before his eyes. He knew the truth of crime, tremendous though it was.

Another recollection came to mind.

Harry thought of Oliver Bayruth, the famous electrical wizard. Bayruth was the man responsible, yet the wizardry could not be called his own. He had simply applied a known device, that of man-made lightning, a thing which science had often demonstrated for public display.

True, Bayruth's bolts had been formidable; greater and more numerous than any used in exhibitions. But, to date, artificial lightning had never been employed as a destroyer. No, Harry was wrong. It had been used for such last night. Lightning from the bridge of the superhighway had doomed two men who knew too much: Wilbert and Quade.

Recalling how he had driven Margo from the scene of that disaster, Harry recalled some words that she had spoken. Talk that had seemed incoherent at the time about lightning striking from the sky. He hadn't credited it at the time, for last night the sky had been clear.

It didn't matter, starlight or clouds, when Bayruth's mechanism was in action, except for one point. A real thunderstorm could cover up the deadly work of the artificial lightning. Bayruth had risked that point last night. Tonight, he had not.

Harry's mind came from its whirl. He began to wonder why The Shadow was waiting on a dirt road, in a torrential rain, after having witnessed such crime as the total destruction of the Asbestile plant. It might be that The Shadow, himself, had been dazed by the procession of horrendous events.

THE THUNDER KING

Usually, The Shadow went after perpetrators of crime without delay. Harry turned to his chief, a question on his lips. An afterthought made him restrain his query.

The Shadow didn't have to go after Bayruth and the other hands of crime.

They were coming to The Shadow!

It was logical that they would come in this direction. They had planted the sedan to cover up their work. The men in the sedan were stationed for two purposes: one, to block off trouble-makers; the other, to pass the word along, in case such persons came.

But The Shadow had banished the sedan and its crew. The car was over the cliff, and no one had given Bayruth the news.

Soon, the wizard of destruction would be coming in this direction, to find The Shadow waiting for him!

As Harry formed that conclusion, a rumble sounded from somewhere along the road. It increased, and with it, headlights sliced through the rain. The glare became more brilliant, and finally materialized itself in the shape of a huge, double-sectioned truck that rolled by at considerable speed.

As soon as the ponderous vehicle had passed, The Shadow slid the roadster into gear and took up the trail.

Harry expected The Shadow to drive without headlights, a system which The Shadow often used to keep close behind an unsuspecting car.

It would have been easy in this instance, for the truck's lamps were huge and powerful, cutting a strong swath along the highway ahead. In addition, the trailer portion of the lumbering vehicle was well sprinkled with taillights, glimmering blobs of red that made guideposts in themselves.

Nevertheless, The Shadow turned on the roadster's headlights, and after a mile or two it dawned on Harry why he had done so.

Bayruth and his crew of evil-working technicians would naturally expect the cover-up crew to follow along in the sedan. If they didn't see headlights behind them, they would suspect something. So The Shadow had supplied the lights, as a necessary item in this case.

The great truck was heading west. Off to the south, the last flashes of lightning from the parting storm disclosed stretches of rugged landscape, and at one spot, Harry observed great metal towers approaching the highway at an angle, and carrying wires across it. Towers and wires represented a high-tension power line, that continued back past the demolished Asbestile plant.

Harry remembered a similar line in New Jersey, not far from Highway 95. He could understand how the makers of man-made lightning obtained the power for their terrific volts. They simply tapped the high-tension systems and accumulated the electricity that they needed. This necessarily limited the scope of their activities; but, so far, it had not hampered them.

Last night, they had picked a suitable spot: somewhere along the route to Bayruth's headquarters, which must be in New Jersey. Tonight, they had experienced no difficulty, because they had probably scouted the Asbestile plant in advance. If the high-tension line had not been close enough, they could have planted longer extensions beforehand.

THE THUNDER KING

From Harry's glance toward the high-tension poles, and the silence which followed that observation, The Shadow divined that his agent had fathomed one part of the game. In a steady tone, The Shadow supplied further details regarding the production of artificial lightning, first mentioning facts with which Harry was familiar.

"Margo spoke of towers above the superhighway bridge," stated The Shadow. "What she saw were metal columns extending up from the truck. Those columns were used again to night. They are made in sections, so they can be telescoped. They are called 'capacitors,' and they store up electrons through transformers.

"When fully charged, the capacitors spill lightning, which can be directed to its mark. In laboratory demonstrations, ten million volts have been employed, with an energy equal to the muzzle of a sixteen-inch gun. Such voltage is about one tenth of a natural lightning bolt."

There was a pause, while The Shadow followed the truck across another highroad, carefully slowing pace to keep an even distance behind it.

"Original tests with artificial lightning," continued The Shadow, "produced only a few hundred thousand volts. Its power was increased to two million volts, covering a distance of about five feet. Voltages of ten million represent a greatly increased range; still, they could hardly account for the destruction that we witnessed tonight.

"Therefore, we may assume that Bayruth has devoted his scientific abilities to the further development of artificial lightning. Statistics, themselves, prove that its limit has not been reached. Those bolts of his were higher-powered than any ever displayed to the public."

THE final statement was emphatic. It made Harry wish that he could see the inside of the huge mystery truck. In fact, he might within the course of the next few hours, considering how capably The Shadow was keeping to the trail.

Rather than start battle on the road, The Shadow was endeavoring to reach the base where Bayruth housed the big truck, and thus clean up the entire case.

Evidence was needed that would go beyond Bayruth, the misguided scientist, and reach the real brain of destruction. For Bayruth, despite the power that he exerted, was a mere tool in the game. His experiments in doom would be impossible without the necessary capital to build bigger and more formidable lightning machines.

Harry recalled facts that The Shadow had mentioned: how Jerome Thorden denied all knowledge of Bayruth's whereabouts, and belittled the scientist's efforts. Disclaiming all connection with Bayruth would be good policy on Thorden's part while Bayruth was knocking down plants that were important to Universal Industries, the chain controlled by Thorden's financial rival, Oswald Kelber.

As for Thorden's claim – to Cranston – that Bayruth specialized in impractical ideas, it was completely belied by this evening's demonstration.

Harry couldn't doubt that Thorden was behind Bayruth's work, but he knew that tangible evidence would be needed to clinch the fact. Evidence such as the letters that Wilbert and Quade had gone after when they started their ill-fated journey, only to find doom awaiting them from Bayruth's well-timed shafts.

Red lights, blinking ahead, brought Harry from his reverie. The truck was signaling to the car that followed it, and The Shadow was trying to interpret the blinks. He moved up closer, but the flashes continued, so he

THE THUNDER KING

dropped to the rear. The red lights steadied, then blinked again, calling for even more distance.

It was about time for the truck to head for New Jersey. Perhaps it didn't want the cover-up crew to be too close; indeed; Bayruth might be signaling for thugs to drop off altogether. Getting a good look at the road, The Shadow decided to drive blind and come up behind the truck.

There was a bend just ahead, and the truck was beyond it. Lights off, The Shadow picked his way uncannily through the darkness. He spotted red lights at a crossing ahead; they veered to the right, and The Shadow neatly trailed them. He was right under the rear of the truck for the next few miles, until it crossed a narrow bridge.

By the truck's lights, Harry saw a bridge sign that stated: "Limit, Six Tons," but didn't appreciate its full significance until The Shadow sputtered forward. As the road widened, the roadster's lights came on, and The Shadow whipped past the truck, cutting in front of it to halt the big vehicle, or drive it off the road.

The truck jerked to a stop. Men sprang from it, with revolvers, and began a wild fire in the roadster's direction. They would probably have employed accuracy instead of haste, had they known who was in the roadster. The Shadow's laugh challenged their fire, and the staccato barks of his automatic backed up his mirth.

His shots were to the mark. Three men had leaped from the truck; all fled as they heard the Shadow's taunt. His bullets sprawled two, the third man escaped only because he managed to dive from the road, into bushes that hid him, while The Shadow was clipping the other two.

Harry was shooting with The Shadow's third shot, but by then, further fire was useless. Together, The Shadow and his agent reached the wounded men, who were lying in the glow of their own headlights. The Shadow sprang into the truck, while Harry was stopping by the two thugs who had sagged in the road. Promptly, The Shadow returned.

"A substitute truck," he told Harry. "Waiting at the crossroad until Bayruth's truck passed. Bayruth must have suspected us, so he gave those signals to urge us farther back. It's too late, now, to regain his trail."

The bridge sign had been The Shadow's clue. Bayruth's truck, with its tons of lightning machinery, could not have crossed a bridge that would take only a six-ton load. Questioning the wounded thugs, The Shadow found that they knew nothing of value.

They were small fry, who had been told to bring this truck, a big but very light vehicle, to the crossroad and wait there until its twin went past; then lead followers on a false trail. The thugs weren't badly wounded, for The Shadow's shots had neatly skimmed them.

After giving them first aid, The Shadow packed them into the dummy truck and told Harry to take it back to town. Harry would have no trouble with the prisoners. The Shadow had bound them.

THE truck pulled away. The Shadow gave a low, grim laugh. It didn't concern the losing of Bayruth's trail; he was thinking of an earlier clue that had slipped.

Stepping into the glow of the roadster's headlights, The Shadow consulted the newspaper that had belonged to Matt Mardan. This time, he ignored the item concerning activities at the Asbestile plant. It was the thing that had misled him.

THE THUNDER KING

The Shadow found another item, so obvious, that he had previously overlooked it. It was the weather report for Kronskill and vicinity. It predicted heavy thunder showers early in the evening. That was why Matt had been so anxious to sign up new recruits. He had known that Bayruth would strike, and therefore it would be his opportunity to bring the new men and join up with the regular crew.

Though The Shadow had practically wiped out all mobsmen who covered Bayruth, he wasn't satisfied. Disaster had struck despite The Shadow. One course alone, remained: to wait. Only by such policy could The Shadow trap Bayruth in new crime.

The Shadow hoped to accomplish more. Next time, if possible, he would avert disaster and carry the trail through Bayruth, to the real head of the game!

CHAPTER X. CRIME'S RESULTS

NEW YORK newspapers were filled with graphic accounts of havoc wrought by lightning at the Asbestile factory. The descriptions were wrong in certain essential details. The heavens hadn't hurled down horror, as one journal put it. Destruction had come from the hill, not from the sky.

Nor had the wrecked car, toppled from the road, its occupants dead, been demolished by another lightning shaft. That car happened to be the crook-manned sedan which had crossed The Shadow's path and kept on to its own destruction.

In his sanctum – a hidden, black-walled room somewhere in the heart of New York City, wherein he planned moves against men of crime – The Shadow studied newspaper clippings and referred to reports from agents. Harry and others were over in New Jersey trying to trace Bayruth's headquarters; so far, without result.

Unfortunately, The Shadow could only direct that quest by blocking off sections of a large-scale map, and phoning new instructions to Burbank.

The Shadow had appointments in Manhattan which he had to keep as Cranston. Leaving the sanctum, he stepped into the daylight of afternoon and started on his rounds.

His first stop was at Kelber's. Things looked very gloomy in the fortieth-floor offices of Universal Industries. A secretary even hesitated at calling Kelber to tell him that Mr. Cranston had arrived, but finally did so.

Entering Kelber's private office, The Shadow could hear the magnate's booming tones. He found the bulky man loosing a tirade upon another visitor, a wizened man who was gasping as Kelber stormed.

Pausing, Kelber changed his scowl to a very poor smile, meant as a welcome to Cranston. He gestured toward the wizened man, who was taking time out to get a pair of glasses back on his nose, from the ribbon on which they dangled. Bluntly, Kelber introduced the earlier visitor:

"This is Jarvis Fralingham."

The Shadow shook hands with the owner of the Asbestile Co. By then, Kelber had broken loose again.

"I warned you, Fralingham!" he argued. "I showed you Wilbert's report. It said that your factory was an old one, that needed further reconstruction. You should have had such work done immediately."

"But... but" – Fralingham was stuttering – "I couldn't believe that lightning –"

THE THUNDER KING

"Your plant was insured, wasn't it?" demanded Kelber. "That proves the danger existed."

"Danger always exists," returned Fralingham. "You see, it was imperative to turn out Asbestile in a hurry. We were just on the point of proper production. Other matters had to wait."

Kelber paced the floor in his caged-lion manner.

"Other things could wait," he growled. "Now, we'll get no Asbestile. I can't do without it!"

Fralingham spread his hands, pathetically.

"I've offered you my formulas," he insisted. "The contracts that I had are now yours, Kelber. The insurance has covered my losses. You can turn out Asbestile."

"How?" queried Kelber. "It requires a plant equipped to apply your chemical process and render building materials, from wallpaper to partitions, entirely fireproof. We've salvaged enough of your materials, Fralingham, to last a week. After then, where do I stand? I'll tell you!" He gestured from the window to the street, far below. "Down there – in a bread line!"

FRALINGHAM went to a chair picked up a brief case and opened it on Kelber's desk.

"Here are the formulas," he said, "and the contracts. You're a man of genius, Kelber. Surely, you can do something with them, now that they are yours. I equipped the old factory in a month."

"In a month! I have only a week!"

"But we had nothing to start with," Fralingham insisted. "I had to buy rollers and compressors. I had to install vats. If only –"

Kelber interrupted with a snap of his fingers.

"Rollers!" he exclaimed. "Compressors! I have them! Ones that I don't need, at my Pennsylvania wall-board factory. Vats! Let's see the specifications, Fralingham. Hurry!"

Digging through the brief case, Fralingham found the specifications. Kelber gave a triumphant whoop

"The dye works down in Delaware!" he shouted. "Working on part time, with only half its vats in use. I can move the machines from the wall-board plant and install them in the dye works! Give me those formulas, quick!"

Kelber pounced for the telephone and began bombarding it with long-distance calls. He talked with chemists, superintendents, shippers, and finally lawyers. When he finished, he sank behind his desk, so heavily that the chair creaked.

"My attorneys are coming over," he told Fralingham. "You can sign a release on the Asbestile process to cover my contracts. I'll be able to deliver, Fralingham!"

Fralingham was hugely relieved. He knew that the fortunes of others hinged upon the situation. Fralingham's interests were but a portion of the Universal Industries chain, and he was glad that he was no longer the weak link.

THE THUNDER KING

Kelber turned to The Shadow.

"This will stop Thorden from taking over my contracts," asserted Kelber, triumphantly. "Do you know, Cranston" – Kelber was pursing his bushy brows in reflective style – "if anything but lightning had struck the Asbestile plant, I'd have believed that Thorden was in back of it! By the way, how did you fare when you called on Thorden?"

"Quite well, while I was there," replied The Shadow, calmly. "But I was followed after I left his house."

"Because Thorden suspected that you came from me!" exclaimed Kelber. "Tell me, Cranston, what did you do?"

"I went hack to the club," said The Shadow, idly. "It is always a good place to spend a quiet evening."

Kelber nodded, then stroked his heavy chin. He studied Cranston from under his large brows.

"You wouldn't care to call on Thorden again?" queried Kelber. "To find out his present reactions? I would deem it a favor, Cranston."

An interested spectator, Jarvis Fralingham was pleased when he saw Lamont Cranston nod his willingness. But it was after The Shadow had gone that Fralingham, about to make his own departure, remembered a point that Oswald Kelber had failed to mention.

"Cranston said that he was followed from Thorden's," reminded Fralingham. "Shouldn't you have advised him to note if the same thing happens again?"

"I should have," agreed Kelber. Glum for a moment, he brightened. "I think we can depend upon Cranston to observe that for himself, since he did before. Somehow, Fralingham" – Kelber smacked a fist into the palm of his other hand – "Thorden seems to be conniving something. Yet it can't be. No man on earth could have arranged the destruction of your plant at Kronskill, in the manner that it happened."

UNNATURAL dusk was again clouding Thorden's mansion when The Shadow arrived there, as Cranston, an hour later. The dusk, of course, was due to higher buildings west of the house, so it was therefore man-made. The Shadow noticed the analogy. Last night's lightning had been man-made, too.

Perhaps Jerome Thorden had often observed the early gloom that came to the windows of his residence. But it was scarcely likely that such had given him the idea that nature could be improved upon by other man-made devices: specifically, artificial lightning, capable of terrific destruction.

The power of artificial thunderbolts had probably impressed many persons who viewed public demonstrations in which they were used. Almost any person, bent upon creating disaster, could picture himself a human Jupiter, hurling lightning shafts at will, provided he could find a Vulcan to forge such bolts.

Oliver Bayruth, the electrical wizard, was just such a Vulcan, but he was being allowed to play at Jupiter, as well, to satisfy his crazed vanity.

It would take more than haphazard investigation to link Bayruth with the brain that controlled him. The Shadow had that thought quite in mind when he entered Thorden's house, on this second occasion, and was conducted to the financier's upstairs office.

THE THUNDER KING

From the rather cryptic smile on Thorden's face, The Shadow recognized that certain news had reached him – which was proof, in itself, that Thorden had ways of getting information. Though only an hour had passed since Kelber found out how to offset the loss of the Asbestile plant, Thorden knew all about it.

"I thought that Universal Industries would be through," said Thorden, smoothly. "But I was wrong. It may interest you, Cranston, to know that Kelber pulled a rabbit out of his hat. He is going to manufacture Asbestile himself."

The Shadow showed traces of surprise. Thorden let out a slight chuckle.

"It should please you, Cranston," Thorden added. "Since Kelber is still in business, and even stronger than before, he should be in a position to buy some of your imports. I would advise you to call on him."

"But how –"

"How did Kelber counteract misfortune?" queried Thorden. "Very simply. He is combining a pressed-wood factory with a dye works, to produce an Asbestile plant. Something he could have done originally, if he had controlled Fralingham's fireproofing formulas.

"Frankly, I am sorry that Kelber saw such opportunity. I still feel that Thorden Enterprises should have the contracts which went to Universal Industries. Kelber's total bid was too low for proper profit.

"Ah, well" – Thorden gave a shrug – "he may still realize that he has undertaken too great a problem. When he does, he will be glad to turn his white elephant over to me."

Since Thorden wasn't interested in the purchase of imported goods, there was no occasion for The Shadow to prolong his visit. He chatted casually, in Cranston's style, for a short while; then took his leave. As soon as the visitor was gone, Bandle came from behind the paneled wall, to join Thorden by the window. Through the webby curtains, the two watched Cranston stroll down the front walk to his limousine.

"No need for you to follow him, Bandle," said Thorden. "I can keep check on Cranston, through others. You might get into further difficulties, considering that the curious masquerader who calls himself The Shadow is interested in Cranston's affairs, and those of people who trail him.

"You are too valuable to take the risks, Bandle. I want you to contact Bayruth, instead. Not from here, of course, because the telephone wires may be tapped. Make all your calls from outside.

"When you talk to Bayruth, assure him that I am giving new consideration to his plans for perpetual motion. I am quite sure that such a message will have a marked bearing on the future."

By then, The Shadow had reached his car. Seeing Cranston's tall form enter the big limousine, Thorden turned from the window. Even the deepening dusk could not hide his satisfied smile.

Something else would have.

Thorden's plans for the future might have undergone a rapid change, had he and Bandle kept closer watch on Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow!

CHAPTER XI. MARGO TAKES A TRIP

WHEN Lamont Cranston entered his limousine, he underwent a rapid change. The drawer beneath the sliding seat was already slightly open, and the tall passenger, snapping from his leisurely manner, flipped a cloak from it in a swoop that carried the garment over his shoulders.

The twist took him toward the speaking-tube, where, in Cranston's tone, he ordered Stanley to start for the Cobalt Club. While giving that order, The Shadow was clamping his slouch hat on his head and kneeling the drawer shut. Still on the spin, he went out through the far door, slapping it shut as he struck the street.

The Shadow was beyond the mansion gate, where Thorden could hardly have seen him, even if still on watch. But that drop to the street, the fading glide that followed it, were meant to deceive observers closer by – and did. The Shadow had timed his drop to the moment when the limousine veered out from the curb; hence, men in another car did not notice the flips of the far door. That action, alone, could have told them that the passenger was gone. For The Shadow, thanks to the gloom that came so early to the street, was no more than a flitting creature that vanished into the hovering bulk of an old building across the way.

The limousine rounded the corner, with another car trailing it. The Shadow glimpsed faces that looked thuggish, though he couldn't view them closely. Two men were taking up the duty that had previously been Matt Mardan's – that of following Cranston's big car to the Cobalt Club

From another car, a watcher saw the double departure. The watcher was Margo Lane, and she was quite perturbed. Not long ago, Cranston had phoned her, asking her to wait for him outside of Thorden's in her coupe.

Hence Margo, seeing Cranston come from Thorden's gate, had expected him to join her. She would have been irked at his neglect, had not the sight of the trailing car worried her.

Margo didn't know whether to follow, or wait. She took the latter choice, purely because she couldn't make up her mind. By the time she changed it and decided to get started, she found a new reason to wait. The door opened on the curb side of her car and Lamont Cranston entered and calmly sat down beside her!

"Sorry, Margo," he said, affably. "I forgot our appointment until I was around the corner. I had Stanley drop me, so that I could come back."

Margo did not doubt the statement. She had been debating with herself long enough for Cranston to return in the style that he claimed. Nor did she see the cloak and hat that he carried on his arm. The Shadow was keeping those garments to the door side.

In addition, Margo was inspired by something more important. She gripped Cranston's arm, the one that wasn't draped with cloak and hat.

"You were followed, Lamont!" she exclaimed. "Didn't you see the other car? It went right after the limousine!"

The Shadow gave a casual laugh.

"Funny, now that you mention it," he remarked. "I must have dropped off without those fellows noticing it. I did see a car, with two men in it. It came around the corner just after Stanley had dropped me."

"But what are you going to do about it?"

THE THUNDER KING

"Do about it?" The question seemed to puzzle Cranston. "Well, I suppose I shall have to go to the club, since those chaps will probably report that I checked in there. Too bad, Margo. It will spoil our evening."

For the moment, Margo was angrily inclined; but she cooled quickly. This was the way Lamont often acted when something more important was involved. It made her think that The Shadow would soon appear upon the scene, and she wanted to see Cranston vanish first.

BUT Cranston didn't vanish.

He offered Margo a cigarette, and took one for himself. Snapping his cigarette case shut, he proffered a flame from the lighter that topped the case. Margo noted Cranston's face as he obtained his own light. His impassive features revealed nothing, yet Margo was convinced that he had more in mind than a mere trip to the Cobalt Club.

Suddenly, Cranston extinguished the lighter. His eyes gazed sharply through the windshield. For a passing moment, Margo thought that she could see those eyes glint, as though retaining the reflection of the dead flame.

"That chap who just came from Thorden's gate," remarked Cranston. "Does he remind you of Wilbert?"

The question made Margo shudder. The man was reminiscent of Wilbert. He happened to be Bandle, but Margo could not see his face. His build was rangy, and his shoulders had a stoop as he sidled to a car across the way. Those characteristics were too similar to Wilbert's to suit Margo. Then, tensely, Margo said:

"He couldn't be Wilbert, Lamont. Wilbert is dead –"

"Of course," interposed Cranston, "You misunderstood me, Margo. I meant: would you class him as a man of Wilbert's type?"

"Why, yes –"

"Wilbert was working for Kelber, as a private investigator. Perhaps this fellow, whoever he is, may be serving Thorden in the same capacity."

Bandle's car was starting. Instinctively, Margo put her coupe in motion. She heard Cranston's mild, but approving laugh.

"Adventurous as ever, Margo," he chuckled. "I suppose you will insist upon following the chap and finding out who he really is. Drop me off somewhere, so that I can get to the club. If you learn anything interesting, call me there. But stay away from places like Highway 95."

"Don't worry," returned Margo. "Maybe you've forgotten that I'm leaving at midnight on my vacation. I have the Pullman ticket right here in my purse, and tomorrow, I'll be with a hiking party somewhere in the White Mountains."

"Still a girl scout at heart," approved Cranston, in a bantering tone. "Ah, here's a red light, and I see a taxicab around the corner. So I'll drop off. Send me some picture post cards of rugged mountain scenery, so I can appreciate how nice it is to stay in New York."

MARGO did not notice the cloak and hat that Cranston carried, bundled, as he stepped from the coupe. She was too interested in following Bandle's car.

THE THUNDER KING

As the trail continued, Margo did look into the mirror, on the chance that Cranston might have decided to follow her in the cab that he had taken. But the cab had gone in another direction. Cranston was actually going to the Cobalt Club, as he had stated.

Keeping well behind Bandle's car, Margo managed to hold sight of it. When it parked near a side-street restaurant called the Platinum Grill, Margo was lucky enough to find another space for her coupe. She also caught a glimpse of Bandle's face as he entered the lighted restaurant. He didn't even glance back in Margo's direction.

Entering the restaurant herself, Margo felt quite free of any danger, provided that she used good sense. She was quite sure that Cranston's departure to the Cobalt Club was tacit agreement on that point.

Tonight's events could not, in Margo's opinion, lead to any scene of disaster as had her trip to Highway 95, a few nights ago. She'd simply find out what she could about the rangy man who had come from Thorden's, call it an evening, and take the midnight train.

Margo only hoped that she would learn something important enough to telephone Lamont and stir him out of his indifference.

Inside the Platinum Grill, Margo saw Bandle at a table, talking to a waiter who was shaking his head. Taking a nearby table, she overheard their undertoned conversation.

"I haven't seen him, Mr. Bandle," the waiter was saying. "If he's back in town, he hasn't stopped in here. He was always irregular, anyway. Maybe he's using one of the other eating places, like down in Greenwich Village. He went there a lot."

Bandle nodded, with no change of his poker-faced expression. Margo, meanwhile, was congratulating herself. She had learned Bandle's name. The next point was to learn the name of the person who was the subject of Bandle's conversation with the waiter.

When the waiter turned to Margo's table, she ordered a sandwich and some coffee. Meanwhile, Bandle went to the cigar counter, changed a quarter into nickels, and entered a telephone booth. He evidently intended to put in calls to several places.

Margo waited until her order arrived, then called after the waiter, asking him to get her some cigarettes. But she didn't call loud enough for him to hear, and since his back was turned, he couldn't see Margo beckon.

All that was for Bandle's benefit, if he happened to be glancing from the phone booth. Deserting her table, Margo went to the cigar counter and bought the cigarettes. She asked for an obscure brand, and while the clerk was hunting for it, Margo inclined toward the phone booth.

Bandle was making his fourth call, and, having a poor connection, he raised his voice.

"You say Bayruth will be back?" Margo heard him query. "Maybe in an hour? Good! Have him call the Platinum Grill... Yes. He is to ask for Bandle —"

Margo was back at her table, when Bandle arrived at his. Instead of giving an order, Bandle confided in the waiter.

"I've found out where his nibs was," said Bandle. "They say he's due back in an hour. But you know how the old guy changes his mind. I'm going to make the rounds and see if I can find him. I'll be back in an hour, but

THE THUNDER KING

if he calls up in the meantime, find out where he is and tell him to wait there."

The waiter nodded. Rising from his table, Blandle took a long look at Margo. There wasn't a touch of suspicion in his gaze; instead, his eye showed a glimmer of approval. He gave a glance at the waiter, who shrugged.

Quite obviously, Blandle was questioning if Margo was a regular customer at the Platinum Grill, in hope of a future introduction. The waiter's shrug meant that he had never seen the girl before.

MARGO fumed inwardly as Blandle left. Not because Blandle had deliberately eyed her, for she had already typed him as a man who would seek that mode of acquaintance. The trouble was that Blandle would remember her, which made it impossible to follow him when he "made the rounds" in search of Bayruth.

Even worse, Margo couldn't stall around the restaurant until Blandle returned, because he would recognize her.

Finishing sandwich and coffee, Margo paid her check and stopped at the telephone booth, to call the Cobalt Club. She learned, worse luck, that Cranston had been there, but had left a few minutes before.

He had left word that Margo could reach him at the office of the Orvis Engineering Corp., in the Mohawk Building. In her turn, Margo left a message for Cranston

"If he calls back," she said, "tell him that Mr. Blandle expects to meet Mr. Bayruth this evening."

Hanging up, Margo wondered if she should call the Orvis Corp. She was looking up the number in the phone book, when the bell in the booth began to ring. Margo took a quick look, saw that Blandle's waiter friend had gone to the kitchen. The man at the cigar counter glanced at Margo as though he thought the return call was for her. So she took the receiver off the hook and gave a cool: "Hello!"

"Hello." The voice was sharp and crackly. "I want to talk to Mr. Blandle."

"He just left," returned Margo. "He told me to take any message that came."

There was a pause; then the voice quizzed:

"Who are you? Blandle's secretary?"

On the point of saying "yes," Margo paused. It might be a catch question. Very probably Blandle didn't have a secretary. Margo was sure that Bayruth was the speaker at the other end, and he probably knew a great deal about Blandle. That probability, in itself, gave Margo an excellent inspiration.

"No," returned Margo. "I work for Mr. Thorden. He told Mr. Blandle that I had better come along" – Margo's tone was becoming strictly confidential – "just in case we had difficulty in finding you."

She was practically telling Bayruth that she recognized his voice, and she heard a pleased chuckle in return. Margo had scored another point. Anyone in Thorden's employ might logically recognize Bayruth's voice, since the electrical wizard, himself, had previously worked openly for Thorden.

"Very well," crackled Bayruth. "Tell Mr. Blandle to meet me at the side entrance of the Cartwyn Building. I shall be there within twenty minutes. I shall wait until he arrives."

THE THUNDER KING

As she hung up, Margo shuddered. Bayruth's verbal crackles had reminded her of something; she now remembered what it was. His voice was like the sharpness of the lightning that had ripped down from a starry sky to overwhelm Wilbert and Quade in their doomed car. Even as an echo, it wasn't a pleasant recollection.

Leaving the grill, Margo stepped into her car and decided to drive to the vicinity of the Cartwyn Building. She could look the place over before Bayruth arrived, and give Cranston a call at the Orvis office. It would only be a short trip and a safe one; a good way of killing time until Lamont reached his own destination.

Margo was doubly wrong. She wasn't beginning a short trip; she was starting on a long one. A trip that would be fraught with menace, even after she completed it. As for killing time, something far more important was at stake, to which the term "kill" aptly applied.

The lives of men were on the verge of sacrifice, and among those slated for sudden doom was Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow!

CHAPTER XII. THUNDER OVER MANHATTAN

THE Mohawk Building was an old one, a five-story relic, in one of those halfway areas where old Manhattan blended with the new. The boom days of the '20s had raised much taller structures in the neighborhood; then the building wave had stopped, leaving an unsightly architectural medley that people had begun to regard as permanent.

Rent was cheap in the Mohawk Building, and the top-floor had skylights, as well as windows, which was why Martin Orvis had located his offices there. The Orvis Engineering Corp. employed a corps of draftsmen, and they found the skylights helpful to their work.

The drafting rooms were located on the side away from higher buildings. Orvis' own private office was in another corner, and from its window he could look across the street to the blank wall of a thirty-story building, which made the Mohawk Building look like a pygmy beside a giant.

An elderly man, with a tired expression, Orvis often commented on the blank view from his window.

At present, Orvis had a visitor named Cranston, who had never been in the Mohawk Building before. Quite naturally, Orvis was pointing out the view across the way.

"I like it," said Orvis, "because it cuts off my view of everything else. If it didn't, I would have to look at the architectural monstrosities in this neighborhood. How I hate them!" He shuddered, as if the mere thought grated his nerves. "I have to walk with my eyes set straight ahead, every time I enter this building or leave it."

Cranston gave a sympathetic nod. He glanced at two other men in the office. One was Orvis' nephew, Claude Orvis, a junior partner in the business; the other, the head draftsman, Tilton. In Cranston's tone, The Shadow inquired:

"How soon do you expect Mr. Kelber?"

"Almost any time," returned Martin Orvis. "He is stopping off to get Fralingham and Darrison. Do you know" – Orvis wagged his head seriously – "I think that Kelber is bringing Fralingham here to impress both myself and Darrison."

Cranston's eyes went quizzical. Orvis explained.

THE THUNDER KING

"Kelber warned Fralingham to protect the Asbestile plant," stated Orvis. "Nevertheless, disaster struck it. Universal Industries lost a most important adjunct as a result, but Kelber managed to find a way out. He has taken over the Asbestile formula, and will be able to manufacture the product himself.

"But he is worried about these plans." Orvis spread large sheets of drawings that were on his desk. "They cover the cantilever construction for the bombproof manufacturing units that Kelber has to build. They are practically complete, and though Kelber does not need them until the end of the month, he is afraid that something may happen to them.

"How could anything happen? I know every detail of these plans. So do Claude and Tilton. I told Kelber that there is no need for worry. He has approved the rough plans in duplicate, and knows that we can deliver everything they call for. It is the most profitable job that we have undertaken; so naturally, we are anxious to complete it."

The Shadow's thoughts retained one phrase: "until the end of the month." He agreed with Kelber's opinion that something might happen. One link in the Universal Industries chain was gone: the Asbestile Co. Kelber had managed to replace it; could he do the same again, if anything ruined the Orvis Engineering Corp.?

While waiting for Kelber to arrive with Fralingham and Darrison, The Shadow decided to call the Cobalt Club. He used Orvis' telephone, and received the brief message that Margo had left for Cranston.

The simple statement that Bandle intended to meet Bayruth, could only mean that Bandle was the name of the rangy man whose trail Margo had taken. It seemed a conclusive link between Thorden and Bayruth.

Unfortunately, Margo hadn't added that she had completed that link, and was taking on a self-appointed assignment. The Shadow was confident that Margo, having been told where Cranston could be reached, would send word of any new developments.

Not only did Margo intend to do so; she was much closer at hand than either she or The Shadow supposed.

IN fact, Margo was right outside the Mohawk Building, within hail of the office windows of the Orvis Engineering Corp., but she didn't know it.

Margo was more interested in the thirty-story building across the street. It happened to be the Cartwyn Building, where Bayruth was to wait for Bandle. Margo had parked her coupe at a rear corner, from which she could watch the side entrance of the Cartwyn Building, as well as the street in back.

From the back street, Margo heard a rumble which gave her a chilling reminder, because it was vaguely like thunder. She stared, saw a truck roll away, a great truck built in two sections, with a blaze of red taillights. The truck looked empty, from the way the trailer section swayed. It had evidently been unloading in back of the Cartwyn Building

Again, the rumble, very faint and from another direction. This time, it was thunder, and immediately afterward, through a space between two buildings, Margo caught a blink of lightning. It was one of those sudden storms that often arrive unnoticed, over Manhattan.

It was approaching, for Margo heard the thunder again, low and sullen, soon after the lightning flash. She would neither have seen the lightning nor heard the thunder had she been indoors, for the storm was low over the river, off beyond massed buildings. But Margo, since her New Jersey adventure, had become quite allergic to thunderstorms.

THE THUNDER KING

She decided not to wait and watch for Bayruth. She started the motor hastily, intending to drive from this neighborhood and reach a telephone, from which she could call Lamont. At that moment her eyes, roving the street, saw a startling surprise.

Across the street was an old five-story building which had lights on the top floor. Its front door was also lighted, and it bore the name:

MOHAWK BUILDING

This was luck, indeed! To find the building where Cranston had gone almost directly opposite the side entrance of the Cartwyn Building, where Oliver Bayruth was to appear.

Thinking that she could get quicker results without telephoning, Margo sprang from her coupe and hurried toward the entrance of the Mohawk Building. Dribbles of rain flicked her face as she dashed. The sudden storm had arrived from the river.

Margo was halfway across the street when a closer flash of lightning rendered the scene brilliant. Margo thought she heard two hoarse voices; they were drowned out by a roll of thunder that seemed to follow in along the street. But the voices were real, as Margo promptly learned.

Amid the return of darkness, two men sprang out from the shelter of the Cartwyn Building and cut across Margo's path.

They nabbed the brunette without a struggle. Wrenching from one pair of hands, Margo was tripped by the other. She threw her arm forward to shield herself from the curb, and only partly succeeded. Her head took a thump that half wilted her. As captors lifted her limp figure, she was vaguely conscious of their voices:

"Maybe this is the dame that talked to Bayruth –"

"Even if she ain't, we'd better grab her!"

"Yeah! She was headed for the wrong place!"

"Maybe she's wise that something is due to hit –"

All during that talk, Margo was being carried to the back of the huge Cartwyn Building, to the very loading entrance that the truck had used. Her head was swimming; she seemed to be sinking, until something jarred her upward.

Then, from a gradual floating impression, Margo realized that she was in a darkened elevator, being carried to the top floor of the tall Cartwyn Building!

THE same lightning flash that betrayed Margo, was observed by The Shadow up in the Orvis office. To his view, it was a glare that filled the street, whitening the blank wall of the building across the way. The earlier flashes had not been visible to The Shadow. That this one was quite close, was evident from the immediate arrival of the thunder, which was the first rumble that he had heard.

Immediately, The Shadow galvanized to action. No longer the lackadaisical Mr. Cranston, he showed a speed that startled Martin Orvis right out of his chair; which helped. For The Shadow was grabbing at Orvis' shoulder, to yank him toward the door.

THE THUNDER KING

"Out of here! Quickly!" ordered The Shadow. His tone, still Cranston's, had a commanding snap. "Don't stop to ask questions. Get clear of this building, if you want to live!"

Propelling Orvis to the door, The Shadow was beckoning for Claude Orvis and Tilton to come along, confident that they would follow when they saw Orvis go. Claude was present, but Tilton was gone. He had left the office during The Shadow's call to the Cobalt Club.

The Shadow's words were grim, in Cranston's tone.

"Where is Tilton?"

"In the drafting room!" exclaimed Claude. "I'll get him in a hurry!"

There was a vivid flash of lightning, followed by heavy thunder, as The Shadow reached the head of the stairway and pointed the elder Orvis down. In another minute, the storm would be directly overhead.

The Shadow heard Claude's shouts to Tilton; then came thumps against a door near the stairs, a short route out of the drafting room. They couldn't get it open.

Springing for the door, The Shadow grabbed the knob and gave a titanic wrench that ripped the door wide. Both men were gone, the pound of their footsteps telling that they were taking the longer way, around through the private office. Hoping that they wouldn't be too long delayed, The Shadow turned to the stairs to follow Martin Orvis.

But Orvis wasn't going down.

He was on his way back to his office, shouting that he had forgotten the precious plans. On the stairs, The Shadow called for Claude and Tilton not to worry about the plans. They were coming out of the office, and, by all rights, they should have swept Orvis right along with them in response to Cranston's ardent beckon.

In fact, Claude did try. It was Tilton who wavered, as he heard Orvis screech frantically that he must save the plans. Tilton's hesitation produced a clutter in the doorway, and before The Shadow could spring to untangle them, it was too late.

The great clap came.

A smash from the sky above. Vivid lightning, and an instantaneous crash of thunder. But that stroke of nature was only the harbinger of destruction. It announced the real devastation, which was produced by man.

Except for The Shadow, those in the building thought that the sky lightning did the work. So did witnesses along the street, persons who had taken shelter in doorways to avoid the storm.

Only Bayruth and his fellow tools of disaster were in a place where they could really see their deadly work. They were atop the Cartwyn Building, among a cluster of squatly skeleton towers that they had set up.

Those towers were flanked with rows of great metal spheres, the capacitors that were loaded with electricity. Timed to the great flash from the sky, Bayruth, a sharp-featured man with apish crouch, released the load.

Arrows of lightning streaked downward with an accuracy unmatched by nature. The crackles those bolts produced drowned Bayruth's laugh, for they were a thousand-fold greater, though in the same key.

THE THUNDER KING

Shafts ripped the skylights from the top floor of the puny Mohawk Building, tearing segments of the roof. The offices of the Orvis Corp. were bared to a bird's-eye view, showing tiny human figures fleeing for the stairs.

Another bolt cleaved the walls; the roof broke apart, and the great rift revealed the stairway. The top offices were withered under the electrical barrage; the furniture vanished into splinters, and with it, the precious plans were consumed upon the desk where Orvis had left them.

Another streak of devastating voltage knifed down into the split building, chopping through wooden floors as though they were cardboard. That crash sprawled human figures, as it took the stairs from under them.

Dollish forms, representing Orvis, his nephew, and Tilton, went tumbling headlong into the debris below. One tiny fugitive, alone, had outraced that electrical volley. He was Lamont Cranston, The Shadow. Still on his feet, The Shadow was near the ground floor, ahead of the crashing wreckage that carried human shrieks, when the last jab of lightning came. It found a weak spot in the building wall, and the whole front of the structure gave. A great curtain of masonry shivered, then toppled inward, engulfing helpless victims beneath its collapsing tonnage.

A great sheet of lightning flickered from the heavens, as though some thunder god had winked an eye. That flash, and the roaring peals that followed, marked the passing of the storm. They were the final cover-up that nature supplied upon this scene where man's evil had triumphed.

A cackle from a thirtieth-floor roof, lost in the wail of wind and splash of rain – such was Bayruth's gloat over the destruction that he had wrought in the service of a hidden, ruthless master, who had ordered this disaster.

Well might men of evil gloat. This deed had succeeded to the fullest measure. Orvis, his associates, and their plans were gone forever, and within the ruin that human thunderbolts had caused, crime's archfoe, The Shadow lay entombed!

CHAPTER XIII. MARGO'S MESSAGE

SEVERAL blocks from the ruined Mohawk Building, a limousine had paused beside the curb to await the passing of the torrential rain. One of its three passengers was Oswald Kelber. He addressed his companions impatiently.

"First you delayed us, Darrison," he told a heavy-set man at his right. "We should have left your apartment earlier."

"But you were in no hurry, then, Kelber –"

"Perhaps not," interposed Kelber. "We still had time to keep our appointment. I suppose we can blame Fralingham" – he glanced to his left – "for becoming skittish in this storm."

"I merely asked that we drive cautiously," put in Fralingham, adjusting his ribboned glasses on his wizened nose. "I thought it would be better to arrive late, than not at all."

"Very well," grumbled Kelber. "The rain is letting up. We can proceed."

They proceeded, but not to the Mohawk Building. Police cars blocked them off before they reached it. The clang of fire trucks came from another street, heading in the direction that Kelber had expected to go.

THE THUNDER KING

Showing alarm, Kelber inquired where the fire was, and was told of the destruction that lightning had produced. Immediately, Kelber furnished facts to the law.

"The Mohawk Building!" he exclaimed. "Why, there must be three men trapped there! Orvis, his nephew, and their head draftsman, Tilton. No, four – if Cranston happened to arrive ahead of us!"

Out of their limousine, Kelber and his companions were allowed through the fire lines. They found firemen digging into the massed debris that had been the Mohawk Building. One look convinced the arrivals that no one could have survived the crash, but the firemen speeded their efforts, upon learning that there were victims in the building.

"They'll never even find the bodies!" wheezed Fralingham. "This is worse than the tragedy at my plant. There, at least, most of the workers had a chance to escape."

Kelber was watching the proceedings, his bushy eyebrows furrowed in gloom. He turned to Darrison, beside him.

"First Fralingham's plant," said Kelber "Now, this! Orvis and his plans – obliterated! I wonder, Darrison –"

"If I'm next?" broke in Darrison. "Impossible, Kelber! These things were accidents."

"But two of them –"

"Mean a most unfortunate coincidence. You've a problem ahead, Kelber, now that you have lost Orvis. But if you can solve it, there's no need to worry about me. I'll turn out all the air-conditioning equipment that the contracts demand."

Doubtfully, Kelber shook his head.

"We're safeguarded at our plant," insisted Darrison. "Vortex Circulators are manufactured in modern surroundings. We have taken every precaution against all dangers. Lightning might knock some shingles off our roof; nothing more."

Fralingham excitedly announced that the firemen had found a body and were bringing it out. Approaching, Kelber and Darrison saw the smoke-eaters lever up a battered door frame, while others reached for the figure beneath it.

"It's Cranston!" exclaimed Kelber. "My friend Cranston, dead!"

A TAXI driver was shouldering his way among the firemen. How he had managed to pass the lines, no one seemed to know. He was the first, however, to argue that the victim was still alive, a point which the firemen doubted.

It happened that the cabby was Moe Shrevnitz, and he couldn't believe that anything could permanently halt The Shadow's career.

"Get him into my cab," insisted Moe. "I'll have him to a hospital before you can get a call through for an ambulance."

The cab drove off carrying Cranston, with a fireman in the rear seat. They had just reached the hospital, when the fireman suddenly agreed with Moe's hunch.

THE THUNDER KING

"Say, this guy is alive!" exclaimed the fireman. "I don't think, he's even hurt bad. You know why? He must've grabbed that door when it was coming in at him along with the wall. He could've hung right in the middle of it and let it take the bricks. Luck, that's what!"

Not luck, in Moe's opinion. He'd seen his chief make drowning grabs at cables and come up with a rope in his fist. It was just one more instance of The Shadow's ability to offset any disaster that overwhelmed him.

Others, however, had not fared so well. Back at the ruined building, Kelber turned away when he saw firemen reclaim the mangled remains of three other humans. Both members of the Orvis partnership, and their chief assistant, Tilton, were in an unrecognizable shape.

Observing that both Fralingham and Darrison looked very sick, Kelber suggested that they go back to the car.

They rode in silence to Kelber's offices, which were open evenings, and working overtime. From the fortieth-story window, Kelber studied the sparkling carpet of Manhattan as if searching for a black gap in its midst, the spot where a building had been chopped to chunks. He swung suddenly and faced Darrison.

"Fralingham will bear witness to what I say," declared Kelber. "Cranston was here this afternoon. He testified that on a visit to Thorden's, in my behalf, he was followed when he left the house. Am I correct, Fralingham?"

Fralingham nodded.

"Cranston went to see Thorden again today," continued Kelber. "When I called him at the Cobalt Club, he stated that his car had been followed again. That is why I wanted Cranston at our conference with Orvis. I wanted him to drive home the danger that I believe exists.

"If Cranston is still alive, you will bear his testimony later. But how can we doubt the menace, after seeing what happened to the others? A coincidence: the destruction of Fralingham's plant and Orvis' building? Bah! Lightning doesn't strike twice!"

Kelber repeated the phrase, as though it impressed him. Picking up the telephone emphatically, he told his companions

"I'm going to call Thorden. I'll tell him that lightning doesn't strike twice. We'll see what he says."

The phone call wasn't much of a success. Kelber reached Thorden, but the latter professed ignorance of the Orvis tragedy. Kelber had to tell him all about it, before breaking loose in wrath. Finally, however, he inserted his choice remark.

"I'll tell you just this, Thorden!" he boomed. "Lightning doesn't strike twice!"

Kelber listened to something from the other end. Thorden's statement finished with a harsh clack of his receiver. Kelber's face looked somewhat blank when he turned to Fralingham and Darrison. They both wanted to know what Thorden's comment was.

"He told me I was wrong," said Kelber, slowly. "The old saying is that lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place. Thorden insists it didn't, in this instance. He said that Orvis' building wasn't your factory, Fralingham. He laughed when he hung up.

THE THUNDER KING

"But he won't split hairs with me!" Kelber pounded his desk so hard, that he had to clutch his fist with his other hand. "Before I'm through, I'll prove that Thorden had a hand in these disasters!"

How Kelber intended to prove it, remained a puzzle. Only one person was in a position to reveal the inside of the lightning-making game, and she was, at present, quite helpless.

Bound and gagged in a darkened office on the thirtieth door of the Cartwyn Building, Margo was watching men who worked in the gloom, dismantling the telescopic columns they had brought down from the roof.

Bulky electrical contrivances were also being removed, and being crated in sections, with Oliver Bayruth cackling orders to his crew.

Hours had gone by, when word came up that the firemen were gone from the ruins of the Mohawk Building. Bayruth promptly used a telephone to summon the truck.

Margo was taken down on the last load that descended in the freight elevator, along with a cargo of cable that had been used in supplying power to the capacitors. She understood why Harry Vincent and the others had failed to locate Bayruth during their New Jersey search. The canny electrical wizard had doubled into New York, there to make ready for tonight's job.

That done, he was going back to New Jersey. Riding in the truck, Margo could tell when they were going through the Holland Tunnel. After that, she was unable to calculate their direction, or even guess the running time.

Finally unloaded, she was carried from what seemed an underground garage into a cell-like room, where Bayruth arrived and ordered that her bonds and gag be removed. Margo saw that he was carrying her purse.

"We picked this up, Miss Lane," spoke Bayruth, eyeing Margo with a cunning gaze. "Your car has been taken to its proper garage, and your bag reclaimed from the Grand Central check room. The bag is over there in the corner."

Margo looked, saw the suitcase.

"You were going on a trip," continued Bayruth. "We found your railroad ticket. It is possible that you might want to write to certain friends – Mr. Cranston, for example?"

Margo started to say something, then stopped.

"Picture post cards would be appropriate," chuckled Bayruth, as though reading Margo's mind. "So I shall supply some, later, and have them posted from the proper towns.

"In advance, I might mention that we have samples of your handwriting, taken from your driver's license and other papers in the purse. When the time comes, you will write the post card exactly as you normally would."

Dully, Margo sank back in the chair where she had been placed. She tried to gather her wits, to think of some way in which she might trick old Bayruth, whose sharp eyes and apish grin took away all the dignity that his snow-white hair gave him. Watching Margo craftily, Bayruth queried suddenly:

"There was something else, Miss Lane?"

"Why... no –"

THE THUNDER KING

"Perhaps there is something else!" Bayruth's tone became a snarl, accentuated by fangish teeth, as his lips opened in a leer. "If there is" – he was approaching viciously – "it would be wise for you to tell me!"

"Only one thing!" blurted Margo. "The telegram... it's Lamont's birthday tomorrow. He'd expect a telegram. I ought to send him one –"

"That will be done," interposed Bayruth, easing his forward creep. "Quite easily, Miss Lane. We shall have the telegraph company send one of its form telegrams to your dear friend, Mr. Cranston."

With that, Bayruth turned on his heel and left the cell. He slammed the door, and Margo heard a bolt grate on the other side. How long she would remain a prisoner, Margo could not guess, but she hoped it would not be many days.

Margo was depending on The Shadow.

CHAPTER XIV. THE SHORTEST WAY

FROM his hospital cot, The Shadow took a new look at the world. It wasn't very bright outside the windows, and his first thought was that it was early morning, only to decide that it was late afternoon. Piecing his recollections, he kept his final verdict.

The Shadow could remember a long, drowsy spell, broken at intervals. He recalled that he had seen drawn window shades whenever he opened his eyes.

He recalled the crash of the night before, and knew that he must have received a brain concussion when the top of the door frame hit his head. But in return for that slap, the door frame had certainly stopped a lot of harder blows from falling masonry.

At any rate, the hospital had supplied its new patient, Lamont Cranston, with the usual treatment – that of keeping him quiet in a darkened room. They'd probably want him to stay a few days more, but that was something The Shadow couldn't tolerate. He'd have to get in touch with Dr. Sayre.

Seeing a bell beside the bed, The Shadow thumped it. He expected a nurse to arrive; instead, Sayre appeared.

Dr. Rupert Sayre was Cranston's physician, which meant, in a sense, that he was in The Shadow's service. In fact, if it hadn't been for The Shadow, Dr. Sayre would never have had Cranston as a patient. Nor would Sayre have had the very fine practice that came from Cranston's friends.

In fact, Sayre wouldn't even be alive. He owed his life to The Shadow, who had pulled him out of a very bad jam several years before.

As a result, Sayre was always ready to do favors for The Shadow, or for Lamont Cranston, for he knew that they were either one and the same man, or very closely associated.

Hearing that Cranston was in the hospital, Sayre had dropped everything else, to come there and wait until his star patient improved.

"You've got to get me out of this, Sayre," said The Shadow in Cranston's calm tone. "So go to it."

"I think that you have sufficiently improved," decided Sayre. "At least, enough for me to convince the chief resident physician. But you still need rest. Knowing how deeply you get into certain matters, I'm afraid you'll

THE THUNDER KING

overdo this one if I get you away from here."

"Just a few loose threads to gather," returned The Shadow, wearily. "I'm too weak to do anything more, Sayre."

Sayre wasn't entirely bluffed; nevertheless, he compromised with himself, by deciding that he would accompany Cranston and watch him gather up the few loose threads. Soon, Sayre and Cranston were in the latter's limousine, riding downtown to visit a man named Oswald Kelber.

In Kelber's office, they met Fralingham and Darrison. Both were impressed by Cranston's description of disaster at the Orvis office. But they were even more interested in his emphatic statement that his car had been followed by two thuggish-looking gentry, after leaving Thorden's the day before.

"You see?" said Kelber to the others. Then, turning to Cranston: "Thorden thinks he has me licked. But he hasn't! Look at these, Cranston!" He spread sheets of rough plans on the desk. "Orvis sent these to me yesterday, which is something that Thorden didn't guess.

"These plans are good enough to work from. I own a bridge-building works, the Criterion Constructors. They're building approaches to the new industrial units that I have to complete. This cantilever stuff was not in their line, but it is now. My engineers say that they can take over from where Orvis left off. It means that I can fulfill the contracts after all, and beat Thorden at his game!"

Triumphantly, Kelber paced his office; then, stopping short, he said:

"But how can I prove the incredible? How can I make anyone believe that Thorden was behind those disasters? I'll admit it sounds impossible. I may be a fool to even think it. But you can help me, Cranston –"

"In what way?"

"By calling Thorden. Make another appointment with him. If men follow you again, find out what you can about them. Thorden can't possibly suspect that you know about the men who were on your trail."

The Shadow didn't entirely agree; nevertheless, the suggestion intrigued him. He reached off the telephone, despite Sayre's warning hand, and called Thorden. After a short, friendly chat, he hung up the telephone.

"It's all right, doctor," he said to Sayre. "I arranged it for day after tomorrow. Suppose we go to the Cobalt Club for dinner, and then you can see me off for home – early."

Sayre nodded, and stepped to the door. The Shadow found time to turn to Kelber and undertone:

"Not day after tomorrow. Tonight, at ten o'clock."

THEY dined at the Cobalt Club, The Shadow and Dr. Sayre. From the way his patient seemed to tire, Sayre was quite convinced that Cranston would be glad to leave for home at an early hour.

They were finishing their dessert, and yawning, when a trio of telegraph messengers clattered into the grillroom, much to the annoyance of the fussy club members.

Lining up in front of Cranston's table, they began to sing a "happy birthday" song. They were badly off key and rather ragged when they sang "dear Lamont," but they rallied toward the end. Then, in chorus, they chimed the signature:

THE THUNDER KING

"Margo!"

The Shadow was still smiling when the messengers had gone. He turned to Sayre.

"That's enough for one night," he decided. "Give me a help upstairs, Sayre. I'm a bit shaky. I'd better start home."

"I didn't know it was your birthday," said Sayre, as they reached the foyer. "Rather a good joke on Margo's part, having a lot of messengers blossom into the sedate Cobalt Club and disturb its serenity with a birthday song."

"A very good joke," was Cranston's chuckled reply. "A much better joke than you think, Sayre."

They were going through the door, when Sayre inquired why.

"Because" – The Shadow paused, about to step into his limousine – "it doesn't happen to be my birthday!"

Leaving Sayre standing quite nonplused, The Shadow wearily ordered Stanley to drive home. Around the corner, he countermanded the order and told the chauffeur to go to the Hotel Metrolite.

There, The Shadow picked up Harry Vincent, who was back from the hunt for Bayruth's headquarters.

"We've narrowed down the range," said Harry, glumly, "but we still have a lot of territory to cover."

"Central Park, Stanley," said The Shadow, in Cranston's tone, through the speaking tube. Then, in a whisper more his own, he stated cryptically to Harry: "Find Margo and you'll find Bayruth."

"What? You mean –"

"They trapped Margo, last night. I'm sure of it. She had to find a way to reach me and let me know something had happened. She managed to send through a phony birthday telegram."

"We'll have to move fast, chief." Harry's tone was worried. "Margo must be in a bad spot."

"I don't think so," returned The Shadow. "She was tagging Blandle, Thorden's prize snooper. He was trying to get in touch with Bayruth. I don't think they'll harm Margo, until they know just how much she knows about Blandle and Thorden."

"But if they make her talk –"

"Trust Margo to handle that," interrupted The Shadow. "She has a perfect out, and sense enough to use it. She can tell them that her friend Cranston is the one who really knows. I am quite sure they will believe her."

The limousine had reached Central Park and was following the drives. Having a few hours until ten o'clock, The Shadow leaned back, closed his eyes, and began to analyze the case, for Harry's benefit.

FROM the start, Harry was intrigued by the fine points; the way The Shadow simplified and interpreted them.

It began with the first time that The Shadow, as Cranston, had visited Thorden. Two persons had picked up the trail. Matt Mardan and Thorden's snooper, Blandle. Matt, in particular, had been too obvious. On

THE THUNDER KING

Cranston's next visit, only yesterday, another thug, evidently Matt's successor, had promptly followed the limousine from Thorden's. Bandle, however, had gone on another mission.

It seemed that Matt had purposely let it be known that he was on Cranston's trail. Certainly, the car that followed yesterday had made no effort to hide the fact that it was tagging the limousine. On the first occasion, Matt's trailing of Cranston had brought The Shadow to the old garage, where he had ruined Matt's rather makeshift effort to trap him.

"Because of what happened to Matt," concluded The Shadow, "those men who followed this limousine last night could well have known that by trailing Cranston, they might end by having The Shadow trailing them. If so, there is but one answer.

"Last night, a trap was set. A real one, much better than Matt's makeshift. But the men who were to bring me to it found themselves ignored. Nevertheless, they are likely to try again. Tonight, if they follow Cranston from Thorden's, they will expect –"

The Shadow's words ended in a low, sinister laugh – his own, though it came from Cranston's lips. Harry knew that thugs would again expect The Shadow, and that this time, they would not be disappointed. The Shadow would arrive.

Harry linked other points. No one – Kelber, his rival Thorden, nor the latter's snooper, Bandle – had proof that Cranston was The Shadow. Even Bayruth, the human tool of murder, could not be positive of that fact. But they did regard The Shadow as Cranston's protector. Bandle, most certainly, could testify to that effect.

Men of crime were seeking a showdown with The Shadow. Their idea of a showdown meant death. The Shadow was willing to accept the challenge.

Why?

Harry received his answer from the solemn, subdued laugh which he heard The Shadow utter. That mirthless tone provided the complete solution.

No longer could The Shadow waste time in a search for Bayruth's headquarters. He was seeking actual contact with men of crime as the shortest way to reach his goal, the hidden place where Margo Lane was a prisoner!

CHAPTER XV. THE MURDER MACHINE

THE big clock in Bayruth's laboratory pointed to the hour of nine, but Margo Lane wasn't looking at the clock. She was too busy staring at the contrivances which Bayruth had on display. Never had Margo seen such an odd exhibition.

The place frightened her, even though Bayruth had been polite enough in inviting her to see the lab. All around were electrical devices, with huge switches, large coils and multitudes of wires.

One, which had a pair of squatly posts a few feet high, topped by large metal spheres, was certainly a portable lightning maker, though it couldn't compare with the mighty contrivance which Margo knew was packed in Bayruth's big double-sectioned truck.

Bayruth could be pleasant when he so chose. But in the sharp-faced wizard's smile, the crackly laugh that accompanied it, Margo sensed menace, accompanied with insanity. At present, Bayruth was trending toward

THE THUNDER KING

the latter. He had forgotten his electrical contrivances, to enthuse over his perpetual-motion machine.

It was a great wheel, and had cups at the end of each spoke. Smiling at Margo, Bayruth placed a rubber ball in the topmost cup, but held the wheel steady.

"When I release the wheel," he declaimed, "the weight of the ball will carry it around. Then, after the ball has passed the bottom, the wheel will bring it up again. Ah, you think I am crazy, as they all do. Watch! Learn why I am right."

He released the wheel and the ball carried it downward, but when it neared the bottom, the cup flipped and the ball scaled out at an angle. It struck the table on which the machine stood, and being of rubber, the ball bounced upward at an angle. By then, the wheel had passed it; the next cup in line scooped the ball and carried it up to the top.

Around and around went the wheel. Each time, near the bottom, the ball left it and made the same bounce. The timing was perfect: the scooping cup next on the wheel took the ball deftly and carried it along.

Margo was so fascinated that she began to forget her present predicament.

"They argue soundly," declared Bayruth, "when they say that friction will prevent the wheel from bringing up the same weight that carries it down. My answer is to remove the weight during a portion of the revolution, thereby lessening the burden of the wheel."

The wheel was slowing slightly, and Bayruth gave it an annoyed stare. He was muttering something about "poor balance," and "too much friction," when a rap came at the door. Bayruth answered it, to admit a flat-faced man, one of his technicians. The fellow saw the revolving wheel and didn't like it. In guttural tone, he said:

"We are waiting for you, Mr. Bayruth. Remember you have orders from Thor –"

He chopped off suddenly as Bayruth gave a gesture in Margo's direction. Seeing the girl for the first time, the technician was quick to smother any mention of names.

"You have work," he corrected. "Important work. When it is done, you can again test your wheel."

Bayruth nodded his shaggy head.

"Very good, Klegg," he said. "The truck is ready?"

Klegg nodded.

"I have come for the portable machine," he said, indicating the small-sized lightning maker. "You are taking it to New York, you know. You are to meet me, afterward."

"I remember," Bayruth acknowledged. "Put the portable machine in my car. Then start out with the truck."

Klegg brought in another man to help carry the portable device. Studying them both, Margo could understand their association with Bayruth. These men had the Fifth Column brand; they were the sort who would try to cripple American industries if they could. They were finding such opportunity, through Bayruth.

THE THUNDER KING

Though Bayruth happened to be the user of the secret weapon in the duel between two industrialists, Oswald Kelber and Jerome Thorden, he was also accomplishing work that foreign agents sought to do.

Margo promptly credited Thorden with having hired such apprentices to serve Bayruth. Ordinary thugs would do for outside work, but these were more efficient in schemes of huge destruction.

HAVING heard that Klegg was taking out the truck, Margo became apprehensive. Knowing that Bayruth had already eliminated two key members of Kelber's Universal Industries chain – the Asbestile Co., and the Orvis Engineering Corp. – she was certain that a stroke was due against the third weak link. That would necessarily mean trouble for Roy Darrison, owner of Vortex Circulators.

But how to get such word to The Shadow?

Margo was puzzling over that problem, when Oliver Bayruth supplied the answer in his sharp, crackling tone.

"If you have any message for The Shadow," he gibed, "I shall be pleased to carry it. I expect to meet him within the next few hours. You saw the portable machine that Klegg took to my car. I intend to test it against The Shadow and his guns!"

The words stunned Margo. She could only stare.

"With The Shadow eliminated," added Bayruth, "we shall have little worry regarding your other friend, Lamont Cranston, who luckily escaped death last night. In fact" – Bayruth tilted his head to study Margo – "you will be our only problem. We shall keep you here, to produce you if needed. But after that necessity is ended –"

Bayruth finished with a gloating cluck that promised Margo a one-way ticket in the wrong direction. By then, the girl's nerve returned. Margo sprang for the door, intending to block off Bayruth.

She was going to fight it out with the crazed inventor, who considered murder a pleasant pastime. Not just for her own life, but for the lives of others. Most specifically, for one life, that Bayruth seemed to think was two: that of The Shadow and Lamont Cranston.

Margo needed a weapon, and found one in the shape of a thing that looked like a table lamp; it had a red bulb, but no shade. She grabbed it, bringing its wire along, and swung it at Bayruth's head.

He made a dive for the wall, and pressed a switch which Margo thought would extinguish the laboratory lights; something that wouldn't matter, because she was sure she could reach Bayruth in the dark.

But the lab lights didn't go out. Instead, the red bulb in Margo's light came on. With its glow, the girl received a sudden shock from the metal standard that she gripped. Tumbling to the floor, Margo was shaken and jounced by the current that came through the wire to the lamp.

The red bulb didn't break when it battered the floor. It was of unbreakable glass, and Margo couldn't let go of the lamp because of the current.

Bayruth kept cackling in great glee at Margo's contortions. Finally, he turned off the current and watched the girl settle in limp relief.

"Fortunately for you, Miss Lane," he said, "I am careful never to use a high current on my laboratory devices. That lamp is one that I was testing as a method of disposing of troublesome persons. You can imagine how

THE THUNDER KING

effective a full charge would prove."

Margo could do more than imagine it. She hadn't any fight left in her. Bayruth opened the door and summoned two of his men. Margo was so weak, that they had to carry her back to her cell. There, they dropped her in a chair and departed without ceremony, bolting the door behind them.

Quite wilted, Margo heard the rumble of the big truck when it left, and also the lesser roar of Bayruth's car. She could only revert to her original hope that The Shadow, in some way, would prove himself a match for the best of Bayruth's efforts. But she knew the truth, and did not like it.

Unquestionably, tonight, The Shadow would walk into a trap, there to meet with Bayruth's portable lightning maker, which was designed to kill within a required range. In picturing such a trap, Margo could think of no place more ominous, and therefore suitable for murder, than the gloomy Manhattan mansion where Jerome Thorden lived.

So far as Thorden's house was concerned, Margo should have set her mind at ease. When Lamont Cranston entered that residence at ten o'clock, he wasn't even carrying a gun.

It was the last place where The Shadow would look for trouble. Thorden might be twice the monster that Kelber made him out to be, and still have judgment when dealing with visitors to his own preserves.

Tonight, however, Thorden could not quite veil his actual sentiments. He received Cranston with a show of mock politeness, which was practically an open statement that he knew his visitor came from Kelber. In fact, The Shadow for once seemed to lack the full poise of Cranston. He didn't know quite how to explain his visit.

Smoothly, Thorden waived that point.

"You had a lucky escape last night," he said. "I was very glad to learn that you were still alive. Too bad about Orvis. I suppose that his death was a very great shock to Kelber."

Before The Shadow could offer a reply, Thorden modified the statement.

"I don't mean in a business way," he added. "I wouldn't do Kelber an injustice, even by supposing such a case. Besides" – Thorden's tone had an oily irony – "I understand that Kelber has quite recovered from his loss. Clever, the way in which he managed to salvage the Orvis situation.

"Perhaps Kelber is more lucky than clever. It was luck that he happened to have those rough plans that his own constructors could decipher. I'm beginning to believe that Kelber is a hard man to beat. I really think that if Vortex Circulators went out of business tomorrow, Kelber would find some substitute method of filling those key contracts."

Cranston's expression was becoming weary. He asked Thorden to excuse him. He was trying to remember why he had made this appointment, at all, and his recollections were very hazy.

In a tired tone, The Shadow remarked that he should have followed his doctor's advice and postponed all business appointments for a few days.

"I had something to discuss," he said, "but it's gone from my mind, Thorden. I think I'd better be getting along."

THE THUNDER KING

Ringed for a servant, Thorden insisted that Cranston accept help in going downstairs. On the way, The Shadow stumbled twice, while Thorden watched.

While the servant was piloting Cranston out through the front door, Thorden returned to the office. Bandle was standing near the window. Both watched from deep behind a curtain. From the light above the front door, they could see Cranston walking unsteadily toward the gate.

"Cranston was badly off form," observed Thorden, dryly. "I didn't believe that he could bluff so poorly. Unless –"

Thorden paused; his eyes took on a shrewd look. He heard Bandle query:

"Shall I follow him, like I did the first time?"

"No," decided Thorden. "Sometimes, Bandle, an act can be so bad, that it is good. I think it applies in Cranston's case. He was giving us the come-on."

"Then why not take it up?"

"It might not prove healthy, Bandle." Thorden clapped his hand on the rangy man's shoulder. "That is, not for you. I wouldn't care to have you in another mix-up with The Shadow. I am quite sure that he will appear upon the scene after Cranston leaves it."

THORDEN'S prediction was correct. Riding to the Cobalt Club, The Shadow saw a rakish car take up the limousine's trail just around the corner from Thorden's. The other car made no effort to conceal its presence.

Arriving at the club, The Shadow alighted as Cranston and sent the limousine away. He saw the rakish car roll slowly past; it actually lingered at the next corner.

There was a side exit from the club. Coming from it, still in the guise of Cranston, The Shadow stepped directly into a coupe, where Harry Vincent was at the wheel. He was using Harry in preference to Moe Shrevnitz, because the latter's cab might prove too conspicuous along the coming trail.

The Shadow had a package with him. He told Harry to cruise along and find the rakish car; meanwhile, The Shadow was unwrapping the package. In a side glance, Harry saw black garments within – the cloak and hat with which The Shadow intended to obliterate the guise of Cranston.

Then they were past the corner and Harry's eyes were straight ahead, seeking the trail of the car that had been sent to decoy The Shadow to his doom!

CHAPTER XVI. JOLTS OF DEATH

THE trail was easy, so easy that it worried Harry. The thugs in the car ahead did everything except reach out and wave. From the moment that Harry's car eased up in back of theirs, they were sure that The Shadow had found them, and they made the most of it.

However, Harry noted that the decoy crew was skittish. They preferred streets that offered a clear path ahead, in case The Shadow should begin to open fire, or try to overtake them. Every now and then, the driver showed tendencies to spurt, until his companions evidently restrained him. Probably they pictured The Shadow half leaning from a window, a ready gun in his hand.

THE THUNDER KING

The Shadow wasn't leaning from the window. He didn't even have a gun in his hand. He was putting on his black garments – rather painfully, Harry thought, which made him wonder if his chief had sufficiently recovered from last night's ordeal to take on the present quest.

Usually, The Shadow slid into hat and cloak so rapidly, that they swished. Such wasn't the case tonight. He was wrapping the cloak in flabby fashion, and he couldn't seem to get the hat properly settled on his head. He kept tugging it down and tightening it.

When cloaked, The Shadow generally became so silent, that Harry almost forgot his presence. On this occasion he seemed fidgety, and Harry was conscious of it.

The car ahead began new tactics. It had reached a dismal section of the city and was increasing speed, while it made devious turns into side streets. It wasn't trying to shake the trail; rather, it was seeking to increase the distance, and keep farther ahead of Harry's car. The reason was explained when the decoy car suddenly swerved into an alley.

As Harry came to the opening, he and The Shadow saw taillights ahead. The red gleams were suddenly extinguished.

The Shadow whispered for Harry to ease past the mouth of the alley and wait on the street, itself.

It was plain that the alley was a blind one; therefore, the decoy crew must have deserted their car. But they wouldn't be waiting for The Shadow in a blind alley. Obviously, they must have some outlet which they could go through, although their car could not.

Harry watched The Shadow step from the coupe, saw him trip over the dangling folds of his cloak. Stooping, The Shadow spent some time in adjusting the garment's hem, which worried Harry badly. Harry was just about to protest against his chief undertaking a fool's venture, considering his condition, when The Shadow moved off into the darkness. From then on, Harry could only wait.

Entering the blind alley, The Shadow plodded slowly, instead of moving with his typical swift glide. Nevertheless, he was up to par when it came to concealment. He had merged completely with the blackness; he made no sound whatever, as he neared the deserted car at the inner limit of the cul-de-sac.

Past the car, The Shadow found the route that thugs had taken. It was a door in the corner of the wall, leading down into a basement. A tiny flashlight pressed between gloved palms, The Shadow directed dots of light along the floor, which was of cement. The passage ended in a flight of wooden stairs that led upward.

Squarely at the top was another door. The Shadow tried it; the door yielded, opening inward. Stopping short on the top step, he viewed a feebly lighted room, where a shaggy-haired man sat in a chair beside a table. The Shadow saw a sharp-featured face, with bright, but watery eyes, above a pair of huddly shoulders. Lips, with a crazed smile, uttered a crackly greeting.

There wasn't a doubt as to the man's identity. He was Oliver Bayruth.

"WELCOME, Shadow!" voiced Bayruth. "Won't you walk into my parlor? I am only the fly, you know. You are The Shadow. To be frank" – Bayruth's tone went suddenly solemn – "I have very much to tell you. Facts I have been afraid to reveal, about crimes for which I was not responsible."

The Shadow's figure was but dimly outlined. He took one step forward, so that Bayruth could see him better. As proof of his real regard for Bayruth, The Shadow extended two automatics, one in each hand.

THE THUNDER KING

The right gun covered Bayruth; the left was aimed toward a door in the far corner of the room. It was the only place that the vanished thugs could have gone.

Though he preferred to take Bayruth alive, The Shadow was willing to show short shrift to lurking thugs. One tremble of that door, and it would be blasted with bullets from the gun that pointed toward it.

Just within the door, where The Shadow could reach it with a few paces, was a table that bore the portable death machine that Margo had seen in Bayruth's lab. Noting the squat columns, with the metal spheres that topped them, The Shadow recognized the device as a lightning maker, capable, perhaps, of hurling a half a million volts – enough to demolish an elephant, with a direct hit.

"It is yours, Shadow," declared Bayruth, earnestly. "I am giving it to you as evidence against the evil master who has done great crime through my inventions, and who hopes to place the blame upon my shoulders."

Bayruth's tone was piteous. His shoulders looked too scrawny to support any burden. He was so far removed from the portable lightning maker that he couldn't reach the switch which projected from the front of the machine. Bayruth extended a scrawny hand to the cord of a lamp beside his chair.

"I'll give you more light, Shadow," he insisted, "so you can see everything quite plainly."

The Shadow took one step toward the lightning machine. As he did, Bayruth pulled the lamp cord. The two happened to be connected by a wire beneath the carpet.

Terrific was the flash that came, its horrendous crackle drowning Bayruth's gleeful laugh. The two capacitors, loosing their killing load, hurled zigzag shafts straight at The Shadow. The natural targets for those streaks of man-made lightning were The Shadow's steel guns.

Striking them with a tremendous jolt, the charge hurled The Shadow's arm upward, flaying his body with it. Amid a peal of instantaneous thunder, that actually rocked the room, The Shadow went backward in a flying somersault that carried him through the door and down the steps.

Out of the thunderous echoes came Bayruth's high-pitched laugh. He could still hear the downward tumble of the falling form in black, but The Shadow's plunge, even though it might be of the breakneck variety, was quite inconsequential to Bayruth. He knew the power of his lightning bolts.

Bayruth had placed the machine at just the proper distance from the stairway door. No living human could have received the charge within that range and survived the stroke. Some persons, perhaps, credited The Shadow with being more than human. Not Bayruth. He had seen the results.

So had the crooks who stepped from the other door. Nevertheless, they gave anxious glances toward the stairway. Bayruth laughed as he studied their three faces.

"Fools!" he exclaimed. "The Shadow is dead. He was killed the moment that those lightning bolts hit him. Come! I am going out through the front, to my own car. Jerry will accompany me. You two, Spike and Ringo, will bring the machine."

BAYRUTH went through the far door with Jerry. Sniffing the ozone that filled the room as a result of the electrical charge, Spike approached the lightning machine a bit gingerly, and began to unclamp it from the table. He heard Ringo gloat from the stairway door:

"Take a look, Spike."

THE THUNDER KING

Approaching, Spike took the flashlight from Ringo's hands and gazed along the path of light that it projected downward. At the bottom of the stairs, they saw what was left of The Shadow, a huddled blotch of black against the stone floor.

"Croaked!" rasped Spike. "Just like Bayruth said. Only, there's one thing his nibs forgot."

"Yeah?" queried Ringo. "What?"

"When the cops find the body," returned Spike, "they'll know what hit it."

"But Bayruth followed orders. He got them from Thor –"

"Never mind that," interrupted Spike, his voice raspy. "We're supposed to use good sense, ain't we? I'm going to load The Shadow with a gatful of slugs so the bulls will think that gunzels snuffed him. What's more, if The Shadow still has life in him, he won't have after I finish blasting!"

Deliberately, Spike aimed his gleaming revolver downward. Ringo was watching his companion's trigger finger when the first shot roared. But Spike's finger hadn't moved, nor did his gun spurt. In fact, the gun burst didn't come from the top of the stairs; it was delivered from the bottom!

Nor did Spike shoot at all; instead, he staggered backward, his gun slipping from his hand. Spike had taken a bullet right in the wrist.

The flashlight, sliding from Spike's other hand, gave a last flickering view down the stairs. In that gleam, Ringo saw the incredible. It wasn't some newcomer who had beaten Spike to the shot. It was The Shadow! The black-cloaked fighter was rising from the stony floor, a smoking automatic in his gloved fist!

Before Ringo could believe his eyes, the view was gone. But from the lower blackness came new proof that The Shadow still lived. It was a laugh that came upward with an increasing taunt, a challenge of vengeance from The Shadow to the men who thought they had slain him!

Ringo was sure that The Shadow was coming up the stairs, for the mocking mirth was rising in volume. But The Shadow had darkness at his service, and Ringo couldn't risk staying in the light, to become a target like Spike.

Dashing across the room, Ringo ducked for the far door, turning as he went through, to take quick shot at The Shadow if the revived fighter appeared.

The Shadow did appear, too soon for Ringo. At the head of the stairs, The Shadow dropped below the level of the top step. Ringo's frantic shots whizzed high above his cloaked adversary's head. The single shot that The Shadow fired clipped Ringo's shoulder, caught the crook off balance and snaked him right out of the doorway, sprawling him on the floor of the room.

Footsteps were pounding up the stairs. Harry Vincent had arrived, having heard the gunfire. Crossing the room, The Shadow sped through the far door, leaving Harry the task of gathering up the revolvers dropped by Spike and Ringo before the wounded thugs could crawl and get them.

Reaching the front street, The Shadow was just too late to open fire at a car that whizzed the corner. His parting laugh, however, was a memory that Bayruth could cherish. It was no farewell, that mirth. It was a token that The Shadow still lived; that he expected to meet Bayruth soon again.

THE THUNDER KING

RETURNING to the lightning room, The Shadow found Harry quizzing the sullen prisoners. They wouldn't talk to Harry, but sight of The Shadow, the tone of his sinister laugh, unloosed their tongues. He reminded them that he could send them where they thought that he had gone: into the realm of death.

"Bayruth deceived you," added The Shadow, sardonically. "After that, he deserted you. I shall find him" – his tone was positive – "and when I do, I shall remember whether or not you supplied me with information. Suit yourselves."

The Shadow was turning away. Outvying each other, Spike and Ringo spilled all they knew. They couldn't give The Shadow the location of Bayruth's New Jersey hideaway, because they hadn't been there. But they did know where Bayruth happened to be going first.

"He's going to knock off another plant," blabbed Spike. "The Vortex Circulators –"

"And the truck is waiting for him," broke in Ringo. "With a guy named Klegg in charge of it!"

The Shadow drew Harry to a corner, gave him instructions regarding the prisoners, the removal of the portable lightning machine, and other matters to follow.

They were in better light, and Harry could see The Shadow's face beneath the brim of the slouch hat. The face was odd, expressionless, which puzzled Harry, until he saw that it wasn't a face at all.

It was a rubber mask!

Harry eyed the cloak and hat. They were of rubber, too, which explained why they hadn't swished! Hat, mask and cloak were all one piece, as were the rubber gloves, which Harry at last observed. The Shadow was wearing rubber shoes with spreading tops, like boots, that became a part of the cloak. He had been fixing them when Harry thought that he had stumbled, just outside the car!

Expecting a meeting with Bayruth, The Shadow had come equipped to meet any bolts that the lightning maker might hurl. Fully insulated, he had taken the jolts of death, unscathed. The Shadow had overlooked one trifling detail: his guns.

Because of his grip upon them, The Shadow had been hurled backward when the guns received the lightning thrusts, which accounted for his unexpected tumble down the stairs. He'd needed a breather after that plunge, so had taken one. Ready for new action, The Shadow had supplied it when the time came.

Thus had The Shadow nullified the schemes of a superfoe who had sent Bayruth to murder him. As Harry pieced those facts, he heard The Shadow's whispered laugh, a token of departure. Then, with a half-plodding glide, the rubber-cloaked fighter was gone, down into the darkness of the stairway.

The Shadow was bound for new combat with Oliver Bayruth, the human tool responsible for mighty crimes!

CHAPTER XVII. TRAILS TO DISASTER

IN the massive mausoleum that he called a mansion, Jerome Thorden was seated at his desk, drumming it with his fingers.

Bandle, watching him, could see shrewd changes in Thorden's Napoleonic expression, but they did not reveal the deep thoughts that they indicated. Bandle, with his poker-faced manner, could not equal Thorden when it came to hiding unexpressed opinions.

THE THUNDER KING

At last, Thorden spoke, his tone smooth.

"Kelber is indeed a problem," he said. "Ever since he underbid me on those contracts, I've expected him to cry for help; but he hasn't. The man is tenacious to the last degree. The loss of the Asbestile plant should have sunk Universal Industries, but it didn't. Nor did the loss of Orvis and his construction plans.

"There is one weak link remaining: Vortex Circulators. If it snaps, Kelber is through. Frankly, Bandle" – Thorden gave a shrewd smile – "I want to see it break. I've made my plans that way. And yet" – his lips stiffened – "if Kelber finds a substitute, my efforts will prove useless."

Bandle had an idea.

"It might be," he said, "that the best way would be to handle Kelber direct."

Slowly, Thorden nodded.

"You are right, Bandle," he decided. "I used the wrong tack. I worked on the assumption that Kelber would begin to lose money through Universal Industries, and would call on Thorden Enterprises as a last resort. But I've just begun to realize that Kelber is in a position to make money.

"Sometimes" – Thorden eyed Bandle cannily – "it is easier to force a deal when a man's business is on a rise, instead of a decline. I have an idea that it will prove that way with Kelber. But I shall wait, until I learn what happens with Vortex Circulators. It won't be long, Bandle."

The ensuing pause was broken by the ringing of a telephone bell. Thorden made a quick reach for the telephone, then shook his head.

"It might be Kelber," he remarked. "I don't want to talk with him yet. You answer it, Bandle."

Bandle answered the call. With his first words, the snooper lost his poker-faced manner. Clapping his hand over the mouthpiece, he turned to Thorden and exclaimed:

"Bayruth!"

Thorden took the telephone. His voice was oily, but pleasant. At moments, he seemed to be talking to a child, in humoring fashion.

"So you are making further progress?" Thorden inquired. "Good!... What? Not going quite so well as you expected? Don't be discouraged, Bayruth... Yes, I am sure that you will have no further difficulty...

"Yes, I have the utmost confidence in you, Bayruth. Of course, I sometimes ask too much, but I am a businessman. You are the true genius... Tonight? Why, certainly! Since you are sure the work will be completed, it is just the time for us to get together –"

Thorden was making notations on the memo pad beside his telephone. He tore off the sheet and pocketed it.

"We are going to Bayruth's place in New Jersey," Thorden told Bandle. "He will have much to tell us."

Bandle's face steadied. "About the perpetual-motion machine?" he asked.

THE THUNDER KING

"That's right," returned Thorden, with a smile. "Didn't you hear how I was humoring him? You may wonder at my interest, Blandle, but there are many things that you do not know, even though your business is to find out facts. However, I know that I can trust you. Tonight may explain a few riddles that you haven't yet solved."

QUITE in contrast to the discussion at Thorden's was the conference going on in the offices of Universal Industries, where Oswald Kelber held sway. Kelber was with his earlier companions, Fralingham and Darrison. They were talking, but the big man looked uneasy.

"I wonder why we haven't heard from Cranston?" boomed Kelber, suddenly. "I'm not surprised that he didn't come back, but he certainly should have called us after he saw Thorden."

"Maybe he hasn't found out what we wanted," put in Fralingham. "You wanted him to check on any persons who followed him."

"Of course," agreed Kelber. "A simple matter."

"Perhaps not," ventured Darrison, uneasily. "It may be that Cranston put himself into trouble."

The lift of Kelber's bushy brows indicated alarm. He reached for the telephone and called the Cobalt Club, only to learn that Cranston had left an hour before. A call to Cranston's home produced no results.

Kelber was wondering if he should call police headquarters, when a secretary entered to announce a visitor who claimed to be one of Cranston's friends.

The friend was Harry Vincent. He introduced himself, and his frank manner impressed Kelber and the others. But Harry didn't do much to clear the Cranston situation. He simply said that Cranston had left the Cobalt Club on what seemed a very important mission, and had asked him to stop in at Kelber's, to assure the latter that everything was working out well.

However, Harry was glancing about in apprehensive fashion, as though he expected to see his friend Cranston, which rather offset his favorable report.

"Tell me, Mr. Vincent," queried Kelber. "Had Cranston been to see Jerome Thorden?"

"I believe so," replied Harry. "I was outside the club when Cranston arrived. What puzzled me was the fact that a car was following him."

"From Thorden's!" exclaimed Kelber to the others. "As we thought it would! "Did you see the men in it, Mr. Vincent?"

"Yes. I didn't like their looks."

That statement did not relieve the tension. Glancing at his watch, Kelber observed that it was after eleven o'clock. He began to chide himself on letting Cranston pursue such a dangerous errand. When his impatience reached the breaking point, Kelber decided to call up Thorden and have a showdown.

"If he knows what happened to Cranston," declared Kelber, grimly, "I'll make him tell me. When mention that Cranston, himself, testified that people trailed him from the house, it will put the shoe on Thorden's other foot. He won't dare to harm Cranston when he hears such facts."

THE THUNDER KING

There was no answer to Kelber's call. He tried the number again, without result, and finally shoved the telephone aside. His bushy brows thickened.

"Thorden must have gone out," Kelber decided. "I wonder why. Could it be that some new catastrophe is due? Tell me, Darrison" – he swung to the thick-set man – "has there been any trouble whatever at your plant?"

"None at all," assured Darrison. Then, with a slight laugh. "Thorden tried to annoy us, but failed."

"Tried to? How?"

"You remember, Kelber. He insisted that Vortex Circulators be put to the test that the contracts specified. We have to demonstrate that they can clear out inflammable gas from underground rooms."

"Oh, that!" exclaimed Kelber. "You certainly had no trouble with such simple tests."

"We won't have," corrected Darrison. "So far, we haven't made the test. The materials weren't delivered until today, and the government inspectors won't come until next week. It is a trifling matter, Kelber."

Darrison had strolled to the window. He was looking westward, across the Hudson, to the Jersey shore. The hill on the other side blocked off his view.

"If we were about twenty stories higher," Darrison estimated, "we could see my plant over on the Jersey meadows. But I don't have to see it. The plant is safe. It is surrounded by a high wire fence, and I have special guards on duty. Not a single source of danger in the place."

Kelber was on his feet.

"Those materials for the test," he queried. "Just what were they, Darrison?"

"Gas bombs, I suppose," returned Darrison. "Of the incendiary type. There was a truckload of them; we put them in the storeroom –"

DARRISON ended his statement with a gulp. Kelber's eyes, as much as his own words, made him stop. Darrison realized that he had belied his former statement that everything was safe in the Vortex Circulator plant.

"Get them on the phone at once!" roared Kelber. "Tell them to clear those bombs out of the storeroom and chuck them in the meadows! My word, Darrison! If they ever went off, they'd melt your plant and all its equipment! Incendiary bombs could turn a cold-storage plant into an incinerator!"

Seizing the telephone, Darrison called the plant, and finally received an answer from the night superintendent. Stammering the news of danger, he ordered immediate removal of the bombs. As soon as Darrison had given that word, Kelber told the others:

"We know where Thorden has gone – out to see havoc ride over Darrison's factory! Come! We're going out there, too. We'll prove that Thorden's hand is behind these recent disasters. This time, he'll be caught on the scene!"

As Cranston's friend, Harry joined the others as they rushed from the office. They had cars downstairs, and the trip to the plant on the Jersey meadows could be made in less than half an hour. Kelber didn't have to

convince Harry that a stroke was due against the Vortex Circulators factory.

The prisoners that Harry had stowed away had already told The Shadow. Somehow, Harry felt that Darrison's call to the factory would be too late to save the situation. His only hope was that The Shadow had already reached the place where doom was due.

Though the case was more desperate than even The Shadow knew, Harry still believed that his chief could find some way to halt disaster from the sky!

CHAPTER XVIII. THE SHADOW'S EXIT

HAVING left Harry the car belonging to the wounded thugs, The Shadow was using his agent's coupe for a swift trip to the Jersey meadows.

Cutting away from a superhighway, The Shadow saw two roads across the flats. One was a level route, to the left, straight to the Vortex Circulators factory, which was located against a hill that stood like an island in the meadows.

The other skirted the hill itself, and evidently connected with a roadway to the top. The hill was something like a knoll, and it was plainly visible, for it had great advertising signs on the brow, illuminated for the benefit of railroad passengers who might chance to read them while passing across the meadows.

The Shadow could see other lights moving up the slope – the lights of a car; unquestionably Bayruth's. The Shadow had gained on the crazed inventor, but to follow him would be folly. Bayruth would have men posted to block the road, and it would take too long to shoot a pathway through them.

Something better might be done at the Vortex plant, itself. At least, it would offer access to the front of the hill, the one direction from which Bayruth's tribe would not expect attack.

Sullen clouds hung over the meadows. They didn't have the look of thunderheads, but that wouldn't worry Bayruth. This was the last job that his master had ordered, and he would certainly go through with it. Later, people could try to explain the phenomenon of a lightning flash descending from clouds that hadn't shown previous symptoms.

Bayruth wouldn't care. The duel between Thorden and Kelber would be at an end, so far as destruction was concerned.

But destruction was the very thing that The Shadow wanted to prevent. He had to defeat killers tonight, and throw them into confusion. It was the only way to make sure of following their trail.

That trail would lead to Margo. The Shadow was still thinking in terms of the shortest way to his most important task – the rescue of the girl who had so faithfully tried to aid him, only to become a helpless prisoner.

It wasn't dark across the meadows, despite the sullen sky. Railroads crisscrossed the flats, and the great headlights of heavy freight locomotives cut moving lines through the darkness. Many factories were at work, some gushing flames from their chimneys, to cast lurid reflections against the sky.

Besides, there was plenty of glow at the Vortex plant, enough for The Shadow to see the gate and the buildings beyond it without relying only on the headlights of Harry's coupe.

THE THUNDER KING

The Vortex factory was modern, compact. Its buildings made a stout mass against the knoll. There were open spaces in among the buildings, but the whole plant was surrounded by a high meshwork fence. The gate was metal, and closed, with men on guard there. They sprang out with rifles, warningly, to challenge The Shadow's car.

He didn't wait to argue. Gates often had a weak spot: their center. Those at the Vortex factory were no exception. The Shadow took them right in the middle, split them apart, ripping them from the hinges.

Thinking he would stop before he crashed, the guards had sprung out to stop The Shadow. They had to dive away as he roared through, with the wreckage of the front bumper jammed across the coupe's radiator. In diving, the guards didn't have a chance to use their rifles.

WHEELING in among loading platforms, The Shadow came upon a beefy man in shirt sleeves, who was unlocking the door of a storeroom, while others stood about. He was the night superintendent, and he couldn't see what had happened to the front of The Shadow's car, because the gleam of the twisted headlamps blinded him.

Taking it that the car had been sent by Darrison, the beefy man hurried over as soon as he had unlocked the storeroom door.

"We're getting the inflammable stuff out," he reported. "But it's stored under a lot of new materials that came in this afternoon. It will take us half an hour –"

He stopped, quite amazed. He saw The Shadow. Having discarded his rubber outfit, The Shadow was normally cloaked as he stepped from the car. Whether he was man or ghost, the superintendent could not tell, but his reaction was the sort that The Shadow wanted. This man would listen.

"I'm here to help you," The Shadow told him. "Send away the guards from the gate. I hadn't time to stop and chat with them. You say the storeroom contains inflammables –"

The superintendent nodded. He was explaining the matter of the test bombs, while he waved back the arriving guards. The facts learned, The Shadow cut the speaker short.

"All will be over in half an hour," informed The Shadow, grimly. "We must do something sooner. Do you have a good supply of insulated cable?"

"Plenty of it!"

"Take men with you. Attach the cables to your plant dynamos. Run them to the fence and make connections. You can do it in ten minutes?"

"In less!" exclaimed the superintendent. "Do you know why we have so much cable? Mr. Darrison wanted to electrify the fence to protect the plant. He thought better of it, later, because of the danger to employees. We'd already run the cables, but we never connected them."

"Connect them at once. Send the juice through, and keep it running."

The beefy man sent others to the fence, while he hurried to the dynamo room to await the word for the current. Meanwhile, The Shadow was beckoning to the guards, who came on the run, having accepted this cloaked stranger as a leader somehow appointed to handle the coming emergency.

THE THUNDER KING

In five minutes, the juice was on. Meanwhile, men were getting to the inflammables, to bring them out to the loading platform. It was Darrison's order, so The Shadow let them proceed. Besides, the incendiary bombs might prove useful later.

Five minutes more. All the while, The Shadow kept under the projecting roof of the storeroom, to avoid notice from the hill above. The first of the incendiary bombs were coming out of the storeroom. Nobody was near the great wire fence that surrounded the yard, for the current was constantly going through it, rendering it quite dangerous.

That thought brought a whispered laugh from The Shadow. Darrison's idea had helped, though The Shadow's ten-minute estimate still held. But Darrison had intended the electric fence to ward off prowlers. The Shadow was putting it to a much greater use. The test would soon come.

NONE of the workers at the store-room realized what terrific things were due to happen. They learned, a few minutes later, when they saw the first flash from the hillock and heard the mighty crackle it produced.

Down spurted a wave of man-made lightning that ripped the big advertising signs to shreds, for the great truck was located just behind them. There was plenty of smash to that stroke, for the capacitors had been feeding from one of the many high-tension lines that crossed the meadows.

Millions of volts were directed toward the weak spot of the Vortex factory – the storeroom, with its inflammable materials.

But for The Shadow, those bolts would have found their mark, and more. Men would have been stunned by the stroke. The fact that they were removing incendiary bombs would have meant their positive doom. The emergency measure ordered by Darrison was a misguided idea. At present, it did not matter. The lightning missed its target.

Instead of striking the heart of the plant, the forked terror found the electrified fence. The surrounding meshwork blazed, while balls of lightning danced merrily along from post to post. More lightning thundered from the sky, to increase the vivid spectacle, as weird as a pyrotechnic display. But the fence was absorbing every volt that Bayruth's great machine could throw!

Amid the thunderous crashes, The Shadow laughed.

He had introduced a system used in the protection of oil fields – a method of diverting lightning from a vulnerable spot. Electrified fences were lightning attractors, and this one was serving its duty perfectly. But it wasn't staving off chance strokes from the sky. This fence was offsetting the deadly work of scheming men.

Snatching a rifle from a stupefied guard, The Shadow wheeled out to the very center of the loading court. He could see the spurts of lightning as they darted downward, and he took their source as a target.

With his long-range weapon, The Shadow opened fire on Bayruth's truck. Others saw what he was doing, and came dashing out to join in the fire.

Immediately, the lightning hurling stopped. Bayruth knew its uselessness. Guns began to answer from the brow of the hill, but they were puny revolvers. The guards, with their rifles, held the full advantage. But The Shadow couldn't count upon them to prevent the flight of Bayruth and his crew.

Hurrying to the storeroom, The Shadow scooped up a pair of incendiary bombs. Coming out, he met the superintendent.

THE THUNDER KING

"I'm going through the back," The Shadow told him. "Signal when you cut off the juice; then start it again in fifteen seconds."

From a small gate in the rear fence, The Shadow saw the beefy man lean from the dynamo room and wave. Whipping through, The Shadow clamped the gate behind him. Clambering up the slope, he could hear the whine of rifle bullets above his head. Revolvers still were answering; their punches were louder as The Shadow neared the brow of the hill.

OVER the top, The Shadow flung the first bomb at the hazy outline of the truck. It struck the side of the vehicle and went off with a great gush of flame, lighting the whole scene. The Shadow saw the open back of the truck, with Bayruth in it, huddled beside the transformers of his great lightning maker. The Shadow chucked the second bomb for the interior.

Bayruth must have guessed that it was coming. He yanked one half of the double door, and was lucky enough to pull the right section. The bomb struck the closing barrier and glanced aside with another burst of flame.

In that lurid light, Bayruth saw The Shadow swooping forward. Quickly, the apish man grabbed for a switch and tugged it.

Puny revolver shots, aimed for the spot where The Shadow had last been seen, were useless and as nothing, compared to the last bolt that Bayruth delivered. A shaft of lightning skimmed the hill brow, blasting away chunks of rock and stumps of trees. In that blaze, Bayruth saw the flying pieces of debris, any one of which might have been a figure cloaked in black.

If caught by that charge, The Shadow could have survived only if clad in rubber, as before. But it was doubtful, even so, that he could live after a plunge down the craggy knoll.

Quite confident that he had finished The Shadow, one way or the other, Bayruth called for his men to board the truck.

They groped to it and climbed inside. Wires were hauled in, and the truck made for the slope. Rifle shots faded in the distance.

Peering out, Bayruth was troubled only when he saw the gleam of car lights from below and knew that they were trying to take up the trail. But that seemed trivial to Bayruth and his companions, who were grouped in the darkness of the truck.

What they were listening for was the laugh of The Shadow. The weird mockery did not come. Bayruth delivered a crackle of mirth instead.

It was his token of victory over The Shadow, telling his companions that they need have no worry for the future.

CHAPTER XIX. RIVALS MEET

SILLY though it seemed, Margo was pounding anew at the door of her cell. She had been hammering, at intervals, for hours, and no one had answered. But she wouldn't give up. Margo remembered stories of prisoners who had dug underground for years, to quit when they had but a few feet to go. She wasn't going to make the same mistake.

THE THUNDER KING

Apparently, Bayruth had taken all of his technicians with him, but there was a chance that someone might return. Perhaps such a person might heed Margo's knocks, and be just the one who would listen for her plea to be released. So Margo rapped, and then went back to her chair.

As she sat down, she was sure that she heard echoes beyond the door. At first, they were vague, as though her strained imagination fancied that her own knocks were returning. Then she recognized that the sounds were footsteps. They approached the door; she heard the bolt grind back. Springing to her feet, Margo was at the door when it opened.

She recognized the man who confronted her. Blandle!

The poker-faced man had a companion, almost out of sight beyond Blandle's rangy form. Margo saw a darkish face, with keen eyes, and knew that the man must be Jerome Thorden.

She gave him a polite smile over Blandle's shoulder. It might have been of some avail with Thorden, if Blandle hadn't recognized her as the girl from the Platinum Grill.

"So it's you," said Blandle, coolly. He turned to Thorden: "This is the girl I mentioned. No wonder I didn't hear from Bayruth, after I came back to the Platinum Grill."

"Ah, yes," observed Thorden, stepping forward. "Quite charming, isn't she? I don't blame Bayruth for keeping her locked up while he is away."

Indignation flashed from Margo's eyes, but it impressed neither Thorden nor Blandle. Their politeness seemed a form of mockery, and when Thorden began smoothly to question her, Margo decided not to reply at all.

He was asking her what she knew about Bayruth, and why the inventor had imprisoned her. To Margo, those oily questions were simply the first steps to more important ones.

From queries regarding Bayruth, Thorden could lead to others that concerned Cranston, and before she knew it, Margo would be telling him too much. After a certain point, even her silence would become a give-away.

The Shadow was quite right in telling Harry Vincent that they could rely on Margo's judgment. Margo had one very excellent system, which was to say nothing until the pressure became too strong. Since neither Thorden nor Bayruth were inclined to use pressure, her silence served quite well.

Both men had guns. They suggested that Margo accompany them around Bayruth's preserves, so she complied. The guns were a good argument, and Margo was quite glad to get out of her cell.

Thorden suggested that she walk ahead of them; Margo did so. She was quite sure that the guns were close in back of her, so she made no false moves.

They arrived in Bayruth's laboratory. Thorden saw the perpetual motion machine and stepped past Margo to examine it. He gave one of his crisp laughs.

"So this is the great invention!" he remarked. "Do you know how it operates, Miss –"

He paused, as though expecting Margo to supply her name – as if he did not know it. Just another wedge to get her talking, so Margo met Thorden's gaze with frozen silence. She stepped to the big wheel and started it revolving. Thorden and Blandle watched the bouncing ball, and soon recognized its purpose. Blandle,

THE THUNDER KING

particularly, was impressed.

"It works," he declared, reluctantly. "Maybe there is something in this perpetual-motion stuff."

"Something, indeed," agreed Thorden. "My money, Bandle! I paid Thorden to produce other things, and he kept reverting to this. He is welcome to keep this brain child."

Thorden threw a sidelong glance to Margo, to see if his statement impressed her. She was still doing an imitation of a wooden Indian.

"Suppose you chat with the talkative lady, Bandle," suggested Thorden. "I want to look around."

Margo ignored Bandle, to watch Thorden while he looked around. He came to a metal cabinet in the corner, tried to open the drawers, but found them locked. He was still rattling them, when a rumbling sound interrupted.

It was Bayruth's truck, returning. It rolled into the cavernous garage outside the laboratory, and Margo gave a weary sigh. She had just been on the point of suggesting that Thorden and Bandle examine a couple of odd-looking lamps.

Both were connected with the wall switch, and Margo had hoped to set the two men hopping under an electric current. Bayruth's return put the end to that little scheme.

BAYRUTH was the first man to drop from the truck. The white-haired inventor looked anxiously about, saw the lights in the lab and hurried there, closing the door behind him. He thrust out a scrawny hand to Thorden.

"I knew you'd be here!" wheezed Bayruth. "How do you like the place? Very nice, isn't it, out in the New Jersey hills? Ah! You have met Miss Lane. I'm so glad you released her. I had to lock her up because she didn't want to stay."

Mention of a lock reminded Bayruth of something else. He brought a key from his pocket and unlocked the filing cabinet. Out of one drawer, he brought an envelope and flourished it toward Thorden.

"The plans for my great invention," began Bayruth. "But wait!" He thrust the envelope into his pocket. "I can show you the apparatus, itself."

Bayruth was stepping toward the revolving wheel, when Thorden halted him.

"Miss Lane has already shown us the perpetual-motion machine," said Thorden, using his crisp tone. "There are other matters that I would prefer to discuss, Bayruth."

"Of course," acknowledged Bayruth. "But first, I must take Miss Lane back to her cell –"

"Not necessary, Bayruth," Thorden interrupted, as the inventor grasped Margo's arm and drew her toward the door. "I would like Miss Lane to hear what I have to say. I have an idea" – his tone was thoughtful – "that she is well acquainted with a certain Mr. Cranston."

All through that discourse, Margo was becoming rather bewildered. This by-play between Thorden and Bayruth couldn't all be for her benefit. Somehow, it must be leading to a climax; though what it might be, Margo could not imagine. She did not have to imagine, for the climax came quite suddenly.

THE THUNDER KING

Bayruth, with one hand upon the door, the other gripping Margo's arm, saw Thorden moving toward him, followed by Bandle. Perhaps Bayruth was a creature who formed sudden mistrusts, even toward those with whom he was closely associated. It might have been that he didn't like to be outnumbered, two to one.

At any rate, he corrected the latter situation by taking Margo on his side, though she was an unwilling ally.

Bayruth did two things at once. He yanked the door open as he pulled Margo toward him. With a quick shove, he sent the girl stumbling toward Thorden and Bandle as they sprang forward.

Throwing out her arms to prevent a sprawl, Margo involuntarily blocked the two men. They spun her aside, and she landed in a corner, knocking over a table and bringing a lamp down upon her shoulders. Fortunately, the lamp wasn't electrified.

Out through the door, Bayruth was actually darting away from Thorden and Bandle, the men who had come here specially to see him. But they weren't following Bayruth. Instead, they were dropping back.

Bayruth's men – Klegg and several others, among them Jerry – were out of the truck, brandishing revolvers. One word from Bayruth was the only signal they needed to cut loose.

Bayruth was crazy. That was the way it struck Margo. Sprawled in the corner, her head against the wall, one foot on top of the overturned table and the other tangled in the lamp cord, she was in a most ludicrous position, one that had suddenly become a vantage point, for she could see all that was happening and still be out of harm's way. To her, it looked like mutiny.

If Bayruth had simply forged the lightning bolts, while Thorden had reserved the privilege of hurling them, this might not have happened then. But Bayruth, so far, had been the whole show. Apparently, he wasn't going to play second fiddle in any more of Thorden's machinations.

CAKGLING gleefully, Bayruth was retiring to a waiting car, and his men were backing with him, still keeping their guns toward the lab door where Thorden and Bandle were rooted.

Yes, Bayruth was going his way, leaving Thorden in possession of all the equipment, which only Bayruth himself could handle and which no longer was needed. Maybe he wasn't crazy. He was abandoning his perpetual-motion machine, which, to date, he had valued more highly than anything else.

All that Bayruth was taking was time. Too much time. Before he and his men could get to their car, Margo heard shouts from the entrance to the cavern that served as the garage. While Bayruth's men were turning, others lunged into sight.

They were uniformed guards from the Vortex plant, and county deputies, who had joined in pursuit of Bayruth. Behind them, Margo saw a smaller cluster that included Oswald Kelber.

Bayruth crackled out a wild order, calling upon his men to open fire. Margo started to close her eyes, so she would not see the horrible results.

As she did, she heard a laugh, far louder than Bayruth's cry. Grim mirth that froze the men who heard it, for it rose, like a voice from the dead, in a crescendo challenge that stirred the cavern with its weird reverberations.

Margo's eyes came open very wide. Only one being could deliver mockery like that. The Shadow. Staring, Margo hoped to see the fighter in black. She did; he was coming from the last place that she expected.

Out of the great truck which Bayruth had used as a lightning-bearing juggernaut sprang The Shadow, a pair of automatics in his fists!

CHAPTER XX. MASTER OF THUNDER

GUNS were blazing from every direction, their stabs so sharp and frequent, that Margo wondered how anyone could survive the outburst. Most of all, she was concerned about The Shadow, for he was the logical target for every man who represented crime.

Disentangling herself from the corner, Margo landed on her hands and knees and decided to go no farther.

She saw The Shadow.

He was in the truck no longer. He had gone from it, in a long leap, amid the first volley of wild shots that missed him. He was weaving across the cavern, jabbing straight shots at Bayruth and the band that served the white-haired inventor.

They were maddened at the way The Shadow had tricked them back on the hill. Too well, they realized how he had survived.

Diving toward the truck when Bayruth had released the last batch of lightning, The Shadow had reached it safely, and had been the first to board the vehicle. He had ridden along with crooks to crime's headquarters. He had tricked them then, and he was tricking them now, by drawing their shots in his direction.

For Bayruth's men of murder were spilling faster than The Shadow could drop them with his guns alone. In going after The Shadow, thugs had exposed themselves to the fire of pursuers who had come from the Vortex plant. Of that evil tribe, only one man was still on his feet: Oliver Bayruth.

Having left battle to his henchmen, Bayruth, surprisingly agile, was trying to leap into a car, even though it would be impossible to make a getaway. Wheeling suddenly, The Shadow sprang across the rolling forms of men like Klegg and Jerry, to overtake the frantic inventor. Just then, a revolver spoke.

It was Kelber's gun. He had thrust through the ranks, to put in a timely shot that wasn't really needed. Close behind him, Harry Vincent tried to jog his arm, for Harry saw that The Shadow was already after Bayruth.

But Harry wasn't there in time. Kelber scored a hit. His shot dropped Bayruth from the car step and sprawled him on the stony floor.

The Shadow was stooping over Bayruth, when Kelber and others arrived. Dying, his eyes glassy, Bayruth glared upward. He tried to speak a name as he wagged one hand, and slid the other weakly toward his coat pocket. Each time Bayruth crackled a syllable, his voice broke.

"Thor –" he gulped. "Thor... Thor –"

The third croak was his last. Bayruth's glassy eyes still stared up toward the faces that peered at him. His smile was venomous – an accusation – but it had become a dead man's leer.

"He means Thorden!" boomed Kelber suddenly, swinging from the group. "I'll settle scores with that man!"

Kelber pivoted toward the laboratory, where Thorden was struggling against heavy odds. Blandle was already overwhelmed, with four men taking credit for his capture; but in going after the rangy man, the attackers had

THE THUNDER KING

neglected Thorden.

He was still clutching his gun and trying to twist free, when Kelber picked him as a target. Finger on trigger, Kelber was ready to drop the man who had been marked as the master of murder.

A gloved fist tightened on Kelber's wrist, so powerful that it stayed the big man's trigger finger. From crouched position, The Shadow was halting Kelber's shot. With his other hand, The Shadow plucked up an envelope that had dropped from Bayruth's pocket.

Releasing Kelber's wrist, The Shadow rose to full height, dipped his free hand to his cloak, and with the other extended the envelope.

Staring at the envelope, Kelber saw the batch of letters that poked from its unsealed flap. He heard The Shadow's strangely whispered query:

"Have you forgotten these, Thor?"

The name "Thor" jolted Kelber, as though he had stepped in the way of a few hundred volts. Uttered by The Shadow, it had a new significance. It didn't come in hurried fashion, as though it were a single syllable, the first part of a name. It was a name in itself, one that The Shadow repeated:

"Thor!"

The name of the great lightning god, master of destruction from the heavens. No title could be more apt for the man higher up, the real head of crime, whose purposes Bayruth had served.

Thor, the thunder king!

Not Jerome Thorden, whose name had been neatly paraphrased, in part; but Oswald Kelber!

KELBER was the man who had been known to his followers as Thor. Only Bayruth could denounce him, and he had tried, when he found himself double-crossed.

Bayruth's dying stare had been fixed straight upon Kelber, and The Shadow had observed it. He had seen something else. Bayruth's plucking at the envelope. Its evidence would do, even though Bayruth now lay dead.

Kelber's booming defiance suited the title of Thor. With his sudden bellow, the thunder king took a new hold on his gun and aimed for The Shadow.

It was what The Shadow wanted – a move whereby Kelber would openly betray his guilt. As for damaging The Shadow, Kelber did not have a chance. His hand was more numbed than he supposed, and before he could pull his trigger, The Shadow was away.

As he twisted from Kelber's path of aim, The Shadow whipped a gun into sight, bringing it in the hand that was dipped against his cloak. So swift was the gesture, that he had Kelber covered and helpless before the master of thunder knew it. Others failed to observe it, too. The Shadow was too swift for them; they saw only Kelber and his attempt to aim his gun.

Thorden, wrenching from hands that had suddenly loosed him, jabbed the first shot at Kelber. It clipped the big man and jolted him, serving as an example for a dozen other marksmen. Shots rang out from every

THE THUNDER KING

direction, and all were aimed at Kelber. They stretched him lifeless on the floor, across the body of Bayruth, whose death had represented Kelber's final murder.

The Shadow was gone, into the black edge of the cavern, when others began to look for him. It was Harry Vincent who met Margo, when she came from the laboratory, and suggested that she ride back with him to New York. On the way out, Thorden detached himself from a group, to insist that they stop at his mansion, later.

This they did, after Harry had taken Margo to dinner, to make up for the stingy meals that she had received while Bayruth's prisoner

When they were ushered up to Thorden's office, they found Lamont Cranston seated there, resting wearily in a chair. Thorden explained that he had called Cranston's home and asked him to come into town.

"Do you know, Cranston," expressed Thorden, "I really believe that you saw through this business more clearly than I did. I should have taken you into my confidence. The trouble was, I mistrusted you."

The Shadow nodded.

"I mistrusted you, too," he said, in Cranston's style. "But not for very long. I was soon convinced that Kelber was the brain in back of Bayruth."

"Just how?"

"Kelber had as much to gain as you – and more," returned The Shadow, calmly. "The real profit for Universal Industries lay in those key contracts held by Fralingham, Orvis and Darrison. Kelber took over Asbestile, and the Orvis proposition. He was after Vortex Circulators tonight. We can be quite sure that he had a substitute for Vortex Circulators."

It was Margo who showed sudden surprise.

"But, Lamont!" she exclaimed. "What about Wilbert? He was working for Kelber –"

"Until he met up with Quade," interposed The Shadow. "Do you remember the correspondence they discussed? Thorden has it. Here, you can see it."

THORDEN passed Cranston the envelope that had come from Bayruth's pocket. He opened it to show the letters. They were addressed to Bayruth, and they concerned the lightning machine, but they bore Kelber's signature, not Thorden's.

"Wilbert was with Kelber," analyzed The Shadow, "and Quade was with Bayruth. They got together and arranged a little plan. Bayruth was keeping Kelber's letters, just in case of a double cross. Quade wanted him to sell them back to Kelber. If he wouldn't pay enough, Thorden naturally would have."

Margo nodded understanding.

"Kelber must have suspected that Wilbert and Quade were framing something," The Shadow added. "Maybe Bayruth told him, without furnishing full details. However, Kelber needed Wilbert no longer, and Bayruth had no use for Quade. So Kelber had Bayruth wait for them along Highway 95."

Easing back in his chair, The Shadow gazed at Thorden and smiled.

THE THUNDER KING

"Call in Bandle," he suggested. "He deserves congratulations."

Thorden winced; then he laughed in friendly tone. It was sufficient for Bandle. He stepped from his listening post behind the wall.

"Just force of habit, I assure you," said Thorden, in a tone of apology. "This Kelber business had us worried. We hadn't an idea of how it really operated. We were trying to get hold of Bayruth and make him explain. When he called me tonight, I thought he was coming back to my side, so I humored him."

"Without suspecting," inquired The Shadow, "that it was Kelber's way of framing you?"

"Stupid of me, but I didn't," admitted Thorden. "Nor did I realize that my insistence on a test of Vortex Circulators was a play into Kelber's hands. If it hadn't been for The Shadow, Kelber would have pinned the entire game on me. I had a close call, Cranston."

The Shadow supplied a Cranston smile, and said:

"I fancy that The Shadow had several close calls."

"He must have," agreed Thorden. "Bandle helped him out of one. Bandle was following you, Cranston, and saw another car upon the trail. He stayed with the other car and wound up at an old garage, where a thug was trying to fling The Shadow into a grease pit. Bandle put a few bullets into the thug to turn the fight The Shadow's way."

It happened that Thorden was telling something that The Shadow already knew. The Shadow had recognized Bandle's real intent, after the struggle with Matt. It had been an important point in swinging The Shadow's suspicion from Thorden to Kelber.

The visitors were about to leave, when Cranston remembered something else. He mentioned it to Thorden when they were standing by the door.

"The night I called on Orvis," he said, "when Margo was so near, and yet so far. The thunderstorm that came up must have worried Kelber badly. He knew that Bayruth was all set to deliver, and Kelber hadn't expected a storm so soon.

"He had to do some clever stalling with Fralingham and Darrison, to keep from getting there before the lightning struck. He was in a bad spot, because he wanted my testimony to help frame you later; but he couldn't warn me, or I would have known that he was Thor."

THAT paradox intrigued Thorden. He was still thinking of it when he stood, with Bandle, at the upstairs window watching Cranston help Margo into the limousine, while Harry was walking away to get his own car.

The webby curtains were drawn aside, for Thorden wanted his friends to see him, if they looked back, and know that his spying ways were ended.

They didn't look back, yet when the limousine had started, Thorden still stared, feeling that eyes must be watching him from somewhere in the darkness. For Thorden was sure that he heard a strange sound from the night, like an echo from the past.

He looked at Bandle, but his companion's face was unchanged. Thorden decided that his imagination must have tricked him. Yet he was not sure.

THE THUNDER KING

For the sound that Jerome Thorden fancied that he heard was a fleeting laugh; solemn, like a knell. It could have been The Shadow's final tone of triumph over Oswald Kelber, the master of crime who had styled himself Thor, the thunder king!

THE END