



THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE

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- ? [CHAPTER I. THE BRIDGEWATER CRIME](#)
- ? [CHAPTER II. A DEAD MAN'S JOKE](#)
- ? [CHAPTER III. SHADOW BAIT](#)
- ? [CHAPTER IV. BLIND MAN'S BLUFF](#)
- ? [CHAPTER V. HOW TO MAKE A STAR](#)
- ? [CHAPTER VI. WHIRLPOOL OF DEATH](#)
- ? [CHAPTER VII. VICTIM NO. 2](#)
- ? [CHAPTER VIII. THE CORPSE THAT WALKED](#)
- ? [CHAPTER IX. A TRICK WITH A SPONGE](#)
- ? [CHAPTER X. THE SHADOW PLAYS A TUNE](#)
- ? [CHAPTER XI. THE THIRD STOOGES](#)
- ? [CHAPTER XII. THE PORTABLE HOUSE](#)
- ? [CHAPTER XIII. THE MAN IN THE WELL](#)
- ? [CHAPTER XIV. INVITATION TO MURDER](#)
- ? [CHAPTER XV. THE CLOSING NET](#)

CHAPTER I. THE BRIDGEWATER CRIME

LIKE most State capitals, the town was not overly large or overly important in an industrial way. Politics was its main business. Here were located the various branches and bureaus of the State government. But the two buildings that really dominated the town were the domed capitol and the lovely executive mansion where the governor lived.

The executive mansion was an architectural gem. Broad steps led to its entrance. Inside was a huge foyer and a richly carpeted staircase. An elevator carried lawmakers and job hunters to the private suite on an upper floor where the governor transacted business when he was at home.

A pressroom was on one side of the entrance foyer. Its door was always open. Nobody could come or go without being seen by the eagle-eyed political reporters from the capital city's three daily newspapers.

The pressroom was as untidy as a rabbit hutch. Papers littered the place. There were more cigarette stubs on the floor than in the brass cuspidors. Phones jangled incessantly. Visitors usually gasped at the disorder when they peered in. Sometimes they became pests by asking a lot of silly questions about newspaper work. But the door of that press coop always stayed open.

It made it easier to spot important personages and buttonhole them for news.

Such a man was now passing the press-room doorway. He had not descended in the elevator. He had come down the broad staircase, where a couple of guards were stationed to prevent the common herd from trespassing. He nodded pleasantly to the guards and they touched their caps respectfully.

He was a heavy-set, well-dressed man who radiated respectability. He carried a leather brief case in one hand. The other held a cigarette in a long black holder.

"There goes Richard Benton," one of the reporters in the pressroom said quickly.

He dropped his poker cards. So did the other newshawks. They piled out the doorway into the foyer. They blocked off Benton's exit.

Benton smiled. He was a famous New York lawyer. He didn't come to this State capital very often. When he did, doors opened magically for him. He and the governor were personal friends. Benton had contributed heavily to the party election fund. He was reported to be interested in a pending water-power bill. His presence today at the executive mansion might be significant.

"Anything new, Mr. Benton?"

"Not a thing, boys. My visit today was purely a social one. As you know, the governor and I are old friends. I happened to be in town, so naturally I dropped in to see him."

A reporter from an opposition newspaper gave Richard Benton a hostile stare.

"Did you and the governor happen to discuss the water-power bill which now awaits the governor's signature?"

Benton lost his smile, but he kept his temper.

"I told you that my visit was merely a friendly call."

"The water-power bill is generally agreed to be a much-needed reform measure. Are you in favor of it?"

"No comment."

"The governor promised in his campaign speeches that he would sign such a bill. Did he tell you he would?"

"No comment," Benton repeated curtly.

His growing anger merely widened the grin of the reporter. If Benton got sore at the heckling, he might blurt out something that would make good headlines. So the reporter persisted.

"It is rumored that you have a big financial interest in water power. It has been stated, and never denied, that you would like to see the governor break his promise to the people and veto that reform bill. What is your comment on that?"

"My comment is good morning, gentlemen," Benton replied suavely.

He strode briskly through the foyer to the exit door. He walked rapidly down the broad stone steps to the sidewalk. The reporters trailed him, firing questions on the run. But all they got was a tight-lipped smile and silence.

Richard Benton got into a taxicab. He spoke loud enough to be heard clearly.

"The Bridgewater Hotel, please!"

Reporters made no effort to follow the cab. They realized that an attempt to prolong the interview was merely a waste of time. Besides, there were more reporters at the Bridgewater. Maybe the hotel

newshawks could succeed where the political boys had failed. And it was always possible that Benton had told the truth and there was nothing sensational in the wind.

A glance at Richard Benton's face in the taxi, however, might have excited his disappointed questioners.

BENTON had dropped his smiling mask. His mouth twitched. He seemed both puzzled and nervous.

His glance dropped to the leather brief case in his lap. His hand crept to the fastenings of the bag. He seemed itching to open the brief case.

Finally, he did.

Pawing hastily through a mass of papers, Benton withdrew a long envelope. The envelope was sealed. The puzzlement in Benton's eyes was replaced by a kind of baffled greed.

"I wonder just what is in that duplicate envelope," he whispered to himself.

Suddenly, his frowning face lifted. He saw the taxi driver staring covertly at him over one shoulder. Instantly, Benton's manner became casual. He replaced the sealed envelope in the brief case. Leaning backward, he put a cigarette in his long holder and began to smoke calmly. He looked like a man without a care in the world.

The pose of indifference stayed with him while he deftly ran the gauntlet of the newsmen at the Bridgewater Hotel. He told them the same thing he had told the reporters at the governor's mansion. To everything else he snapped, "No comment!"

But when he gained the privacy of his room, Richard Benton was trembling with suppressed eagerness. He laid his brief case on a table as gently as if it might contain a fortune in jewels - or dynamite!

His movements became rapid and stealthy. He made sure that the door of his room was locked. He withdrew the key and shoved it into his pocket. Into the keyhole Benton stuffed a wad of paper to discourage any eavesdropper who might tiptoe down the corridor to peep into his room.

Then Benton walked alertly to the window.

It was a rear window. It faced a narrow court, with no windows opposite. A fire escape led to a dark alley, which in turn led to a side street around the corner from the Bridgewater's ornate lobby.

Richard Benton locked the window and drew down the shade. It made the room pitch-dark. He snapped on the lights with a low-toned murmur of satisfaction. He turned and stared at the steam radiator in his room. The sight of it brought a tight smile to his lips.

His next action was prompt - and peculiar. He turned the control handle at one side of the radiator until he had shut off the steam. Then he unscrewed the metal valve at the other side. He took the valve off completely and laid it on the floor. This left the hole for the air vent wide open.

Turning the control handle gently, Benton allowed steam to escape in a small white plume. It made a faint purring sound that was not audible in the corridor outside. It looked like the tiny jet of steam from the roaster of a peanut stand.

But Benton was interested in something a lot more important than peanuts. With a quick clutch, he opened the brief case. He took out the sealed envelope that had made his eyes glitter so strangely in the taxicab.

He used the steam from the radiator vent hole to open the gummed flap of the envelope. It was one of two identical envelopes Benton had brought with him to his private conference with the governor. He read it hungrily.

The sight of it brought both amazement and fear to Benton's eyes. The amazement remained, but the fear gradually faded. It was replaced by a cold, shiny greed. Benton put the document back into the envelopes and shoved it in his inside pocket. His voice was a whisper of delight.

"Good heavens! I should have guessed it was something like this! What a fool I have been - what an absolute fool!"

There was silence for a moment. Then the whisper of Richard Benton's voice made a rustling like the faint squeak of a rat:

"Five thousand dollars, hell! This means millions! From now on, I'm going places!"

He turned toward the coat and hat he had thrown carelessly on a chair. He could barely see them through the haze of greed in his eyes. He was completely indifferent to the fact that there was a closet door behind his back.

The door of that closet was silently opening.

Through the narrow crack, a hand emerged. The hand was gloved. Its steady fingers slid, unseen by Benton, about three inches along the smooth wall. There was a light button there. As a gloved fingertip touched the button, Benton repeated his jubilant whisper: "From now on, I'm going places!"

A click of the wall button plunged the shade-drawn room into darkness.

"You're right, my friend," a voice growled. "You're going places - straight to hell!"

THE unseen intruder sprang. Richard Benton whirled as the light went out. He tried to shout.

It was too late. A palm choked off his terrified yell. The muzzle of a gun jammed against Benton's wildly thudding heart. The killer fired at such point-blank range that the flame from the gun ignited the victim's clothing. Sparks began to eat through the cloth in a widening circle.

Benton crashed to the floor. There was a bullet through his heart. He had died instantly.

The noise of that single gunshot in a closed room had been terrific. But the killer didn't seem to be unduly worried. Laughter echoed softly in the darkness.

A match flared, disclosing for an instant gloved hands and a masked face. The mask had been pushed aside from the killer's lips. The tip of a cigarette glowed. The killer was calmly soothing his tense nerves, following a perfect ambush and an easy slaughter.

He kept puffing steadily even when he heard the frightened voice of a chambermaid outside the door. She kept pounding on the door.

"Glory be to heavens! Is there anything wr-r-rong in there?"

The murderer heard the chamber maid rush away. The diminishing sound of her feet told him in which direction she had run.

Not even the crash of gunfire and the fear of tragedy could break down ingrained habit of a hotel employee. The woman was racing toward the employees' staircase at the distant end of the corridor.

It meant that the chambermaid was taking the longest possible route to reach the clerk's desk in the lobby downstairs, to report the shooting inside a locked room. It gave the unknown gunman ample time to make a perfect getaway.

His glowing cigarette dropped to the floor. It was crushed out under his heel. He darted toward the window and raised the shade. A swift click took care of the window latch. The sash lifted.

A dark figure bounded lightly to the fire-escape platform. He faded without a sound down the slanting ladders. The gloom of the narrow alley swallowed him. He vanished in the direction of the side street.

If the killer had a car waiting, it was an efficient one. There was no echoing sound from a motor. No clash of gears.

In the locked room in the Bridgewater Hotel, the corpse of Richard Benton lay flat on its back, staring fixedly at the ceiling with three wide eyes. The blood-drenched eye over Benton's ruptured heart was by far the largest.

Pounding fists and excited voices sounded presently outside the locked door. The wadded paper in the keyhole was pushed inward and fell to the floor. A passkey grated. The door was flung open.

A red-faced, gray-haired man with a derby hat was holding the passkey. He also had a gun. This was Regan, the house detective. With him was the hotel manager. Behind them trailed three ferret-eyed reporters from the lobby downstairs. They were the trio with whom the dead man had so recently talked.

But Richard Benton was very dead now. The newshawks gasped as they stared down at the hideous bullet wound over his heart, with its circle of charred cloth from the flame of a gun muzzle.

The gun that had killed him was gone. So was the murderer. It was obvious that the killer had sneaked from the closet, fired his one grim shot, and had then made a shrewd getaway via the alley fire escape.

Hissing of escaping steam from the vent hole in the radiator added a grotesque note. The unscrewed valve still lay on the floor. Nearby was the crushed stub of a half-smoked cigarette.

Regan, the house dick, uttered a quick order.

"Don't nobody touch nothing! I don't want this case gummed up!"

He hopped to the telephone and flashed a call to police headquarters. He felt better at the thought that the homicide squad was on the way. But anger flooded his face when he saw one of the reporters grab at the phone he had just laid down.

"Let that alone! Want to blur fingerprints?"

"Nuts! You just used it yourself!... Hello! Operator! This is Eddie Kramer of the Daily Express. Gimme the executive mansion, in a hurry!"

He got it. He talked to the governor, after a swift and razor-sharp argument with the governor's confidential secretary. Eddie Kramer had tragic and sensational news that put the governor himself on the phone in a hurry.

The governor sounded queer. His voice seemed peculiar to the shrewd Eddie Kramer. There was amazement in his tone, horror - and a kind of savage rage.

"Thank you for letting me know about this at once, Eddie. I'll be right over!"

Kramer hung up. He swung toward his fellow newshawks.

"The governor sounded as if he was glad that someone had bumped his good friend, Richard Benton. Wow! I wanna talk to my rag!"

But Regan, the house detective, stopped that. He made the reporters chase downstairs to the public phone booths in order to file their preliminary stories about the crime. Then he locked the room door. He didn't open it until the homicide squad arrived.

THE homicide squad found itself confronted by a Grade A mystery. That steam from the opened valve in the radiator didn't seem to make sense. Richard Benton had, of course, removed the valve before he had taken off his gloves. The cops didn't know that.

They assumed, wrongly, from the absence of fingerprints, that Benton's killer had monkeyed with the radiator. The lack of prints seemed to point to the killer.

Going over the room, the fingerprint detail discovered plenty of prints. But all of them matched the fingers of the dead man.

The crushed cigarette stub on the floor was a bit more definite. It wasn't an ordinary butt. Police noses sniffed sharply at it. It was a menthol cigarette. An opened package on the dead lawyer's bureau contained only a popular brand of cigarettes. The killer must have had a tender throat and tough nerves! He had calmly smoked a cigarette to relax his tension before he had fled!

There were no prints on the menthol cigarette stub.

Nor did Richard Benton's brief case disclose any satisfactory reason for the sudden ambush that had snuffed out his life. It contained a few routine papers, none of them in any way noteworthy.

The inspector in charge of the homicide detail knelt gingerly beside the sprawled corpse, to give it a careful and painstaking search. But before he could begin, there was a knock on the door. The cop on duty outside poked his head in, with a respectful murmur:

"His excellency, the governor!"

The governor strode in without his customary polite smile. He seemed in a cold and bitter rage. Without a word, he crossed the room and stood staring down at the body of his friend. The sight of Benton's bleeding body seemed to harden his rage.

"I don't know who killed him," the governor said, "but if ever a man deserved death, Richard Benton did! He was a dirty, double-crossing rat!"

CHAPTER II. A DEAD MAN'S JOKE

INSTANT silence was created by the bitter accusation. All eyes turned toward the governor. He stood with clenched fists, staring down at the corpse of the New York lawyer who was supposed to be one of his best friends.

The police inspector blinked. He was worried by the sensational statement he had just heard. He yanked open the door and spoke to the cop on duty outside.

"Don't allow anyone else to enter this room. Especially reporters!"

"Yes, sir."

He returned to where the governor stood. His manner was respectful, but firm.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'll have to ask you to explain that remark. Have you a definite reason to believe that Mr. Benton was a crook?"

"Forget it," the governor said. "I spoke impulsively. Whether my accusation is true or not doesn't matter. There are some things better left unsaid. Particularly when politics is concerned."

"Have you any idea who killed this man - or why?"

"None. His death is a complete mystery to me."

The inspector looked unhappy. But he was a man of honesty in his devotion to police duty. He stared grimly at the most influential man in the State.

"I hope you see the spot I'm in, sir. A murder has been committed that will be a newspaper sensation. Not only in this State, but in New York State, where Richard Benton lived. It can't be covered up or hushed. I've got to do my duty. My duty is to question you - or resign."

The governor smiled wanly.

"You're right, inspector. Richard Benton's rottenness can't be covered up, and it shouldn't be! He came to me today with as dirty, and as cowardly, an attempt at blackmail as I ever encountered in my whole political career! I say cowardly, because Benton didn't have the nerve to make his rotten demand to my face. I only found out after he had left."

"I don't understand," the inspector murmured. "How could Benton blackmail you without your being aware of it until after he had left?"

"Perhaps you had better let me explain," the governor said.

His explanation was a story of greed and double dealing. Richard Benton had come to see the governor as a personal friend; as he had on many other occasions.

This time, however, he had seemed agitated and nervous. The governor noticed his friend's peculiar behavior and commented on it. But Benton laughed away any idea that he was worried. He departed, finally, after a lot of aimless talk.

But he left behind him on the governor's desk a sealed envelope. He asked the governor to read it carefully, when he found the time.

The governor's attention was diverted by a couple of visitors for whom appointments had been made. But he was puzzled by Benton's accountable nervousness and his eagerness to depart. As soon as he could, the governor opened the letter and read its contents.

It was a bold attempt at blackmail. It was backed up by a threat to ruin the governor's career if he failed to do what Richard Benton demanded.

"Benton wanted me to veto the water-power bill now awaiting my signature," the governor said harshly.

His words created another sensation. The water-power bill was a reform measure that had been agitated throughout the State for nearly twenty years. Every decent citizen wanted it. It had been passed by both branches of the legislature.

The governor had publicly announced his pleasure at the privilege of signing so necessary a law. He had even invited prominent leaders from all over the State to be present at the public signing of the bill, as a historic occasion.

This was the bill that Richard Benton had demanded that the governor veto!

"The paper he left for me was typewritten and unsigned," the governor said. "The blackmail threat was the dirtiest part of it. It was faked blackmail - if you understand what I mean. Certain innocent things I had done, people I had been persuaded to meet by Benton, places I had gone to in his company - all this was stitched together to make me seem a blackguard in my private behavior."

The governor drew a deep breath of disgust.

"It was so cleverly contrived, that no newspaper editor would have been afraid of libel. There were more hints of evil than out-and-out charges. It made me mad clean through. I was getting ready to come over here to Benton's hotel and thrash him within an inch of his life - when Eddie Kramer, of the Daily Express, telephoned me that somebody had shot Benton to death."

"Wasn't Benton interested in the old water-power set-up?" the police inspector asked. "Didn't he have a lot of money invested in some of those fly-by-night utility companies which the reform bill would have put out of business?"

"That is correct. If I had vetoed the reform bill, Benton would have profited enormously."

"I can see that," the inspector said. "But I don't understand why he was killed. That part still doesn't make sense."

DROPPING on his knees beside the corpse, the inspector resumed his interrupted search of Benton's pockets. It brought instant confirmation of the governor's story. There was a long envelope in Benton's inside pocket. Its flap had been steamed open. Inside was the carbon copy of an unsigned typewritten note.

It was a duplicate of the one described by the governor. He showed the inspector the sheet that Benton had left for him. The two documents were identical.

"That proves it," the inspector growled. "The guy was a crook, all right."

"I wish there was some way to hush it up," the governor said sadly. "He must have been insane! He was my friend for nearly thirty years. Do we have to let the newspapers know about the blackmail angle?"

"I'm afraid so. The letter Benton left with you and the carbon copy found on his body will have to be marked as evidence and turned over to the district attorney."

The governor sighed. But the faint murmur he made was drowned out by a louder sound. A scuffle was going on outside the door. The voice of the cop on duty was lifted angrily. Then the door flew open. Two intruders rushed in.

One of them was a woman. She was gorgeously beautiful. Her eyes were as blue as cornflowers. Her hair was like pale gold. Even in her excitement and worry, her loveliness was stunning.

Not so many years earlier, she had been one of the most popular stars on the musical-comedy stage. She had left the stage after she had married. Her name was known to every man in the room even before she parted her red lips to identify herself.

"I'm Claire Benton. What has happened to my husband? Why are these police here? And why am I not permitted to enter?"

The man with her gulped nervously. He was a good-looking young man, with even white teeth and a face like a collar ad. He spoke soothingly to Benton's wife.

"Take it easy, Claire. There is probably nothing seriously wrong."

"Oh, I forgot. This is Paul Hardy, a very dear friend. What are police doing here? And where is my husband?"

The inspector's glance flicked sideways. From where Mrs. Benton and Hardy stood, the body of the dead man was invisible beyond the projecting corner of a piece of furniture. The inspector continued to talk gently.

"Am I to assume that you are worried about Mr. Benton's safety?"

"Of course! What's become of him? Has he been kidnapped?"

"Maybe you had better tell me - why you think someone would kidnap him," the inspector said.

It came in a frightened rush of words. Claire Benton had been worried by her husband's behavior. He had acted as if there was something on his mind. He had evaded her questions and had told her not to annoy him. The previous morning, he had abruptly packed a bag. He said he had to make an unexpected trip to this State capital. He promised to be home by midnight.

Midnight came, but not Richard Benton.

"I waited until three a.m.," Claire said faintly, "then I telephoned the Bridgewater Hotel here. I knew it was his favorite hotel in the capital. The clerk told me Richard had registered but had gone out. He promised to have Richard telephone me in New York, when he returned. But I got no message. So I took a train, came here in a taxicab direct from the station - and where is Richard?"

The inspector hated to do it, but it was part of his duty to hand a shock to this pair and then watch their reaction.

He led them across the room to where the sheeted body lay. He twitched off the covering.

Paul Hardy uttered a cry of horror, Claire Benton was made of sterner stuff. She stood perfectly quiet, swaying slightly as she saw the hideous bullet wound above her husband's heart. The inspector thought she was about to faint. But she shook him off.

"Who did it?"

"I don't know, madam. I was hoping you might give us some sort of clue."

She shook her head woodenly. It wasn't self-control that made Claire Benton so calm, the inspector realized. She was stunned by the sight of her husband's bloody corpse. The inspector watched her narrowly, as well as Paul Hardy. But he could see nothing revealing in either of their faces.

THE governor had moved into the background when Benton's young wife and her companion had rushed into the room. Now he stepped forward. Claire recognized him.

"Governor! You've got to help! You're Richard's friend -"

"I'm sorry, Claire," he said slowly. His face was stony. "I was Richard's friend up to an hour before he was killed. I'm sorry to say it, but I have no further interest in him. Your husband was a rogue!"

Paul Hardy sprang forward, said harshly:

"What do you mean? Governor or no governor, you can't say that about Mr. Benton, or I'll smash you in the jaw!"

Claire restrained her impetuous companion.

"Be quiet, Paul! Let me talk to him, please... Why do you call Richard a rogue? Have you any proof?"

The governor's jaw tightened. He showed her the two typewritten letters - the one he had been handed by Benton and the carbon copy. He repeated the ugly tale he had already told the police.

Claire Benton shook her golden head. There was a tragic smile on her lovely face.

"It's not true! How could it be? You've known Richard nearly thirty years! You yourself admit that until an hour before he was murdered you still were his friend! How can you stand here, with Richard dead, and brand him as a rogue?"

"The facts themselves are the answer."

"Facts sometimes lie! A man like Richard wouldn't change his character overnight! He was one of the leading lawyers in New York. Did he ever before today, to your knowledge, commit a crime?"

"No," the governor admitted.

"Then why should he be a rogue now? Is it because he is dead and can't defend himself? Are you sure there isn't some monstrous conspiracy afoot?"

"Such an idea is sheer fantasy," the governor said. "I see no reason for changing my mind about your husband's behavior. Perhaps he was insane."

"Rot!" Claire Benton said. "Richard's mind was as clear as a bell! There's something strange behind his blackmail demand on you - and the prompt way in which he was killed by an unknown assassin."

There were tears in her blue eyes, but she winked them desperately away. A thoroughbred, if ever there was one, the police inspector thought. Then his eyes narrowed alertly.

Claire had dropped to her knees beside her husband's body. She was peering at his stark face. All at once, she uttered a high-pitched cry, began tearing fiercely at the corpse's clothing.

"Stop that!" the inspector shouted.

He sprang forward to restrain her but he was too late. Claire Benton had ripped open her husband's vest with a violence that made the buttons pop. Another clutch tore his shirt into a jagged ribbon. Benton's flesh was exposed, with the ugly bullet hole above his heart.

But Claire wasn't staring at the bullet hole. Her eyes were glued on the bare expanse of the dead man's chest.

"Inspector!" she gasped. "I was right! You've been tricked by some criminal. This man on the floor is not my husband!"

"What!"

The inspector thought she had gone mad. Richard Benton was a well-known New York lawyer. He had often been to this State capital. The inspector had recognized him. The governor had identified him. And yet his wife declared he was not her husband!

At Claire Benton's cry, the governor stepped forward. He stared at the exposed chest of the corpse. There was an expression of stupefaction on his face.

"Mrs. Benton is right," he said in slow wonder. "This man is not Richard Benton. He looks enough like him to be his twin brother. But he is not Benton!"

"How do you know?" queried the inspector.

"Tell him," Claire demanded.

THE governor explained. Benton's chest was tattooed. As a young man, he had served a brief enlistment in the navy. He had a design of double anchors tattooed on his chest. But the skin of this dead man's chest was unmarred except for the bullet hole.

"Benton might have had the tattoo marks removed," the inspector said huskily. Claire Benton shook her head.

"Impossible! Richard tried every way there was to get rid of it. He was terribly ashamed of his youthful foolishness. He went to the best skin specialists in the country. They all told him the same thing. It is impossible to eradicate a tattooed design, once the indelible ink has been injected into the subcutaneous layers of skin."

"Only his wife and a few intimate friends like myself knew about this," the governor admitted, in a low voice. "Evidently some unknown crook was posing as Benton."

"Is the corpse wearing Benton's clothes?" the inspector asked.

Claire examined the dead man's suit. She nodded dazedly.

"This is the suit Richard wore when he left New York yesterday morning. Look at the lapel. See the small burned hole? It came from a cigarette spark. I remember about it, because the suit was a new one and Richard was angry at his carelessness in burning it."

"What does it all mean?" the governor whispered.

"I don't know," growled the inspector, "but I'm going to find out! We'll let the dead man's fingerprints do a little talking."

It was a sensible idea.

The fingerprints were sent to Washington by air mail. There they were tested for analysis and comparison in the huge fingerprint bureau maintained by the F.B.I. for the assistance of police all over the country. The reply only added to the mystery.

There were no prints of the dead man on file. He was not a professional criminal. Just a dead man in a hotel room. Mr. Nobody!

To Claire Benton there was only one answer: Her husband was innocent. But the police had a different idea. They were convinced now that the governor's first accusation had been correct. Richard Benton

was a very clever criminal! He had used a physical double of himself because he knew he was taking a desperate chance in blackmailing an honest governor. If the scheme went wrong, his cat's-paw furnished an out for him.

The scheme had gone wrong. Benton had killed his tool to protect himself. All he had to do now was to lie low until he deemed it wise to reappear. A fake tale about kidnapping would cover him. He was lawyer enough to tell a plausible story, produce plausible proofs. The only man who could wreck his alibi was dead.

A police alarm went out to locate and arrest Richard Benton for murder.

But this was a case that couldn't be solved by a routine police alarm. A keen mind would be necessary to unravel the strange threads of crime that had tangled themselves in a locked room at the Bridgewater Hotel.

Only The Shadow could solve this bloody enigma!

CHAPTER III. SHADOW BAIT

IN the library of the exclusive Cobalt Club, Lamont Cranston was reading his morning newspaper. No item was too small to escape his interest. This time-wasting habit of his was something of a joke to his fellow club members.

To them, Lamont Cranston was an amiable society idler. The truth about him would have excited laughs of derision. But the truth was something which Lamont Cranston had for years cleverly concealed.

Lamont Cranston was The Shadow!

The Shadow found the appearance of Lamont Cranston an easy one to use. The real Lamont Cranston was something of a globe-trotter. He spent most of his time abroad. The Shadow made profitable use of the situation.

Today, Lamont Cranston was reading his newspaper with more than ordinary attention. The whole front page of the paper was splashed with the details of the Richard Benton case. The attempted blackmail of the governor of a nearby State, the subsequent murder at the Bridgewater Hotel, the amazing discovery that the dead man was not Richard Benton - these facts made a tremendous sensation.

Police and reporters were agreed that Benton had used a double for a stooge, had killed him when the blackmail scheme didn't work, and was now in hiding to build up a fake kidnap alibi for himself. A police alarm had flashed over forty-eight States to arrest Benton on sight.

Cranston had read every word of this, but his mind was grimly concerned with something else. He was thinking of the name of an altogether different man. Of late, this man's name always flamed in The Shadow's mind when a crime of unusual magnitude was committed.

The name was Benedict Stark.

Stark was one of the five wealthiest men in the United States. He owned banks and railroads. The click of Wall Street tickers paid him tremendous profits. Yet, with all this, Stark was a man of mystery.

Newspaper interviews with him were rare. His photograph never appeared in the Sunday rotogravures. He was powerful enough to wreck any paper which defied his wishes. The public thought he was merely an eccentric millionaire. The Shadow alone knew the truth.

Benedict Stark was the most dangerous criminal in America! The Prince of Evil!

His was a perverted mind. He loved crime for the ungodly and cruel thrill it brought him. Protected by wealth and social position, he was able to mystify the police. Benedict Stark and The Shadow had pitted their brains against each other - and twice had Stark slipped The Shadow.

True, The Shadow had solved those two amazing webs of crime. He had saved the son and daughter of a prominent New York family from beggary and death. (Note: See "Prince of Evil," Vol. XXXIII, No. 4.) He had smashed a murder conspiracy against the lives of an honest factory owner and thousands of loyal workmen. (Note: See "Murder Genius," Vol. XXXIV, No. 3.) Both times, Benedict Stark had escaped justice. The Shadow knew Stark's guilt, but he couldn't prove it.

The Benton case had all the earmarks of one of Benedict Stark's cunningly engineered crimes!

Lamont Cranston laid his paper down and closed his eyes. He was sitting there, absorbed in his thoughts, when he felt a light touch on his shoulder.

"Hello, Cranston, old man! Taking a little nap?"

The sound of that voice warned Cranston. When his eyes opened with lazy slowness, they were vapid and harmless-looking.

He was staring at Benedict Stark!

He mumbled a sleepy greeting. He admitted with an embarrassed smile that he must have dozed off. But his eyes took keen note of the extraordinary ugliness of the man who had tapped his shoulder.

STARK was proud of his ugliness. He dressed deliberately to emphasize it. His torso was powerful, barrel-chested like a gorilla's. A malformation at birth had made one of his arms shorter than the other.

His head was enormously large on a short neck. He had a jutting lower lip and eyes like bright marbles. Behind those small eyes was a magnificently trained brain. It was his brain that made Benedict Stark so dangerous.

Cranston was puzzled by Stark's unexpected visit to the Cobalt Club. He seldom showed up more than once a year. Cranston waited for a clue to explain his presence.

It came very soon. Stark wanted to talk about the Benton case!

He discussed it pro and con. He was very bitter about the vanished New York lawyer. He wanted him caught and punished. Every time he mentioned Benton's name, it was with an oath of subdued rage.

It was so pointed that Cranston commented politely. Why was Stark so bitter about Richard Benton?

"Because he is not only a crook, but an ingrate! I befriended that man at the start of his career. I hired him many times as my attorney when he found clients hard to obtain. He used confidential knowledge he obtained about water power while in my employ, to try to wreck all honest utility holdings - including mine!

"The veto of that reform bill could have enriched Benton and ruined me. I hope they catch him and burn him in the electric chair for the murder of his unfortunate cat's-paw!"

Benedict Stark seemed loath to abandon the subject. He spoke about the suit worn by the dead man. It was further proof, Stark declared, that Benton had worked a guilty masquerade. Benton had given the

stooge his own suit to wear. The cigarette, burn on the lapel proved that! Stark seemed almost overeager to emphasize the point.

Cranston agreed with him, that this angle of the case was probably its more important clue. After a few minutes more of talk, Stark left the Cobalt Club as abruptly as he had arrived. His behavior seemed mystifying.

But to Lamont Cranston, the answer was plain.

Stark was a shrewd customer. He had long suspected that Lamont Cranston and The Shadow were the same individual. But he had never been able to prove it.

Now, Stark was making another cunning attempt to link Lamont Cranston to The Shadow. That was why he had emphasized the importance of the burned lapel. If The Shadow emerged from darkness to investigate that clue after Stark's private conversation with Lamont Cranston, it would indicate to the wily Stark that Cranston and The Shadow were the same.

The Shadow's lips tightened. He was going to accept that challenge. He went to a telephone booth in the club and dialed a number not listed in any city directory. The voice of Burbank answered.

Burbank was the contact man in The Shadow's organization. His duty was to receive and transmit messages between The Shadow and his secret agents.

The Shadow gave Burbank an order for Clyde Burke. Burke was an ace reporter on New York's big tabloid, the Daily Classic. More important than that, Clyde was an agent in The Shadow's secret group of trained crime fighters.

Lamont Cranston left the Cobalt Club. He hurried across town. His goal was an imposing apartment building in the most fashionable neighborhood along the East River. On the river side of the skyscraper apartment was an anchorage for privately owned express cruisers and seaplanes.

One of these seaplanes belonged to Lamont Cranston.

He walked down a long ramp to the float and boarded the plane. It would have been impossible to recognize him as the dapper Cranston. He was dressed in white coveralls. He wore a leather helmet that fitted snugly over his skull. Goggles screened his upper face.

He gunned the ship to a perfect take-off from the anchorage cove. The plane zoomed above the East River, flew over the dirty diagonal of the Harlem River and so onward to the Hudson.

It flew up the Hudson to a point well above Yonkers. The broad river was deserted at this spot. The seaplane landed on the water near the Palisades side and taxied close to the shore.

A rowboat appeared presently. Clyde Burke was the oarsman. He brought something with him that looked like a huge sheet of oilcloth. Before Clyde climbed into the plane, he tacked the cloth on the side of the cabin. On it was printed in bold black letters:

AERIAL NEWS SERVICE NEW YORK DAILY CLASSIC

The rowboat remained anchored where Clyde had left it. The seaplane roared at terrific speed up the Hudson. It did not, however, continue to Albany. It cut off in a different direction. It headed for another river in a nearby State.

On that river was located the State capital where an unknown man dressed in Richard Benton's clothes

had been found murdered at the Bridgewater Hotel.

WHEN they reached the State capital, The Shadow remained in the seaplane in his guise of a hired newspaper pilot. Clyde Burke went ashore.

He went straight to the morgue.

Clyde had no difficulty examining the corpse of the fake Richard Benton. He pretended great interest in the naked body under the morgue sheet, but actually he had none. What he wanted to see was the dead man's clothing.

He covered his eagerness with a great show of boredom at such a humdrum task. He gave the morgue attendant a cigar, and when the man stowed it away to smoke later, Clyde winked and showed him the top of a silver hip flask.

"Here's something you can use right now."

The attendant turned away for a cautious gurgle of excellent bonded rye. That gave Clyde his chance. A palmed razor blade slashed the tailor's label from the inside of the dead man's coat. The blade and the label were out of sight when the attendant handed back the flask with a husky murmur of thanks.

The clothing was returned to its niche in the property vault. Clyde's speedy arrival had made a delicate task easier. Had he taken a train instead of the swift seaplane of The Shadow, the garments so recently removed from the dead man would have been already transferred to the custodian at police headquarters.

It was just another instance of The Shadow's infinite attention to detail.

Clyde Burke took a taxi to another part of town. He entered the Bridgewater Hotel. He made his entrance as publicly as possible.

The lobby was thronged with reporters still buzzing around the hotel like flies around a sugar bowl. Clyde took copious notes, kidded his fellow news-hawks, and hung around quite a while. He boasted loudly about the enterprise of the Daily Classic in sending news planes to distant story spots.

But he left the hotel to make an extremely important phone call. He picked out a dingy little drugstore with a glassed booth at the front and a very sleepy clerk at the rear.

Clyde whispered a number to the long-distance operator. After a brief delay, a crisp faraway voice replied:

"Burbank speaking."

Clyde repeated certain orders which he had received from The Shadow before he had left the anchored seaplane. He mentioned the name of a man. The name was Miles Crofton.

"Orders received," Burbank said. Clyde hung up, and hurried back to the water front. The seaplane with its Daily Classic sign was still moored in a quiet cove not far from shore. A few rowboats circled it with curious sightseers. They yelled friendly banter toward the goggled pilot.

But the pilot said nothing, not even when Clyde scrambled aboard and cast off the mooring lines from a buoy.

Roaring up into the sky, the seaplane was soon a vanishing dot on the smoky horizon.

The Shadow flew toward the upper reaches of the Hudson River. He followed the Hudson southward, to the spot where Clyde Burke had met the seaplane. The rowboat which Clyde had used was still anchored there.

They used the rowboat to go ashore. Pushing through thick bushes, they came to the edge of a narrow unpaved road at the base of the towering Palisades.

A man was waiting there. So were two empty automobiles.

Clyde Burke had driven one of those cars from New York City, The other was the luxurious limousine of Lamont Cranston. The man who was waiting had driven that limousine from Cranston's country estate in northern New Jersey.

His name was Miles Crofton. He was an efficient aviator. He held every license possible in the United States, including the coveted commercial- transport pilot's ticket. The Shadow used Miles Crofton whenever he found it inconvenient to pilot a plane himself.

He had need for Crofton now. That was why Crofton had driven the limousine from New Jersey instead of Stanley, who was Cranston's regular chauffeur.

MILES CROFTON rowed out to the waiting seaplane. He took it into the air in businesslike fashion. He was dressed exactly like Cranston had been before the latter had changed to a more normal costume for his return automobile ride to New York. White coveralls covered Crofton's lean body. A leather helmet and goggles obscured his face and head.

Crofton piloted the seaplane in a rather curious fashion. He seemed to have no place in particular to go. He roared westward over most of New Jersey, then banked and came roaring back over Long Island Sound. He stayed quite high.

What he was actually doing was wasting time. Finally, he glanced at his wrist watch and nodded. He glanced downward. He was far enough toward Montauk Point to have an empty sweep of water beneath him. He flew lower.

He began doing something with a small nest of cords. The cords connected with the lightly driven tacks that held the oilcloth news sign of the Daily Classic to the fuselage. The rush of wind helped to rip the loosened cloth free. It fluttered like a fouled parachute in the slipstream.

Crofton grinned and let go his cords. The oilcloth fluttered downward in a dizzy spiral. It dropped soggily into the Sound. Waves soaked it. Crofton circled above the surface until he saw the soggy oilcloth sink. Then he nosed upward for altitude and came roaring down Long Island Sound to the crooked course of the East River.

He landed at the private basin from which the plane had taken off originally. When he walked up the ramp from the float, almost the first man he met was Benedict Stark! Stark's thick lips were curved in a malicious grin.

"Hello, Cranston! Taking a little air spin upstate?"

Miles Crofton didn't reply. He merely removed his leather helmet and jerked off the goggles.

If it were not for the spark of rage that burned like cold fire in Stark's small eyes, his amazement would have been ludicrous.

"Sorry, sir," Crofton said politely. "You've made a mistake. I'm Mr. Cranston's pilot. I've just been up to

try out the ship. Mr. Cranston thought there was something wrong with the prop."

A cheerfully lazy voice behind Stark made him whirl like a startled cat.

"Hello, Stark," Lamont Cranston said, with a smile. "How do you like my ship? How did its propeller behave, Crofton? Did anything go wrong on your try-out flight?"

Realizing the double meaning of his reply, Miles Crofton had difficulty restraining a grin.

"It was a perfect trip, sir. Everything ticked like a clock. You haven't a thing to worry about."

Cranston turned politely, toward the discomfited Stark.

"I'm on my way downtown to an art exhibit. I just stopped off to see how Crofton made out with his piloting. He seems to have done very well. How about coming along with me to see the art show?"

"No thanks," Benedict Stark growled.

He seemed to be swallowing a dose of castor oil. He had hoped to trap The Shadow with bait handed to Lamont Cranston. He had failed. There was no evidence that Cranston had been away from New York for five minutes.

Best of all, the camouflaged air journey had produced important results. At this very instant, Clyde Burke was on his way to a celebrated Fifth Avenue tailor. In his pocket was a vital scrap of evidence!

CHAPTER IV. BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

THE tailor shop toward which Burke headed was on Fifth Avenue in the smart upper Forties, not far from the magnificent tree lined entrance to Rockefeller Center.

It looked more like the midtown branch of an exclusive bank than a place where men bought cloth to be made into suits. A uniformed doorman stood on the sidewalk. Ordinary folk didn't trade with Max Kringel. Max Kringel was the owner and presiding genius of this magnificent establishment.

A supercilious young man with a white carnation and a broad accent greeted Clyde when he entered the shop. There was only one small table in sight, with a bolt or two of cloth on it. To show more evidence of trade than that would be vulgar. When one desired a suit, he was taken to a small consulting room. Lesser clerks brought bolts of cloth from a supply room at the rear for his inspection.

That was as the way things were normally done in the establishment of Max Kringel. But Clyde had other plans.

He brushed away the supercilious young clerk and started for the rear. He heard a well-bred cry of objection.

"I say! You cawn't do that! Where are you going?"

"I want to see Mr. Kringel privately."

"Have you an appointment? Mr. Kringel very rarely -"

"He'll see me!"

Clyde showed his press card from the Daily Classic.

"Tell him my paper's about to go to press. I'd hate to have it go to press and do him a grave injustice by printing something that might fill this place with cops and put a crimp in his high-class trade. If you're more than two minutes getting back here, I'll scam and file my story."

The young man was back in one minute flat.

"Mr. Kringel will see you - sir!"

He said "sir!" like a man saying, "You dirty dog!" but Clyde didn't mind. Grinning cheerfully, he went into a private office behind the merchandise section of the shop.

Max Kringel had a pink bald head, a puttyish nose and a comfortable potbelly. He got worried when Clyde mentioned the Richard Benton case and told him what he wanted.

"The business of a client is sacred. I can tell you nothing."

"How would you like to tell the police? How would you like a few guys with flat feet and derby hats cluttering up this joint and scaring away your wealthy customers?"

Max Kringel looked as if he wouldn't like that.

"I'm not here in the role of a reporter, at all," Clyde continued persuasively. "You might say that I'm here unofficially, in order to save you some trouble - and myself, too. Talk frankly, and I'll give you my word to keep mum. Refuse, and I'll start asking questions about the Benton case on the front page of the Daily Classic."

"Vot would you vant to know?" Max Kringel asked, his frightened accent getting thicker by the minute.

Clyde showed him the label from the dead man's clothing. Kringel looked at it, studied the serial number, and nodded. He went to a coded account ledger and opened it. His fat finger ran along the page. Then he gave Clyde some information.

It was very interesting information, indeed!

"The suit whose label you just showed me vas bought here by Mr. Benton. It vas the second suit."

"The second suit? You mean he bought two suits of the same kind?"

"Dot's right. Benton liked the first vun so much that he must have another made just like it, he said."

"Are you sure this label came from the second suit and not the first?"

"Of course. The serial number of the first is, naturally, different."

Clyde felt a hot glow of excitement. Kringel's story blew wide open a pet theory of the police. The police had assumed that the dead man in the Bridgewater Hotel had been dressed in a suit which Benton had worn. Clyde knew now that this was false. If there were two suits exactly alike, Benton had obviously been prepared for a masquerade act before he had left New York!

It was even more sinister than that! Benton's wife had testified about the cigarette burn in the lapel. It had happened a week or so before Benton had left for the State capital. Therefore, the accidental burn had been on the first suit. The burn which the police had discovered had been placed deliberately on the second suit!

Clyde's head began to whirl, but he controlled his excitement. He asked a question that disclosed another

mysterious fact.

"When did Mr. Benton come in to order that second suit?"

"He didn't come in. His secretary handled it for him."

"You better tell me the whole story, Mr. Kringel."

KRINGEL'S story was simple. Several days after Benton's original purchase, the lawyer's secretary appeared at the tailor shop. He said that Mr. Benton had liked the material so well that he wanted an extra suit.

There was no need for a fitting; the measurements were all in the shop. When the duplicate suit was ready, Benton's secretary returned and took it away. He paid for it.

That was all.

"How did he pay for it?" Clyde asked. "With one of Mr. Benton's checks?"

"No. He paid cash -"

"I see," Clyde murmured.

But he wasn't so sure what he saw.

The thing was beginning to get more complicated than he had dreamed. Before Clyde could put his thoughts in order, however, there was an interruption. The young salesman with the carnation appeared, looking more annoyed than ever.

"A gentleman wants to see you, Mr. Kringel. It's about the Benton case. He's a detective. He says unless you see him at once, he'll make trouble."

"Vat?" Kringel groaned. "Anudder vun?"

"Tell the man that Kringel will see him in two minutes," Clyde said in a sharp tone.

He glared at Kringel, and the latter nodded. The young man shrugged and went away.

"Quick!" Clyde said. "Where's a good place to hide?"

Kringel showed him with a trembling forefinger. Clyde ducked out of sight. It was a place where he could hear perfectly. By peering cautiously, he could see, too.

The man who came in announced himself as a city detective from the State capital where Benton's unknown double had been murdered. But to Clyde the guy looked more like a prosperous song-and-dance man than a dick.

He was tall, with the lithe balance of a professional dancer. The man said his name was Thornton. He wanted to know all about Benton's suit with the burned lapel. He asked a lot of questions, mostly the same ones Clyde had put. When he had found out the answers, he chuckled in a hard tone.

"Thanks, pal. You were smart to play ball. You might have got some nasty police publicity. But no one's gonna hurt you if you keep your mouth shut. Just forget all about Benton and his suits. If anyone comes in to nose around, tell 'em you lost the ledger page and have no way of checking up. Get me?"

"I get you," Kringel said in a scared voice.

Thornton departed with a light, graceful step.

As soon as he was gone, Clyde squirmed out of his hiding place. He hurried through the shop to the front door. Thornton was walking briskly down Fifth Avenue like a man without a trouble in the world.

Clyde followed him discreetly. He was anxious to get a line on this bird and find out where he had come from. Thornton never once glanced back. Clyde congratulated himself on an easy follow-up.

But Clyde was mistaken. Without realizing it, he was putting himself directly on the spot.

A car was parked at the curb, a very nice car. A pretty girl with copper hair and a snub nose was sitting behind the wheel. She looked bored. Her hand kept idly caressing a lovely fur piece that hung loosely about her neck.

She was watching the tall Mr. Thornton. As he passed the car, he gave her a quick, almost imperceptible glance. Her pink-nailed fingers slid along the fur piece to the tail at its loose end. It was a signal from one crook to another.

The girl with the copper hair and the snub nose had just informed Thornton that he was being tailed!

Clyde, of course, remained unaware of this clever by-play. He continued to follow Thornton down Fifth Avenue. Thornton was walking more slowly now. Clyde did the same.

But there was quick activity in the car a block behind. A well-dressed man in the back seat leaned forward.

He had been invisible to Clyde when the reporter passed the car. He had a thin face, thin lips, sunken eyes.

He looked sick, but he wasn't. Business reasons forced him to diet rigorously.

"A nice job, Marge! Looks like Thornton caught a fish. My guess is that the guy's a private dick. Let's go!"

MARGE put the car into motion. She headed west. She crowded on speed as if she had a long journey to make.

But her goal was quite near.

She halted outside a real-estate office, just beyond Broadway. The place was on the ground floor. There was a shade on the window and a shade on the door. The man on the back seat of the car got out.

"Make it snappy, Oscar!" Marge whispered fiercely in his ear. "Don't waste too much time getting artistic. Thornton will delay all he can, but we don't want the mug to get suspicious."

Oscar grinned. He walked quickly into the real-estate office. The girl with the copper hair drove away.

Inside the office was a desk, a bookcase with some shabby volumes, and a blond typist. Her eyes were dark and as hard as pebbles. She was reading a magazine, her legs cocked high on the desk. She didn't look up when Oscar walked in.

He hurried to a locked inner door. He opened it with a key he took from his pocket. After it closed behind him, he locked it on the inside.

The rear room looked like a theatrical dressing room. That's exactly what it was. There was a basin with hot and cold water, and a make-up table with a plate-glass mirror. Oscar got busy with the speed of an actor awaiting a stage cue.

He peeled off every stitch of his clothes. The stuff he donned from a closet made a hideous change in his appearance. Except for his face, Oscar looked like a pathetic and ragged bum.

He got to work on his face to make it match his costume. He added a stubble of beard, heightened the thinness of his lips and cheeks, deepened the caverns of his eyes. It made him look gaunt and emaciated.

Into his eyes he put stuff from a medicine dropper that added a fixed and unnatural glitter. He put on dark glasses. Over his shoulders he hung a pathetic little tray filled with chewing gum, shoelaces and pencils. There was a sign above the tray.

PLEASE HELP!

I AM BLIND

From the closet, Oscar took a tin cup for his left hand, a knobby and weather-beaten old cane for his right. With a grimace of satisfaction, the "blind man" departed.

He left by a rear door that opened on an alley. Ducking down the alley, he appeared on the street behind the real-estate office. He walked toward Broadway at a shambling pace. Turning the corner, he tap-tapped past a cop.

The cop grinned sympathetically as he saw "Blind Tom" pass. The cop didn't know that Blind Tom was a guy named Oscar, who knew a pretty copper-haired gal and a fellow named Thornton.

Blind Tom had a peddler's license. He also had a regular spot halfway down this very block. The cop kept going, with no further thought about the beggar.

Thornton kept going, too! Thornton was walking slowly down Broadway now, followed by the persistent Clyde Burke.

He had managed to get a sly look at his pursuer. He had an exact idea of how Clyde looked. But he had no intention of taking care of Clyde. Two other guys, both of them handy with guns, had that part of the set-up. It was Thornton's problem to tip off the two gunmen.

That was where Blind Tom came in.

As Thornton passed, he dropped a dime into the beggar's cup. The beggar whined and ducked in a hideous bow of thanks.

"God bless you, sir!"

His ducking motion gave him a chance to snake the dime out of the cup. He also palmed the bit of pasteboard that Thornton had put into the cup along with the coin.

The dime went into the blind man's ragged pocket. But the card remained in his hand.

Nearby, the two gunmen waited. One of them was a chunky, black-haired guy. The other had brownish-yellow eyes the color of frozen mustard. There was a sullen twist to his lips.

He was the one who got the card which Thornton had given the blind man. He read the description and passed it to his pal. Both of them let their eyes rove ahead. They spotted Clyde Burke a dozen feet or so

behind Thornton.

"So that's the mug, eh?" the black-haired thug grinned. "Let's take him at the corner. It's a joke, Dave!"

Dave was the sullen lad with the mustard eyes.

"Yeah?" he snarled. "What's so funny about it? You and your silly grin make me sick, Charlie! Let's put the dig on him!"

The "dig" came at the next corner. Thornton managed his end very skillfully. He loitered until the light changed, then he skipped across an instant before the side-street traffic charged through.

Clyde Burke was left stranded at the curb. While he waited, black-haired Charlie drifted on one side of him and the sullen Dave on the other. The "dig" came simultaneously. The guns were concealed in side pockets, but those hidden muzzles hurt!

One look at Charlie and Dave convinced Clyde that he wasn't dealing with amateurs. With the "dig," his arms had automatically raised. Now, he lowered them.

When the poker-faced pair turned, he turned obediently with them.

ALL three walked up the side street toward the real-estate office, like friends who had just met and were off for a sociable drink.

Charlie helped the illusion along with a flow of cheerful chatter. But Dave still acted sore.

"Get a load of that car, sucker!" he whispered at Clyde's ear.

The car was rolling slowly along the curb. It was driven by a very pretty girl with copper hair and a snub nose.

"Just in case you got any funny ideas," Dave growled. "One yip out of you, and your belly starts taking a dose of lead! The car is there for a quick getaway. Wanna make a break, and let the girl friend show her stuff as a racing driver?"

Dave looked as if he actually hoped his prisoner would give him an excuse to pump reckless lead in broad daylight.

Charlie said in a nervous undertone: "Cut it, Dave! You want cops on our necks?"

"They'll be layin' on their backs, if they monkey with me!" Dave snarled.

Clyde Burke said nothing.

He was walked into the real-estate office by his two captors. The blond typist was still reading a magazine. She paid the trio no more attention than she had paid Oscar.

Dave and Charlie hustled their prisoner into the rear room.

Clyde Burke was in a bad spot behind that locked door. He was doomed to die, after certain preliminary tortures. The blond typist knew that as well as Charlie and Dave. But it didn't interrupt her reading or her comfortable pose.

CHAPTER V. HOW TO MAKE A STAR

OUTSIDE the real-estate office, the girl with the copper hair and the snub nose stepped up her slowly moving car to a faster pace.

She drove across to Eighth Avenue and then around to Forty-second Street. Thornton stepped into the car when she halted it.

"O.K., Marge?"

"Yeah. The sap slid into a hole as slick as butter. Charlie and Dave pulled the hole in after him." Marge giggled. It was not a pretty sound. "A funny way for a tap dancer to earn a living, but it suits me. Big money always did!"

Thornton nodded, with a grin of conceit.

"Stick around with me and watch the dough roll in! I told you that, Marge, when you married me."

"Who introduced you to Archie Hiller? Was it me - or me?"

"The hell with arguments! Let's go see Hiller and give him our song and dance."

That's what this pair was: a couple of ex-song-and-dance artists. They were "ex," because they had found out that crime paid bigger dividends than a few minor theatrical jobs.

Marge drove the car to Times Square, stopped in front of a building in the theatrical sector. It housed the offices of all kinds of amusement enterprises; some legitimate, some so-so, and some downright crooked.

Archie Hiller's enterprises were sort of in-between. To the public, his was a legitimate and famous name. But actually Archie Hiller had crossed the dividing line between decency and the underworld. He had produced many a million-dollar musical show.

That was the trouble. A lot of them had been financial flops. Unknown to the public or the police, Hiller had relined empty pockets by taking the easiest way - the criminal way.

Thornton and Marge took an elevator to an upper floor. They walked into a waiting room that was a bedlam of noise, laughter and conversation.

"I told my agent to go to hell! Why should I go out West for one lousy movie?"

"That's how I feel. A grand a week, or nothing! That's what I told one movie company."

It was all lies and fooled nobody. But it made these tired and hungry, hopefuls feel better while they waited in a packed anteroom to beg Archie Hiller for a stage bit at twenty-five bucks a week.

Hiller was a hard guy to see. To one and all, Hiller's hatchet-faced secretary had the same reply:

"No appointment? Sorry. Take a seat."

Marge and Thornton didn't take a seat. Marge said, "Hello, Toots," to the vinegary secretary.

The secretary knew why this pair had come. But she had to make things look normal for the benefit of the rest.

"Mr. Hiller is busy, dearie. Mr. Penny will take care of you."

Mr. Penny's name was on a door adjoining the private office of Hiller. He was supposed to be Hiller's assistant.

Thornton and Marge went in. A screen just inside the opening prevented watchers outside from catching a glimpse of the shy Mr. Penny.

Marge giggled as she stepped past the screen. There wasn't any Mr. Penny. The room was empty.

The only object in the room besides the screen inside the now-closed door was a large painting on the inner wall. It was a painting of a ballet dancer in a gauzy white costume. Marge paid no attention to the art. She pressed a button in the frame of the painting and the whole thing slid open like a door.

The two crooks stepped into the office of Archie Hiller.

HILLER was smoking a fat cigar and working on a crossword puzzle. He had mild blue eyes, an innocent smile and a goat-like fluff of beard on the point of his chin. He looked like a retired philanthropist.

"Hello, folks! What happened?"

"A smash hit," Thornton said. "I watched Kringel's tailor shop, like you said. A guy with all the earmarks of a private dick breezed in. After a while, I went in. I was sure the guy was hiding in Kringel's office, so I let him have an earful. He tailed me, but Oscar and Marge took care of that. Dave and Charlie gave him the old gun dig. They got him in the real-estate joint now."

"Swell!" Archie Hiller said very softly. "By the time those boys finish with him, he ought to spill his guts. Whether he does or not, he's going to disappear like a magician's elephant! I thought of the murder method myself. There won't be enough of him found to cover a dime!"

Hiller said all this like a man reciting a pleasant fairy tale for a favorite grandchild.

"Now for more important business! Everything is set for you two to pull a quick job at the Apex Theater. My new musical show is rehearsing there right now. It's due to pull out tonight for the try-out in Pittsburgh."

He handed Thornton a message to the stage director of the Apex Theater.

"You know what to do. Go and do it."

But before Thornton or Marge could depart there was a sudden interruption. Hiller's annunciator box began to buzz. He flipped a lever and listened. The raspy voice of his hatchet-faced secretary became audible.

"Mrs. Richard Benton is here, sir. She says you asked her to call."

"Ah!" Hiller breathed. "Is she alone?"

"No, sir. There's a young man with her. A Mr. Paul Hardy. A friend of" - the secretary's voice sounded acidly - "of her late husband, Mrs. Benton says."

"Wait about three minutes. Then show them in."

Hiller nodded swiftly toward Marge and Thornton.

"Scram! Use the back door. Get over to the Apex Theater and do your stuff!"

They stepped into a closet in the rear of the office and didn't come out again. Afterward, Claire Benton and Paul Hardy entered from the outer room.

Claire Benton seemed pale and tired. Paul Hardy acted very much as if he might be in love with her. But Hiller gave the young man barely a glance. He devoted all his attention to Mrs. Benton.

He was very suave. He expressed his sorrow at the unfortunate criminal mystery in which she was now enmeshed. He asserted his belief in the innocence of her vanished husband.

"Have you heard from him?"

"Not a word. Nothing."

"He must have been kidnapped. I'm sure he'll turn up presently, with a clear story to explain why he left New York and who the dead man was that masqueraded as him."

Claire Benton nodded faintly. "Why did you want to see me, Mr. Hiller?"

"Because I'm an old friend. How are you fixed financially?"

"I'm practically broke," she admitted, with a wan smile. "There's plenty of money in the bank, but Richard always kept the accounts in his own name. My last month's allowance is practically eaten up. There's no way I can cash a check. But I'm not worrying. Richard will turn up soon. I'm sure he will!"

Hiller smiled, said: "In the mean time, you have an old theater friend named Uncle Archie Hiller. Let me write you a check for a thousand. It's not a loan. Just an advance, until you can get hold of your own money."

"Thanks," she said unevenly. "You're a dear, and that's sweet of you. But I simply can't do anything like that. I'll get along."

"The same old Claire!" Hiller murmured, with a comical shrug. "However, you're not going out of here until you promise to help me out of a jam. How would you like a job?"

"A JOB?" Claire Benton's lovely eyes widened. "You mean a stage job? Are you serious?"

"Of course! Good heavens, Claire, only a few years ago you were tops as a musical-comedy leading lady. The public has been crying its eyes out ever since you married Richard Benton and retired at the peak of your fame. Do me a favor, darling. Head my new show and give me a chance to make some money on a smash hit."

"Headline in a new show?" Claire gasped.

"Sure - 'The Blonde From Spain.' It's rehearsing right now at the Apex Theater. The show leaves tonight for the Pittsburgh try-out, but you can fit in without trouble. Not much of a role to learn. Mostly singing and dancing. The same sort of songs that made you famous. What do you say? Will you do Uncle Archie a big favor and sign up?"

"But... how can I? What about Helen Dare? She's already signed for the leading role."

"Helen Dare is out," Hiller said sadly. "I've just had the toughest news a producer can hear. Right on the eve of the Pittsburgh try-out, Helen Dare has had an unlucky accident. She just broke her leg!"

"Oh, how horrible! The poor child!"

"Horrible for me, too," Hiller said sorrowfully. "I stand to lose my shirt on account of it. Claire, darling, give an unlucky old producer a break! Please take the leading role in 'The Blonde From Spain' and help me put a new smash hit on Broadway."

There were tears in Claire's eyes. They were tears of joy. She loved her husband. She had retired from the stage at Richard Benton's wish. But she had never forgotten the bright glare of the footlights. Or the hot, sweet smell of powder and make-up, and new costumes on an opening night.

She nodded excitedly. The tears in her blue eyes made them sparkle like stars.

"I'll do it! That is, if you think -"

"I don't think. I know!" Hiller cried.

He rubbed his thin palms together like an overjoyed little elf.

"Don't worry about your contract. I'll have it drawn up at your own salary terms. You hurry home and pack a few bags. I'll send the typewritten role of the leading part over to your house. You can study it on the way to Pittsburgh with the troupe.

"The show doesn't open until three days after it gets to Pittsburgh. That'll give you plenty of time. You're a darling to accept. And I'm a lucky man!"

Hiller didn't tell her the real reason why he was lucky. He had one grim purpose behind all this faked benevolence. He wanted to get Claire Benton away from her home and out of New York!

"Too bad that poor Helen Dare broke her leg," Claire said as she left.

Hiller concealed his nasty grin until he had closed the door.

IF Helen Dare's leg was broken, she didn't know it.

She stood in the spotlighted center of the stage at the Apex Theater and poured out her gorgeous voice in a love song.

Behind her, the stage was set like a Spanish courtyard. Chorus girls in black lace mantillas and high combs joined in the chorus. The stage director listened, with a frown, from a seat in the empty orchestra pit.

"Try that love song again," he shouted, when the music stopped. "A little slower, please. Then we'll have a last try at the dance routine."

Again Helen Dare's lovely voice filled the auditorium. The stage director closed his eyes. He opened them when a hand touched his shoulder lightly. Thornton and Marge were smiling at him.

The stage director read the note from Archie Hiller.

"Tap artists, eh? All right, I can use you both. There's a spot in the second act where a good tap routine will cover an awkward wait while we change scenery. I've got a comic in that spot now - and he's lousy! How lousy are you?"

"We're smash-hit lousy!" Marge snapped. "We've tapped in better shows than you'll ever get to see!"

The stage director grinned.

"That's the talk, sister! If your legs are as confident as you, I'm satisfied. Go backstage and grab yourself a costume."

He swung his gaze back to Helen Dare. He didn't notice a curious fact. Marge had climbed the steps to the stage and vanished obediently out of sight in the wings. Thornton didn't.

He sidled to the back of the stage near the big drop curtain that framed the Spanish-courtyard scene. There was a terrace there and a flight of wooden steps painted to look like marble. Thornton knew all about the uses of that flight of steps. Archie Hiller had told him.

He climbed to the terrace and sat down discreetly out of sight. When the music stopped, Thornton waited until the star walked forward to the footlights to confer with the stage director. Then he slyly approached the staircase.

The stage was a bedlam of noise during the wait. The chorus girls were talking in a huddle of bare backs and silken legs. They screened Thornton's deft job at the staircase.

He tampered with the handrail. There was sweat on his face and a strained look about his mouth, but he worked swiftly and with a minimum of motion. No one saw him as he retreated. He ducked over to the wings to wait for Marge.

Marge came out as Helen Dare ran offstage to change into her costume for the staircase dance. There were beads of perspiration on Marge's snub nose; She was trembling. But triumph was in her eyes.

"O.K.," she breathed. "I got to her dressing room. Her maid was down the corridor, kidding with an electrician. I fixed the heel on her left slipper. How about you?"

"The left, also," Thornton whispered.

He gave Marge an admiring look. She had coolly taken time to get rid of her street clothes, in case an investigation later demanded an answer to what she had been doing backstage. She was wearing a white silk blouse, white trunks that left most of her legs bare, and a pair of tap shoes.

"Beat it!" Marge hissed. "Grab a dance costume quick. And don't show back on the stage!"

Thornton faded in the dimly lit area beyond the wings. Marge watched the stage. After a while, a faint smile twisted her red lips.

Helen Dare had returned to the set.

The star of "The Blonde From Spain" had changed her fluffy gown of the love song for a chic dancing ensemble. It was skimpy enough to show a lot of her shapely figure. And very Spanish.

She still wore the black lace mantilla and the high comb. But the rest consisted mostly of jet-black spangles and black net stockings. On her feet were high-heeled slippers with wooden soles.

She was ready for her dancing solo down the courtyard stairs.

Marge watched her grimly. So did Thornton. He had returned to the wings in a white blouse like Marge's and a pair of black and very floppy velvet pants. He tensed as the music blared into a swing number. Helen Dare began her graceful dance down the stairs.

THE accident happened almost at the very top of her descent. Her left heel tore loose. With a cry, she pitched sideways toward the left banister. The sudden crash of her body was too much for the fragile

handrail - or so everyone else thought. It tore loose, plunging the shrieking star into space.

She fell nearly twelve feet to the stage. She lay in a moaning huddle. One leg was bent grotesquely beneath her.

The stage director was the first person to reach her. He took one look and uttered an oath of despair. But he was an old trouper. His voice was quietly composed when he spoke to the horrified members of the cast.

"I'm sorry, boys and girls. This unlucky show ain't opening nowhere! Miss Dare's leg is broken!"

There was a wail from the chorus girls. All of them had worked hard during rehearsals. The big money hadn't started yet. Now, it never would. With the star out with a broken leg, the show was done!

The stage director raced to a phone. He called up Archie Hiller and spat out the ugly news. Then a look of startled hope came over his pale face. He swung around to the knot of actors and actresses who had followed him.

"Uncle Archie said for everybody to shut up and pray. He'll call me back in a few minutes. He sounded excited. I don't know what he's up to."

But the stage director knew in less than five minutes. He leaped at the phone like a panther, when it rang.

"What? You - what?... Hurray! Whoopee!"

He began dancing insanely. He punched the nearest man in the jaw. He kissed every chorus girl within reach. He was grinning like a fool. But there was sense in his shouted words:

"Uncle Archie says he has just signed up Claire Benton for the leading role! He had a hunch and called her. She accepted! She's coming out of retirement to take a role that's tailor-made for her! The biggest star in musical comedy, boys and girls! Back on Broadway! And the show goes on!"

There was a jubilant scream of delight from every man and woman on the stage.

"Three cheers for Uncle Archie Hiller!" someone shouted.

Back in his discreet private office on Broadway, Archie Hiller was calmly working out a crossword puzzle. He looked as harmless as any man alive. But there was ugly triumph in his chuckle.

CHAPTER VI. WHIRLPOOL OF DEATH

CLYDE BURKE was doomed!

He knew it the very instant that his captors shoved him into the room behind the real-estate office and locked the door.

The place was fixed up like a small theatrical dressing room. Clyde's glance flicked sideways as, helplessly, he stood flanked by the grim figures of Charlie and Dave. He saw a wash basin and a small portable shower stall. He saw a make-up table, with jars of creams and powders and unguents. Above the make-up table was the usual theatrical mirror.

But the thing that sent cold terror to the heart of Clyde was the sight of the man in front of the make-up table. It was the "blind man" whom Clyde remembered passing on Broadway a few minutes earlier!

The fellow had taken off his dark glasses. There was nothing wrong with his vision now. He stared at

Clyde with cruel recognition.

"So you picked up the sap, eh?" he said to the two gunmen. "Nice work."

He began stripping off his ragged clothing. A damp sponge removed most of the gaunt poverty from his face. He didn't seem to worry about the fact that he was revealing his actual identity to the prisoner. Clyde shuddered, as he realized the ugly reason for the fake blind man's careless behavior.

These crooks had no intention of permitting Clyde to leave the place alive!

The "blind man" reached over and turned on the water in the portable shower stall.

"Who is this mug, Charlie? A private dick?"

The black-haired thug shrugged.

"We dunno yet, Oscar. If he is a private cop, he's the dopiest one we ever put the dig on. The boob hasn't got a rod! Can you imagine that?"

Charlie laughed. So did the saturnine Oscar. But there was no humor in the sullen Dave. His mustard-colored eyes froze with murderous impatience.

"How the hell are we going to know anything until we start working on him? Get off that rug, Charlie, and open the door."

Charlie got off the rug. It was a small one in the center of the floor. Under it was the outline of a trapdoor. Charlie lifted it, disclosing wooden steps leading to a cellar room below. He hurried down the stairs, and light flicked on below.

"You go first, sucker!" Dave said.

Clyde stepped to the head of the stairs. It was now or never! His only chance for freedom was to whirl swiftly, clutch at the armed thug behind him and pitch him headlong down the steps. Oscar's gun was on the dressing table. But Oscar had moved closer to the shower stall.

Clyde whirled. But Dave was too quick.

The butt of his gun landed against Clyde's skull. The knees of the Daily Classic reporter buckled. He fell headlong down the stairs, with a rumbling crash.

"Sounds like a ton of coal going down a chute," Dave told Oscar, in his grating voice.

He went downstairs, to find Charlie clutching at the hair of the limp prisoner. Clyde's head wobbled.

"You hit him too hard, Dave!" Charlie growled. "The sap is out cold."

"You don't know how to handle a boob," Dave answered.

His toe swung brutally against Clyde's ribs. Clyde groaned, and struggled to hands and knees. Dave hauled him upright.

"What's your name, stupid?"

Clyde groaned again. Dave hit him in the jaw and knocked him down.

"Search him. If he's a dick, he's got a badge somewhere!"

Charlie found no badge. But he discovered something that brought a yelp of excitement from him.

"Hey! This guy is no dick. He's a reporter! He's got a press card on him from the Daily Classic."

"A damn newspaperman, eh? Hell, I thought we had something important!"

"Wait a minute, boys!" Oscar's voice yelled through the opening of the trapdoor. "I had a phone call from Thornton. This guy told Max Kringel he wasn't going to print anything in the paper. He's working privately, for someone else."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" Dave snarled. "Scram! We got work to do."

The trapdoor thudded flat. Dave stared menacingly at Clyde Burke.

"So you're working for a secret boss, eh? Who?"

CLYDE was silent. His brain raced.

Oscar's statement proved that the conspiracy was even deeper than Clyde had suspected. His entire conversation with Kringel was known to these crooks.

Kringel himself was honest, Clyde believed. Someone had slyly listened in. It could have been only one man: the innocent-looking salesman lad with the broad accent! He was one of the gang, planted there to co-operate!

"Who's your boss, sucker?" Dave repeated harshly. "The Shadow?"

"No!" Clyde's voice was shrill. "I'm working for the Daily Classic on a special assignment. They promised me a raise if I cracked the Benton case. I never saw The Shadow in my life!"

Clyde's shrill eagerness to deny any connection with The Shadow was suspicious. Had his brain been clearer, he would not have been so foolish. He knew he had made a fatal error when he stared dimly at the faces of the two thugs. Even Charlie's eyes were ablaze with a suspicion of the truth: They had landed one of The Shadow's agents!

Dave wasted no more time. He went to work on Clyde with brutal thoroughness. All that saved Clyde from being kicked to death was the fact that he pretended unconsciousness. He let his limp body quiver unresistingly to the brutal impacts of Dave's toe. He heard the worried snarl of Charlie.

"Take it easy, Dave! We ain't gonna learn nothing this way."

"Yeah?" Dave panted. "He's the kind that ain't gonna talk. I can tell the cut of his jib. Toss some cold water over him. We gotta get him outta here and bump him. The boss don't give a damn who he's working for. The boss wants him dead!"

Charlie growled an assent.

"Maybe you're right. The boss seemed a hell of a lot more interested in getting Mrs. Benton out of town. If Thornton and Marge did their stuff over at the Apex Theater, Benton's wife is probably the star of the show right now. She's ready to scam for Pittsburgh for the try-out."

Clyde lay on the floor like a dead man. But he was listening intently. As a reporter, he knew about the musical show that was rehearsing at the Apex Theater. It was "The Blonde From Spain." Its producer was Archie Hiller.

Was innocent old Uncle Archie Hiller tied in with these hired killers? Clyde had no time to speculate. Water sloshed over his face. He opened his eyes and pretended to struggle back to dazed consciousness. He was hauled to his feet. The blood was wiped from his face. A bit of plaster went over a cut on his cheek.

"Walk, sucker! Up them stairs!"

Clyde had no choice. He stumbled to the dressing room above. There were no signs of Oscar. The fake blind man had already taken his departure.

The rear door of the back room was opened and Clyde was conducted outside to a narrow alley.

A light delivery truck was waiting at the exit of the alley. It looked as if it might have been rented from a trucking agency, but there was a grim absence of any sign on it. Clyde was forced into the front seat.

Charlie and Dave sat on either side of the prisoner. Charlie took the wheel. Dave's hidden gun muzzle made a painful pressure on Clyde's ribs.

The truck drove toward the Hudson River. It waited outside one of the ferryhouses. After a while a ferry came in and the truck rolled aboard. It halted in the dark vehicle runway. Charlie slipped out from behind the wheel.

"Get down, sucker!" Dave whispered to Clyde.

Both thugs were murderously alert. The ferry was still in the slip. Other trucks were rolling aboard.

Clyde was walked quietly toward the starboard rail at the front of the boat. There were no passengers to be seen. The killers had shrewdly selected a ferry whose lower deck was devoted exclusively to runways for vehicles. The passenger cabins were on the upper deck.

Nor did any truck drivers follow the grim trio to the open space up front. A light drizzle made the bow cold and uncomfortable. A cold wind swept in from the river.

"Take it easy, sap!" Dave snarled in a warning undertone.

He wasn't jabbing Clyde's ribs any longer with a concealed gun. He had unbuttoned his coat. His hand was under the loose flap of the garment. Clyde caught a glimpse of blade of a knife. It was a quick and silent way to kill a man, without attracting unwelcome attention.

Charlie took out a pair of brass knuckles and slipped them over his hand.

Both crooks seemed to be waiting for the hoarse whistle which would announce that the ferry had begun to move out of the slip. The whistle came at last. The two thugs tensed. With a shudder, the unwieldy boat began to lurch ahead.

Suddenly, Clyde realized the horrible nature of the death these killers intended for him - and why they had picked the front starboard rail.

The current pushed the bulky ferry toward the other side of the slip. There was open water between the starboard rail where Clyde stood and the heavy timbers opposite. But that open space was narrowing fast as the ferry veered to curve out into the river!

"Make one squawk and I'll drive this knife right through your guts!" Dave warned.

Charlie's brass-knuckled fist tightened.

Clyde knew now what the killers intended. They were going to throw him headlong over the rail. They intended his body to be smashed into a bloody pancake between the ferry's bumper and the black timbers of the slip.

"QUICK!" Dave hoarsed. "Let him have it!"

Charlie's brass knuckles struck. Clyde's body toppled toward the rail. A quick heave at his legs and he went headfirst overboard!

There was a crunch as the ferry bumped ponderously into the black timbers. The heavy boat scraped and recoiled. Its powerful propeller began to shove it out into the river.

There was sweat on Dave's strained face. But he spoke calmly.

"Nice! Let's get back to the stern and make sure. The propeller ought to finish him like hamburger."

They moved like flitting ghosts, past the parked vehicles in the darkness of the lower-deck runway. They had done a fast job.

They didn't realize that they had tricked themselves by their very murderous haste. Charlie's brass knuckles had struck an instant too soon!

Clyde's tumbling body had gone overboard ten seconds before the massive ferryboat bounced the slip. He fell between the boat and the timbers. The sound of his splash was covered by the tremendous bump of the ferry's impact.

Half drowned in foaming water, Clyde heard the grinding thump above his head. He was below the bumper of the ferry. The curved overhang of the ferry's steel hull prevented him from being ground to pulp between boat and slip. But he was in a torrent of black water that foamed like a millrace. He felt himself drawn astern like a bobbing cork.

The suction of the propeller was drawing Clyde's body. He was being pulled at lightning speed toward whirling blades that would chop him into mincemeat!

The cold sting of the water revived him. His dripping face lifted with a convulsive movement. He kicked with every atom of strength in his legs. His arms flailed.

It slowed his mad speed toward death. He managed to wriggle out of his coat - though how he did it so swiftly, he could never remember. All Clyde could think of was the fact that ferryboats traveled two ways. There was a rudder and a propeller at each end.

The rudder not now in use - at the front end - was held immovable by stout chains. But as the rudder at the rear was now in use, similar chains had been released by a deckhand from above - and hung slack.

Clyde's discarded coat was sucked down into a roaring whirlpool. But his arms lifted wildly as he saw the rudder chain whizz close to his drenched face.

His legs kicked fiercely. His wet hand clutched, slipped on a wet link, caught again! He hung on grimly, as the pull of his half-submerged body tried to tear him loose and suck him below the water to the thunderous knives of the ferry's propeller.

It was like tearing his dangling legs free from glue. But he hooked one dripping leg over the chain, and then the other! Half drowned, with his ears roaring and his body shaking with fatigue, Clyde hung on desperately. He was completely invisible from the view of the murderous Dave and Charlie.

They had reached the rear of the lower deck. Their eyes stared at the tumbling foam in the slip behind the departing ferry. They watched the dirty whirlpool that spun on the surface from the churn of the propeller.

And they saw Clyde's discarded coat!

It didn't look much like a coat. It was shredded to ribbons. To the eyes of any chance passenger on the upper deck, that momentary glimpse of ripped cloth would have suggested an ordinary bit of river flotsam. But to Charlie and Dave it was the final proof of a successful murder job.

Somewhere under the pilings were the bloody bits of a sucker named Clyde Burke! Fishes would take care of that. He was just another sap to be listed in the police blotter as missing.

The two thugs smoked a cigarette apiece. Then they went back to their truck in the runway.

MEANWHILE, Clyde was taking the most dangerous river ride of his life. He hung on to his chain, soused with spray from the choppy Hudson. Under his face was the constant thunder of the churning propeller. He dared not let go.

And yet he had to leave his perch before the boat reached its Jersey slip across the river. Clyde ran the risk of being discovered if he hung on too long.

Some ferryboat employee might see him when he tried to climb from his dangerous spot. A single startled yell would create instant commotion. Charlie and Dave would discover that their murder job had been a flop.

That was the last thing that Clyde Burke wished to happen.

Fate came to his assistance. The bad luck that had dogged Clyde ever since he had entered the tailor shop of Max Kringel switched to good luck. A string of sand barges heading up the river forced the ferry to cut its engines. It began to drift.

Clyde let go his hold and dropped into the river.

There were a half dozen small boats bobbing among anchorage buoys a quarter mile to the north of the Jersey slip. Clyde took one long look to orient himself and get his bearings. Then his legs upended and he dived below the surface.

He swam as fast as he could, keeping below the surface until his lungs nearly burst. When his head appeared, he gulped spasmodically and dived again. No one aboard the ferryboat noticed him. Delayed passengers were staring impatiently toward the ferry slip.

By the time the ferry's engines started again, Clyde was too far away to be sucked into the propellers. He drifted, with his face low in the dirty water. The current helped to carry him toward the small boats.

After a while, he hooked a dripping leg over a gunwale and rolled out of sight into the craft.

He lay there, recovering his strength, until the distant ferryboat discharged its vehicles and passengers. Then he darted to the small boat's engine. There was plenty of gas in the tank. The roar of the motor was like a song in Clyde's heart.

He sent the boat skimming across the river to the Manhattan shore; tied up at a deserted freight pier and scrambled ashore. He had found a pair of dungarees in the craft he had borrowed, and he donned them in place of his soaked trousers.

He was hatless and coatless. His shoes oozed water. But the waterfront area behind the adjoining pier was thronged with stevedores who looked almost as dilapidated as Clyde. The dungarees he had stolen had been made for a much taller man. The trouser legs hung over Clyde's wet shoes.

He went to a West Street bar-and-grill, where he was known as a newspaper reporter, and borrowed a dollar from the counterman. The counterman asked curious questions. But Clyde merely grinned.

He used part of the dollar for a taxi ride. A nickel of it got him a telephone connection in a private booth many blocks across town.

"Burbank speaking," a calm, dry-as-dust voice replied.

Clyde Burke made a low-toned and complete report.

Burbank learned about Max Kringel and the young salesman with the white carnation. He was informed about a "blind man" named Oscar and two thugs named Charlie and Dave. The name of Archie Hiller was also recorded by the listening Burbank.

Hiller seemed to be the unknown boss of the murderous Charlie and Dave. He seemed also grimly eager to send Claire Benton out of New York. Was Archie Hiller the brains behind that strange murder in the Bridgewater Hotel?

The answer to that was now up to The Shadow!

CHAPTER VII. VICTIM NO. 2

THE SHADOW was in his sanctum. A blue light threw a small pool of brilliance on the surface of a polished desk. The Shadow himself was almost invisible, although he sat close to the desk. The jut of his strong, beaked nose could be seen dimly. Deep-set eyes reflected the gleam of the light. The rest was silence.

Suddenly, there was a sibilant whisper of laughter. The Shadow leaned closer, for a final look at the report in front of him.

Every fact transmitted to Burbank by Clyde Burke was now a part of The Shadow's trained mind. His tapering fingers put the report aside. Into the small pool of light moved another document.

It was cream-colored note paper, creased in the center. It had come quite normally through the mail, addressed to Lamont Cranston at the Cobalt Club. It seemed a perfectly innocent missive. And yet it was this sheet, rather than Clyde's report, that had caused The Shadow's grim whisper of laughter.

The signature was that of a man whom The Shadow alone knew was a master criminal!

He reread the letter, with his nostrils crinkled, as if he could smell treachery beneath the friendly words of the message:

MY DEAR CRANSTON:

I wonder if you would mind doing me a small favor? I have recently purchased, through my art representative in Italy, one of the last of the genuine Andrea del Sarto paintings on the open market. I'd like you to see it and to hear your expert opinion, which I assure you

I value highly. May I expect you at my home at nine this evening? I don't need to tell an art critic like yourself that your favor to me will be well repaid by the pleasure you will get from a close inspection of this magnificent old masterpiece by one of Italy's immortal painters.

BENEDICT STARK

To The Shadow, the receipt of that letter by Lamont Cranston was sinister. Everything that Benedict Stark did was motivated by evil. But was Stark's master brain behind Archie Hiller and the rest of this tangled web of rogues?

The Shadow intended to accept the challenge of this suave invitation to Lamont Cranston, from the Prince of Evil.

Over the desk, the light winked out. There was no sound in the darkness to indicate that The Shadow had moved. But another light glowed presently and The Shadow was revealed more fully. He was standing in front of a chrome-steel safe, which he had just opened.

The top compartment of the safe was crammed with papers and documents. The lower part was empty.

Into the lower compartment The Shadow put a strange object. It was a silver cigarette case inscribed with the initials of Lamont Cranston. The Shadow stood it on end, allowing its surface to rest against the rear wall of the safe.

His next action was even more peculiar. In front of the cigarette case, The Shadow placed several packages of what looked like terrifically compressed cotton.

The Shadow vanished briefly beyond the radius of light. When he became again visible, there was a gun in his hand. The room was soundproof. Kneeling quietly, The Shadow aimed the gun at the compressed cotton in the safe. He fired a single shot.

Having replaced the gun, The Shadow removed the wadded cotton from the open safe. His bullet had drilled a hole through the highly resistant material. The spent slug was lying in front of the silver cigarette case.

The Shadow examined the case. The bullet had made a dent in the silver.

Again, sibilant laughter whispered in the quiet sanctum. The Shadow's behavior became even more strange. He removed his slouch hat and the black robe. Underneath the robe, he was dressed in the expensively tailored clothing of Lamont Cranston. He peeled off the jacket and the vest.

He donned another garment with swift care. It was a corselet of linked steel, sewn on leather like the scales of a fish. They were tough, those scales! Every one of them was bulletproof.

The Shadow replaced the vest and the jacket of Lamont Cranston. Into his vest pocket, the one just over his heart, he put the dented cigarette case. Then he glanced at his watch. A gleam came into his eyes. The hour was early. There was still considerable time before nine p.m. Time enough, The Shadow decided instantly, to have a look at the New York residence of Richard Benton, before he went to the home of Benedict Stark.

The sanctum of The Shadow relapsed into pitch-darkness. There was no sound of a door or a panel opening. And yet The Shadow was now gone!

IN the street far below, a dapper figure was climbing into a taxicab. Lamont Cranston was on his way to the Benton home.

He left the taxi a block or two from his goal. He approached the dwelling by way of the back. Garbed in the concealing robe of The Shadow, he gained an entry through a rear cellar door by a cleverly contrived picklock that had been manufactured according to The Shadow's own specifications.

He found that the three-story brownstone dwelling of Richard and Claire Benton was dark and deserted. He proved it by a careful survey that took him to the top floor and down again.

Picking a convenient spot from which to watch, The Shadow melted from sight. His gaze remained grimly on the inside of the front door. He had a hunch that there might be a visitor tonight to this conveniently empty house.

He was not disappointed. A key grated suddenly in the front lock. A male figure slipped swiftly inside, closing the door gently behind him. He flashed on a small electric torch and began to tiptoe toward the front stairs, carrying a suitcase in his left hand.

The face of this furtive intruder made The Shadow's lips tighten.

It was Richard Benton!

The missing New York lawyer had returned like a thief to his own home. He had taken cunning advantage of the absence of his actress wife.

Cautiously, The Shadow trailed his quarry up the stairs. Benton hurried to his bedroom. He laid the suitcase on his bed and opened it. Then with only the flashlight on the floor to give illumination, he stripped swiftly. He placed his discarded garments in the empty suitcase, from which he had already taken other garments.

The Shadow allowed a smile of satisfaction to cross his face.

Benton's bared chest was tattooed! The two entwined anchors which had been described by the lawyer's wife were clearly visible on the lawyer's skin.

The man's infinite daring in returning to his own home through a police dragnet was magnificent. But Benton topped his own daring when he put on the clothing he had brought in the suitcase.

It was the suit Benton had worn when he had first left New York. The cigarette burn in the lapel was visible in the glow of the flashlight. It was a verification of the report of Clyde Burke. Benton had bought two suits exactly alike! He had dressed his unfortunate double in one. He himself was now wearing the other.

Benton left the bedroom and hurried downstairs. The Shadow followed. But he didn't use the staircase, as Benton had done. His trained ears had heard a slight creak from some of those steps. The Shadow stepped lightly over the balustrade and hung by his hands from the outside of the top step.

He went down the outside edge of the staircase, hand over hand, until his dangling feet touched the rug on the floor below. He could tell from the pale glimmer of Benton's flashlight where the lawyer had gone. Benton was in a rear room on the parlor floor.

He was watching the shade-drawn window. His pose was one of rigid listening. Presently, he heard something. The Shadow, hidden from the lawyer's sight, heard it, too. It was the sound of three lightly tossed pebbles against the glass of the window behind the shade. There was silence, then the sound was repeated.

Benton clicked out his torch. He darted to the shade and raised it. A moment later, he unlocked and lifted the window. A dark figure crawled in from the porch.

Benton drew down the shade. His torch glowed faintly.

"Is everything O.K.?" he whispered.

"Everything is swell! What the hell are you tremblin' about?"

It was a raspy voice, from a mouth that was sullen and twisted. The newcomer's eyes looked like frozen mustard. Remembering Clyde Burke's description, The Shadow knew this ugly customer at a glance. He was one of the two thugs who had so nearly murdered Clyde. It was the killer called Dave.

"Where's Thornton?" the lawyer cried nervously.

"Where he's supposed to be - at a phone not too far from here. Go ahead and call him. I'm dyin' for some action!"

Benton gave Dave a warning growl.

"I don't want the policeman killed. Remember that! Just tap him on the head and knock him out. Understand?"

"O.K. I won't croak him."

But some of the eagerness went out of Dave's yellowish eyes. A killing suited his ideas a lot better than a knockout. But there was grudging obedience in his promise.

BENTON called up a number which Dave whispered to him.

"Hello. Thornton?... Get going right away and hunt up the cop on this beat. Tell him you saw a strange light shining through a rear window. Make your story strong enough, so the cop will investigate without delay. Got that all right?... Fine!"

Benton hung up. Dave's chuckle sounded like a carpenter using sandpaper on a wooden plank.

"Just to show you that I'm playin' ball about not hurtin' the cop - take a look at this blackjack. I even got the thing covered with felt. If I was bossing this job, I'd cover it with barbed wire!"

Benton didn't reply. In darkness, he raised the shade so the cop could see the opened parlor window. He backed farther into the room.

The murderous Dave took up his position behind a heavy drape.

"Remember," Benton warned. "The minute the cop comes through that window, I'm going to make a noise to attract his flashlight. I want the fool to see me, but I don't want a police bullet in my belly! Remember that and sock him fast."

To the listening Shadow the whole thing didn't seem to make sense. Richard Benton wanted to be recognized as a fugitive from justice in his own home! But why?

A muttered remark from the lawyer provided part of the answer.

"A police alarm for me, when the cop comes to, will help things along," Benton snarled. "It will make things look good when I put the buzz on Victim No. 2!"

Victim No. 2! It was the first intimation The Shadow had received that there was to be more crime in the Benton case - this time, in New York.

But who? And for what reason? The Shadow had no time to ponder. There was a cautious scrape of feet on the porch outside the parlor window. The wily Thornton had hooked another fish. The cop on the beat had fallen for his story of strange lights in the Benton home.

With utmost caution, the cop entered the room. His feet made no sound on the rug. But his quick breathing was clearly audible. He stood near the velvet drape, listening. From the darkness across the room Benton deliberately attracted the cop's attention.

He coughed faintly.

The cop's flashlight glowed. A beam of brilliance cut across the room. It bathed the white face of Richard Benton.

With a gasp, the cop recognized that face. He realized that he had blundered into the presence of a man for whom a police alarm was out in forty-eight States. The cop's hand dived for his gun.

It was a swift draw. Benton yelled in fright.

"Don't shoot!" he gasped. "I surrender, officer!"

"One move out of you, and I'll -" The cop's stern threat was never finished. The taped blackjack of Dave's swung from behind the velvet drape.

There was a dull thud. The cop's gun dropped from his grasp. His knees buckled under him. He pitched forward on his face.

"Out cold," Dave rasped. "A lump on his head like an egg!"

The Shadow heard nothing of this. He had melted backward into the gloom of the long hallway. Noiselessly, he descended to the basement through which his picklock had afforded him an earlier entrance to the house.

He had made no effort to capture Benton or the ugly Dave. Nor had he attempted to save the cop from a knockout.

The latter omission was the one which The Shadow regretted the most. But he had no choice. He knew that the cop risked no serious injury. Crooks merely wanted to stun the cop temporarily after he had recognized Richard Benton!

Crime was in the making, crime that was due to happen elsewhere. Was Benton's deliberate exposure of himself a perverted alibi of some sort?

Who was Victim No. 2? Could he be saved? The Shadow, in order to interfere successfully, would have to travel to the victim along with Benton himself!

THE SHADOW left the basement door as noiselessly as he had entered. Like a black wraith, he faded down the alley.

A car was parked at the curb on the rear street. The Shadow lifted the rumble-seat lid. He had barely vanished when he heard the faint patter of rubber-soled shoes.

Peering through a crack of the lifted rumble cover, The Shadow saw the figure of Dave appear. The thug melted around the corner.

A moment later, Richard Benton hurried to the parked car. The Shadow tensed for trouble, but Benton didn't go near the rumble. He was in too much haste. He leaped behind the wheel and started the engine.

The car got under way. It headed west. A couple of blocks nearer the Hudson, it turned again. This time, it went straight north.

The Shadow, hidden as a stowaway, wondered where the fugitive lawyer was heading. He had no sure means of knowing. But from the faint sounds of boat whistles, he guessed that Benton's destination was somewhere along the upper reaches of Riverside Drive.

Presently, the car stopped. The motor was shut off. But there was no sound of Benton getting out of the car.

What was he waiting for?

Gently, the lid of the rumble rose. There was only one house in sight. It was a huge mansion, facing the black sweep of the Hudson River.

The Shadow's rear glance could see the house, because Benton had parked fifty feet or so beyond. The car had halted outside a stone wall that hemmed in the grounds of the mansion.

A surge of baffled wonder flowed through The Shadow, as he recognized the place.

Victim No. 2 was Benedict Stark!

CHAPTER VIII. THE CORPSE THAT WALKED

HIDDEN in the rumble seat of Richard Benton's parked car, The Shadow found himself faced by two puzzling questions.

Was criminal fighting criminal? Benton's stealthy behavior indicated that an attack of some sort was about to be launched against Benedict Stark. He had shut off the engine and switched off the car's lights.

But there was still no answer to Benton's peculiar delay. His behavior became increasingly restless. A match flared briefly in the front seat. Benton had taken a quick look at his watch.

"Five after nine," he muttered. "Can it be that the fool is not coming here, after all?"

The harsh whisper acquainted The Shadow with the truth. The Shadow had been so hot on the trail of crime ever since he had left his sanctum, that he had temporarily forgotten the letter which Stark had written to Lamont Cranston.

Nine o'clock. That was the hour which Stark had suggested as a good time for Cranston to call in order to view the newly bought Andrea del Sarto painting.

The attack was not intended against Stark at all! It looked now as if Stark and the fugitive Benton had combined forces. Victim No. 2 was to be Lamont Cranston!

It was a challenge to the wits and courage of The Shadow. He accepted that challenge.

The rumble lid lifted slightly higher. Moving with the stealth of a man used to dangerous emergencies, The Shadow began to emerge from his hiding place. The darkness that shrouded the parked car was an aid. The Shadow's slouch hat was drawn low on his forehead. The collar of his black cloak screened the lower half of his face.

Benton anticipated danger from every place except the car itself. His eyes veered toward the stone wall of the estate. Every minute or so, he consulted his watch.

The second time that Benton bent low against the dash to strike a match, The Shadow stepped noiselessly to the black pavement in the rear. With almost the same motion, he dropped flat on his stomach.

A small penknife came out of his pocket. He opened the blade. Pressing evenly, The Shadow forced the point of the blade through the tough rubber of the right rear wheel. He was careful to avoid a puncture of the inner tube. The last thing he wanted was a noisy gush of air. His purpose was merely to slit the outside fabric.

Soon, he laid the penknife aside. The tool he now used looked like an extremely slender hatpin. He probed gingerly, feeling for the inner tube. No surgeon engaged in a major operation could have used more delicacy of touch.

A simple test proved that The Shadow's handiwork had been good. A drop of saliva on the outside of the slit tire began to swell gently. A slow bubble of air escaped.

The Shadow set to work on the other rear tire. He did the same thing. When he had finished, both tires had slow leaks.

On hands and knees, The Shadow began to retreat. He crossed the dark street diagonally, to the opposite sidewalk. His movements kept the unglazed part of the car like a shield between himself and the unsuspecting lawyer in the front seat.

There was a thick growth of trees across the street. Like most millionaires, Benedict Stark was jealous of encroaching neighbors. He didn't want houses springing up on the same street where his mansion was. So he had purchased the tract opposite and had kept it undeveloped.

It made a perfect covert for the vanishing Shadow.

When he emerged finally on a side street, he had resumed the appearance of Lamont Cranston. A glance at his watch showed him that nearly ten minutes had passed. He increased his pace. He didn't slow down until he had traveled several blocks toward a subway station on upper Broadway.

There was an empty taxi there and Lamont Cranston entered it. He gave the driver the address of Stark's mansion.

Benton's darkened car was still parked in front of the stone wall that flanked the grounds, when the cab stopped there. Cranston walked coolly up the front steps of the house and rang the bell.

The summons was answered by Benedict Stark himself.

STARK'S smile was like melted butter.

"Come in, Cranston, old man! So glad you could come. You'll have to excuse the informality of greeting you at the front door. When I invited you, I forgot that this was an evening off for my servants. I hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all. I can't wait to see that painting you've just bought."

"You shall, as soon as we have a highball. My butler left all the essentials in the library."

When Stark wanted to, he could be the most charming man alive. Tonight, he excelled himself. There was bonded liquor on an exquisite serving table. There was soda imported in special bottles from a world-famous spring. There were ice cubes in a small refrigerator that rolled on wheels like a tea wagon.

Lamont Cranston sipped his drink. His smile was vague. But inwardly, his mind was on the alert.

He had already proved that Stark was a liar. Or rather, his nose had. A lifetime in combating crime had made Cranston's nostrils quick to detect an unusual odor. He detected one now - a faint smell of menthol.

"Did you say you were all alone in your house tonight?"

"Yes."

Cranston took a cigarette out of his case and lit it, making sure that Stark didn't see the bullet-dented side of the silver container. He dropped the burned match carelessly in an ash tray on the table.

A swift glance was all he needed. There were five stubs in the tray. Four of a popular brand. The fifth was a half-smoked menthol cigarette.

Stark himself could have smoked that extra cigarette; but he hadn't. When he opened his own case to join Cranston in a smoke, he disclosed only cigarettes of the popular brand.

It was proof that someone else was in the house. Someone who had fled into hiding the instant Cranston had rung the doorbell. Whoever the man was, Cranston was positive of one thing. He was the unknown killer who had shot a man to death in a locked room at the Bridgewater Hotel!

The Shadow didn't waste time speculating. He asked to see the Andrea del Sarto painting.

"Which one did you buy?" he asked.

"One of his best. 'The Reclining Woman With Infant.'"

With a theatrical gesture, Stark rose and twitched a cloth covering from a painting on the library wall.

But even before the picture was disclosed, Lamont Cranston knew the millionaire was again lying.

Stark, in his letter, had said he had just bought the picture. Cranston, who kept informed about art news, knew that to be a lie as soon as he heard the picture's title. Stark had secretly bought the "Reclining Woman With Infant" over three years ago, at a private sale in Florence! He had pretended he had just bought it, in order to lure Cranston to his home.

But Cranston played ignorant. He was loud in his praises of the picture. But his real concern was with the man who had smoked the menthol cigarette. Why was he hiding in Stark's home? Did he intend to appear on the same scene?

The sudden thud of quick steps made Cranston stiffen. He whirled from the painting on the wall. So did Stark.

A man had darted into the room. He was an ominous figure, white-faced, threatening. His leveled gun menaced both Stark and Cranston.

"Hands up, both of you! If you make a sound, I'll shoot to kill!"

It wasn't the unknown murderer who smoked menthol cigarettes. It was Richard Benton!

THE lawyer's fierce breathing was audible. He looked ready to kill. There was a sinister silence for a moment. Then Stark said unevenly:

"Benton, eh? How did you get in here? What do you want?"

"I want five thousand dollars! I want it fast! And I want it in cash!"

"You're mad! You can't get away with this. There's a police alarm out for you right now. You'll get no money from me, you damned murderer!"

Benton kept his gun steady. His laughter sounded horrible.

"All right. I'm a murderer! So what? Are you going to arrest me? If you think so - try it!"

"Why should I pay you money?" Stark said hoarsely.

"Because I need it. I'm on the run, as you have just reminded me. A man can't keep out of sight indefinitely without cash. I had some in my own home. I sneaked in there tonight. But a cop saw the opened window and I had to flee empty-handed. I can't go to a bank, so I'm making you my bank. I happen to know you always keep cash on hand."

His laughter echoed thinly.

"Five thousand! That's what I need. Take it out of that safe of yours in the corner, or I'll kill both of you! Do I get it?"

His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Take it easy," Stark growled hastily. "You can have the money."

"Stark, you open the safe! Cranston, get over by that closet door. And don't move an eyelash!"

Cranston obeyed. He sensed murder in Benton's glittering eyes. The gun muzzle seemed to sway more toward him than toward Stark. Stark bent and opened the safe, after a nervous twiddling with the dial.

The sight of the money brought a hoarse cry of delight from Benton.

"Fine! You get over alongside Cranston, Stark. I want both of you to step into that closet and -"

His voice rose to a sudden scream.

"Damn you, Cranston! Keep those hands up!"

Cranston hadn't made a single move. He stood perfectly rigid, with upraised arms. But Benton's gun flamed suddenly at almost pointblank range. Cranston staggered and pitched to the floor. He lay there in an inert heap.

It was an attempt at deliberate murder. But Cranston gave no sign that he was unwounded. He lay with closed eyes where he had fallen. His only injury was a dull ache where the bullet had struck scale armor underneath his clothing. He allowed Benton to kick his limp body out of the way of the open closet door.

Stark was backed into the closet. The door slammed. There was a spring lock on the outside, that made the door impossible to open from within. Stark's fist began to pound against the inside panels.

"Help! Murder! Police!"

Benton could easily have killed the imprisoned millionaire by firing through the door, but he didn't. Instead, he turned, hurdled Cranston's inert figure and raced out of the library.

There was an echo of flying feet from the front hall. Evidently Richard Benton was racing back to the parked car he had left in the shadow of the stone wall that hemmed in the grounds of Stark's estate.

The moment the fugitive lawyer vanished, Lamont Cranston returned to life. With a noiseless bound, he gained his feet. He glanced toward the locked closet inside which Stark was still pounding and yelling. A peculiar smile flitted across Cranston's lips. He tiptoed to a side window of the library.

Lamont Cranston dropped out the window to the dark turf of the grounds. He vanished into blackness the moment he passed through the radius of light from the library window. He was careful to tread lightly on his toes, to avoid making any deep impression in the spongy turf.

His goal was a certain spot within the stout stone wall that divided the grounds from the street.

Presently, he returned through the light from the library window, hurrying toward a point farther back in the grounds. A significant change had occurred. Lamont Cranston was gone. In his place was the black-cloaked figure of The Shadow.

RICHARD BENTON had done what The Shadow had anticipated. He had rushed straight for his parked car. He leaped in and started the motor. But he soon made an unwelcome discovery.

The car had barely rolled a few feet when Benton realized that both the rear tires were as flat as pancakes.

A single glance at the useless rubber showed him the foolishness of attempting flight in the car. An easy getaway from a cowardly kill had turned into a trap.

Benton realized how desperate the trap was, when he heard the swiftly approaching sound of a policeman's heavy brogans. The shot in the house had been heard. A cop on a nearby post was racing to investigate.

For Benton, it was a double peril. Even without the sound of the shot, the sight of that car would have warned any cop of trouble. The policeman who had been slugged earlier in Benton's home had probably already recovered consciousness.

He had seen the car before he entered Benton's home. One glance at the make of this car and its license plates would inform the approaching bluecoat that Richard Benton was again at bay!

Benton didn't hesitate. He raced across the sidewalk, to the stone wall of Stark's estate. A frenzied leap brought his clutching fingers to the top of the coping. He drew up his squirming body. In an instant, he wriggled over the top and dropped to the darkness of the enclosed grounds.

His fears were justified. The cop halted the moment he saw the parked car with the flat rear tires. Then he gave an excited cry. He had recognized the license number.

He was a young cop. He had been on the Force only a few months. That was why his beat was in so outlying a district. Now, he saw a chance to reap some personal glory and get himself promoted to

third-grade detective.

It was enough to make any young cop hesitate. Should he race to a police box and send in a call that would bring precinct reserves on the run? Or should he try to nab Richard Benton alone?

Fate made up his mind for him. A pistol shot blasted somewhere in the darkness beyond the stone wall.

CHAPTER IX. A TRICK WITH A SPONGE

WHEN Richard Benton dropped to the turf behind the stone wall, he landed awkwardly. An ankle gave way, pitching him sprawling. He was up in an instant, however. His ankle had not been wrenched badly.

He knew exactly what to do. He had surveyed every inch of these dark grounds on the evening before.

The grounds extended, like a flat plateau, to the edge of a high cliff. Like most millionaires, Benedict Stark had built his estate on a spot that commanded a magnificent view. The cliff at the rear was more than a hundred feet above the sunken ribbon of Riverside Drive. Beyond the Drive was shrubbery, dwarfed and toylike from above. Farther out was the black expanse of the Hudson River.

But Benton was not concerned with the view. He was thinking of the staircase.

The staircase was built of stone. It led downward from the brow of the cliff to the Drive far below. It offered an easy avenue to freedom.

Richard Benton raced through the darkness, dodging clumps of bushes. He veered away from the mansion, toward the stone balustrade at the top of those rear steps.

In his excitement, he failed to veer far enough to the left. He reached the cliff nearly fifty feet away from the stone stairs. He knew it when he saw a low wall and a screen of bushes. The bushes lined the edge of nothingness. Below them was a sheer drop of more than a hundred feet.

Benton whirled to retrieve his error. But before he had taken a single stride, he heard an ominous command:

"Stop!"

A figure had risen spectre-like from the earth. It was robed in black. A gun pointed at the fugitive. Over the barrel of the gun was the gleam of calm, deep-set eyes. Benton recognized his face with a gasp of terror.

"The Shadow!"

His arms lifted in surrender. The Shadow darted forward to make an easy capture. It was a mistake. Benton had no intention of surrendering. He was cold with the lust to kill and get away.

As The Shadow sprang forward, Benton ducked suddenly. He flung himself like a diving football tackler at the knees of The Shadow. The two men went down in a writhing heap on the turf.

A terrific battle started. Benton seized The Shadow's gun in a desperate grip. His other hand clamped on The Shadow's throat. The two foes rolled over and over, thrashing and kicking. Not a sound was audible except the gasp of their breathing.

Benton was a powerful man, but he was no match for the trained muscles of The Shadow. The hand that clutched at The Shadow's throat was torn away before it could clamp tight with a strangling hold.

Benton's throat was the one that began to feel cruel pressure.

His other hand left the gun of The Shadow. Dazedly, the fugitive fought to tear loose the fingers at his throat.

The Shadow could have shot Benton with the greatest of ease. But he preferred to take the man alive. He anchored him flat to the ground with a scissors hold of flying legs. Calmly, he choked his foe into submission.

When The Shadow rose to his feet finally, he jerked Benton upright with a powerful heave. The lawyer gasped hoarsely. Only the supporting arm of The Shadow kept him from falling.

The Shadow's lips hissed grimly at Benton's ear. He demanded a confession.

"What... what do you want to know?" gasped Benton.

Two low-toned questions were shot at him. What was Benton's secret criminal game? Who was his unknown boss?

"Confess!" The Shadow rasped.

The first words that Benton muttered were no surprise to The Shadow. Benton had come to the home of Benedict Stark to kill Lamont Cranston!

"The boss suspected Cranston was The Shadow," he babbled. "I killed Cranston! But... but who are you?"

Sibilant laughter mocked him.

"Confess! The name of your boss? Who?"

Again The Shadow underestimated a cunning foe. Benton had merely acted to gain time to recover from pain that had clouded his eyes with weakness.

He sprang backward. His hand dropped like a streak of lightning to his pocket. He fired as the gun barely cleared the cloth of his coat.

INSTINCT was all that saved The Shadow from a bullet in his no-longer- armor-protected heart. His muscles reacted to the threat of that backward leap of Benton. He flung himself spasmodically sideways. Flame creased his ribs as he tumbled to the ground.

This was the shot which was heard by the cop outside the front wall of the estate.

In an instant, the cop was over the wall. He began to race into the blackness of the grounds.

Meanwhile a terrific struggle was going on between The Shadow and the treacherous fugitive. As The Shadow rolled, after his hasty dive from the flaming gun, Benton leaped over his body. It was a desperate effort to race to the stone staircase which led down to Riverside Drive.

Benton failed. The hand of The Shadow caught an ankle as it whizzed above his prone body. Benton went down.

The Shadow tried to top him. But the rebound from the quick fumble rolled the fugitive to his feet. He kicked The Shadow in the stomach.

Pain laced The Shadow's ribs. He was no longer wearing his bulletproof garment. He had removed it in those few moments of darkness when he had changed from the guise of Lamont Cranston. But pain was no deterrent to the will of The Shadow.

He swayed to his feet, his gun aimed at the back of the fleeing lawyer.

"Stop!"

The policeman, rushing pell-mell through the darkness from the front of the grounds, saw both figures. He uttered a yell. But his voice was drowned out by an uglier sound.

The crash of a gun toppled Benton like a felled tree. He pitched head long on his face with outspread arms. He had been shot through the spine!

To The Shadow, that shot came as a stunning surprise. The bullet that killed Benton had whizzed past The Shadow's shoulder. It had been fired from a dark ambush somewhere in the rear of Stark's mansion. Crook had killed crook!

It put The Shadow in a suicidal spot. The roar of a police .38 sent flame stabbing through the blackness. The cop thought, mistakenly, that The Shadow had killed Benton.

His bullets hummed like bees past the black-cloaked figure who had aimed a gun at the fleeing lawyer's back just before he fell dead.

The Shadow vaulted over a low stone wall. He ran toward a line of thickly planted shrubs. He was well aware that those shrubs hid the brink of a hundred-foot cliff. But The Shadow had no time to hesitate. No other way of escape was open.

He dived through the mass of bushes. As he vanished from sight, the cop fired again. A scream of agony came from The Shadow. It was the yell of a man mortally hurt. It was followed by silence.

The cop burst through the dark covert. He found nothing. The Shadow was gone.

For an instant, the policeman recoiled at the black edge of emptiness. Then, with a shudder, he dropped flat on his stomach and inched forward to the lip of the cliff. He stared downward.

Far below, in the sunken road at the base of the cliff, lay the body of The Shadow. The cop could see the huddle of the black cloak, the tiny blur of the slouch hat that lay nearby.

Trembling, the cop rose to his feet. He retreated through the screen of bushes and vaulted the low stone wall. He raced parallel with the cliff toward the top of the stone staircase that afforded a safe route to the bottom of the cliff.

This was exactly what The Shadow wanted.

THE SHADOW was not dead. He was not even wounded. His yell of agony had been a counterfeit cry to add plausibility to the sight of his cloak and hat on the road far below. The moment he uttered that cry, he had whipped off cloak and hat.

The blade of a penknife had drawn blood in a welling stain from a small gash on The Shadow's leg. He'd rubbed part of the cloak in the spreading crimson, smearing it hastily. Then the stained cloak had fluttered downward to the foot of the dizzy cliff.

The next instant, The Shadow himself had gone over the cliff!

But not to die! He had noticed the jagged edge of an outcrop of rock. Seizing it, he had belied over into empty darkness, let his legs swing into the awful gulf below him.

The rock slanted inward below the projecting lip of the cliff. The Shadow went down it inch by inch, holding on with arms and legs like a fly on granite flypaper. He was completely hidden from view by the time the cop had crawled carefully to the edge of the cliff above him.

But it was a horrible spot for a human being to be in. Only a man of supercourage could have dared to take that risk. The slightest wrong move meant death.

It was worse when The Shadow began to inch upward, snail-like, on the return journey.

Once a rotted fragment of stone broke loose, almost pitching him to death. Again, a clump of grass tore free at the very edge of the precipice. But The Shadow maintained his balance and his slow, even breathing.

He squirmed, with a sudden heave, to safety!

He had no time to wonder about the mystery of the man who had killed Benton from ambush. The Shadow was more concerned with the problem of Richard Benton.

He bent over the dead lawyer for a few moments, shrouded by darkness. It was impossible to see what The Shadow was doing. Sibilant laughter echoed briefly. Then The Shadow fled.

He raced back toward the home of Benedict Stark. His goal was the lighted library window.

He returned to the library as Lamont Cranston. Closing the window, he tiptoed to the exact spot where he had fallen when Benton's bullet had struck his steel-meshed vest. He could hear the yells of Stark from the locked closet where the millionaire was still imprisoned. Stark was still shouting: "Help! Murder! Police!"

There was no way Stark could have gotten out of that closet. The spring lock was controlled from the outside. It seemed to exonerate Stark. And yet Cranston smiled grimly. A sinister joke had taken place in this house tonight - a joke which Cranston was beginning at last to fathom!

He lay down on the floor, in a pose of seeming death.

Meanwhile, the policeman had reached the road below the cliff at the rear of the estate. He found a blood-smeared cloak, but no body. He assumed, wrongly, that criminal confederates had been waiting below with a car. Tire tracks at the edge of the road seemed to prove that. Pals had picked up the dead Shadow and driven swiftly away.

The cop hurried up the cliff steps and ran back to the mansion of Benedict Stark. He saw the "dead" Lamont Cranston and heard the shouts of the imprisoned Stark. He liberated Stark from the closet.

Having listened to Stark's gasping story, the cop darted to the telephone. He called headquarters and asked for homicide. When he hung up, he felt a little better. The responsibility was no longer his. Homicide would take over.

Inspector Joe Cardona himself was coming!

"Too bad poor Cranston had to die," Stark said sadly. "But it was his own fault. Benton warned him not to make a move. Cranston tried to grab Benton. That's how he got killed."

The lie had unexpected results. Cranston groaned suddenly. He stirred and opened his eyes. Then to the stupefaction of Benedict Stark, he got weakly to his feet.

"You're... you're alive?" Stark gasped. "Benson didn't... kill you?"

"No. He didn't kill me. I'm lucky, I guess. Look at this."

Lamont Cranston held out a silver cigarette case. It was the one he had so carefully dented with a bullet hours earlier in the privacy of The Shadow's sanctum. He also exhibited a flattened slug.

Actually, the slug had flattened itself against a bulletproof garment. But that was not Lamont Cranston's story.

"I had the cigarette case in the pocket of my vest, just over my heart. It was all that saved me from death. Lucky, eh?"

"I'll say!" the policeman, grunted. "You ought to go to church, mister, and say a few prayers!"

Benedict Stark didn't say anything. But Cranston knew what he was thinking. How could this lucky fool of a Lamont Cranston possibly be The Shadow? The cop had shot The Shadow! The Shadow had fallen to his death from the cliff.

And here was Lamont Cranston, stupid as ever and still very much alive!

INSPECTOR CARDONA arrived a few minutes later, with the homicide squad. He listened to the policeman's report. His eyes narrowed.

"You say that you saw The Shadow deliberately shoot Benton in the back?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't believe it," Cardona snapped. "It's too silly!"

"Why is it silly?" Benedict Stark interjected.

"Because The Shadow is not a criminal. He doesn't shoot people in the back."

"Perhaps this young policeman is lying," Stark said, with a faintly malicious smile.

The cop growled. His face was red. He was a good cop, with a good record. His voice vibrated with unmistakable honesty.

"I saw The Shadow and Benton fighting. Benton tried to run. I saw The Shadow pull a gun and aim it. Benton went down with a bullet in his back. That's the truth, inspector! Why should I lie about it?"

Cardona coughed. He felt embarrassed at the argument.

"Nobody doubts your word, Rafferty. Let's go look at Benton."

The unfortunate lawyer was still flat on his face, with blood caked around an ugly hole through his spine. Cardona twisted the head briefly and stared at the dead face.

"It's Benton, all right!"

Lamont Cranston pointed suddenly. He spoke in a hesitant tone.

"What's that under the body? It looks like the edge of a piece of paper."

It was. Cardona stared at it with incredulous amazement when he snatched it up. There was a brief pencil-printed message on the paper:

This man is not Richard Benton. He is an impostor.

THE SHADOW.

Inspector Cardona was paralyzed for a moment by this seemingly foolish denial of truth. Then he dropped to his knees beside the corpse and ripped open the dead man's clothing. He unbuttoned the vest and shirt, tore open the man's undergarment.

The flesh of the chest was exposed. On the skin was the tattoo design which Benton's wife had already described. Two anchors in indelible red and blue, intertwined with a design of rope ends.

"Looks like The Shadow made a bad mistake," Benedict Stark said in a grating voice.

There was tension in it. And something a little less evident. Was it fear?

"A funny sort of tattoo mark, isn't it?" Lamont Cranston said.

There was nothing officious about his remark. He stated it timidly, like a man afraid to air an opinion which didn't seem very important, even to himself.

"What do you mean?" Cardona said.

Cranston gave a feeble chuckle.

"I'm probably wrong, inspector. I don't know much about such things. But these marks look a little blurred, don't you think? Maybe tattoo marks do blur. But I always thought that tattoo ink was injected under the skin, where it couldn't blur."

Cardona's head turned. He uttered a quick cry:

"Bennie! Where's Bennie Osterman?"

"Right here, inspector."

Osterman was one of the fingerprint experts on the homicide squad.

"Got a sponge in your kit, Bennie?"

"Yeah."

"Wet it. Put some alcohol on it. Lemme have it, quick!"

Cardona rubbed the wet sponge briskly over the twined anchors on the dead man's chest. The ink streaked and faded. The faked tattoo washed completely away!

"Another double!" Joe Cardona gasped. "A second fake Benton! What in the name of magic are we up against?"

To Cardona, the death of this unknown stooge had all the earmarks of black magic. It made a tangled mystery worse than ever.

But The Shadow was beginning to understand!

CHAPTER X. THE SHADOW PLAYS A TUNE

THE SHADOW'S understanding of the Benton case, while yet far from complete, was definite enough to point toward a reasonable solution of a mystery that seemed on its surface to be senseless and without meaning.

In this belief, The Shadow was at variance with the opinion of the police and the newspapers.

He sat in his sanctum, examining a selected pile of newspaper clippings that lay in a pool of blue light on his polished desk.

The clippings represented the opinion of all important newspapers. Richard Benton, they charged, was guilty of two cowardly murders.

He had somehow managed to hire the services of two crooks who looked exactly like him. He had used one in an attempted blackmail of the governor, killing the stooge to shut his mouth when the courage of the governor ruined the blackmail scheme.

The crime at the Bridgewater Hotel, the newspapers believed, had forced the wily Benton to go into hiding to protect his alibi. But in hiding he needed money. So he sent the second stooge to his own home to get hold of cash. The stooge was careless enough to attract police attention. But he got away.

Benton then sent him to the home of Benedict Stark, to demand money. The holdup failed, and again the stooge was killed - by Benton himself, posing as The Shadow!

This incredible theory drew a burst of sibilant laughter from The Shadow's lips.

The truth, The Shadow now knew, was that Richard Benton was innocent. He was guiltless of either blackmail or murder. Benton was the one and only real victim in this seemingly complicated case. And Benton had been kidnapped!

That made things a lot simpler.

Tapering fingers of The Shadow drew a blank sheet of paper into the oval cast by the cone of blue light above the desk. On that sheet of paper he drew a mathematical symbol: X.

The brain of The Shadow reconstructed a truer picture.

X was the man who smoked menthol cigarettes. X had kidnapped Richard Benton by luring him away from his New York home with a fake message of some kind.

Having done this, X went to the State capital with Stooze No. 1. The stooge pulled the false blackmail stunt on the governor. After the stooge had returned to the Bridgewater Hotel, X lay in wait and killed him.

There was a serious gap in The Shadow's logic at this point. He did not know why X had killed the stooge. He suspected the murder might have been caused by a possible attempt of the stooge to double-cross X. But there was no proof, as yet.

The Shadow proceeded with his reconstruction of the hidden facts behind a strange mystery.

Having hopelessly involved the kidnapped Richard Benton in murder, X returned to New York. Here, he

made the second attempt to incriminate the vanished lawyer. He sent a second double to Benton's own home, after a crooked theatrical producer named Archie Hiller had gotten rid of Benton's wife by sending her out of town as the star of a musical show, "The Blonde From Spain."

From this point on, The Shadow was on surer ground. He had personally intervened in the second series of events. The Shadow knew that the stooge's discovery at Benton's home by a cop was deliberate.

It raised a hue and cry for Benton right here in New York! It pointed the finger of guilt on Benton while Stooze No. 2 was racing to the home of Benedict Stark to pull a fake holdup; actually, to kill Lamont Cranston.

Once more, a stooge had been murdered. But this time The Shadow knew why. The stooge had been killed from ambush by X, to prevent his confessing to The Shadow.

Who was X? Was he Archie Hiller? The fact that two doubles for the kidnapped Benton could be produced so easily, suggested that X might be a man with theatrical experience. That, however, was guesswork. The Shadow did not linger on the point.

But there was no guesswork about who X's boss was. It could be no one on earth but Benedict Stark! The Prince of Evil!

STARK had lied about the painting which had lured Cranston to his home. The painting was not a newly purchased one. It had been owned by Stark for at least three years. Stark had also lied about no one being at his home during Cranston's visit. X was there!

He was hidden somewhere, to make sure that his stooge did a perfect murder job. X had smoked a menthol cigarette. X had sneaked out to the grounds. X had killed the stooge the moment the prisoner was almost to confess to The Shadow.

Always X!

The Shadow laughed. He abandoned mathematics. Thinking was now finished. Action was necessary.

He was prepared to strike a double blow that should produce simultaneous results at two separate points. He was going to move against Archie Hiller and against a certain Oscar who used a real-estate office as the headquarters for a very shrewd "blind-man" act.

The Shadow plucked earphones from the wall. His voice spoke crisply into a transmitter. Presently, a voice replied:

"Burbank speaking."

To his contact man, The Shadow gave complete and detailed instructions. He ordered those instructions to be transmitted at once to Harry Vincent, at the Hotel Metrolite.

Ordinarily, The Shadow would have continued to use Clyde Burke on the case. But Clyde was now supposedly dead at the bottom of the Hudson River as a result of his adventure with the murderous Dave and Charlie. The Shadow preferred to let the criminals continue in their mistaken belief that Clyde was dead. That was why he selected Harry Vincent.

Harry was one of The Shadow's most trusted agents; the oldest in point of service, as a matter of fact. He could be depended upon to give a good account of himself.

The bright light faded above The Shadow's desk. The sanctum was plunged into darkness. In that

darkness, no sound was heard as The Shadow departed.

THE taxicab of Moe Shrevnitz cruised leisurely about town. His cab contained a well-dressed and well-paying passenger. Lamont Cranston was enjoying a pleasant drive.

It was a long drive, too. The taxi visited many parts of busy Manhattan. From the lower end of Harlem to the upper fringe of Greenwich Village, Moe carried his distinguished fare. But there was one section of town where the cab was not seen. That was the Times Square district.

The Shadow had no desire for Moe's cab to be recognized in the neighborhood of the fake real-estate office maintained by the cunning Oscar. Later on, there would be plenty doing in that particular block. Moe's cab was due to set off the opening fireworks.

Moe Shrevnitz was a secret agent of The Shadow's.

Meanwhile, time had to be wasted in order to allow Harry Vincent to study his orders and get to the spot where The Shadow had ordered him to wait.

In the taxicab, Lamont Cranston glanced at his watch. The frown of impatience left his face. A smile creased his lips.

He leaned forward and tapped twice on the glass that separated him from the driver. Moe understood that tapped signal. The cab swung around a corner. It headed south from Eighty-sixth Street, where it had been loitering.

Presently, it swung into the brilliantly lighted gash of Broadway. It headed toward Times Square.

Cranston alighted a block from his goal. He walked to the corner and lit a cigarette. His gaze drifted up the side street toward the darkened front of Oscar's real-estate office, on the ground floor of a dingy building. The store door was closed and locked.

His gaze shifted across the street nearer the corner. There was a soft-drink stand on the opposite side of the street. It was a busy little hole-in-the-wall, with an open front for serving customers. There were plenty of customers tonight.

And yet Cranston noticed an odd circumstance. Although there were two men behind the counter, only one man was taking care of the busy trade. The other man - the boss, apparently - seemed to spend most of his time drifting to the sidewalk and staring about.

He was a hard-faced, squint-eyed little runt, distinctly not a better type of citizen. His glance seemed to drift most often in the direction of the real-estate office up the street.

Discreetly, Cranston moved around the corner. It wasn't the first time he had been in this neighborhood to observe this squint-eyed little soft-drink merchant. He suspected the fellow to be a member of Oscar's mob; a lookout in case of possible trouble.

Cranston didn't like the man's looks. Before he left the taxicab, he had warned Moe to be careful of gunfire when Moe pulled his rock stunt.

Moe's cab was in sight now. It had halted at a red light on the east side of Broadway. That was to allow Moe to get up plenty of speed when the lights changed to green.

They did so almost instantly. Moe rocketed ahead, crowding on all the speed he could. It was a normal stunt with busy hackers. It attracted no attention from pedestrians. But the squint-eyed man at the

soft-drink stand heard the loud roar of the motor. He moved quickly out of his hole-in-the-wall.

Moe passed the real-estate office going like a racing car. Suddenly, one of his hands left the wheel. His arm swung like a baseball pitcher's. He made such a grimly powerful heave that his cab skidded and swerved toward the curb.

But the rock that Moe hurled went straight. It whizzed through the window of the dark real-estate office with a jangling crash of broken glass.

Almost before the crash had sprinkled the dark sidewalk with shattered glass fragments, Moe had recovered from his skid. He crowded on more speed. With both hands back on the wheel, Moe was unbeatable as a cab driver. The taxi roared westward, Moe's body prudently low behind the wheel.

It was well that he slid low. The squint-eyed man from the soft-drink stand was out in the center of the street at the first crash of broken glass. An automatic pistol leaped from a pocket.

The automatic pistol went off like the stuttering bark of a machine gun. Bullets whistled toward the tires of the vanishing cab. One higher than the rest sang like a spiteful mosquito a bare inch above Moe's ducked head.

But no tires were hit. The man with the gun had two things to do; and in trying to do both at once, he bungled his job. He wanted to disable Moe's tires, and he wanted to note the license plate.

He failed in both. Moe's cab got away clean.

THE sudden crash of glass in a busy street, followed by the roar of bullets, produced terrific excitement. Men shouted and ducked into doorways. Women screamed. One of the bolder pedestrians darted toward the squint-eyed man. He tried to grab his gun arm.

"What are you trying to do, you fool? Kill someone with that reckless gun of yours? Put it away!"

The squint-eyed man uttered a nasty growl.

"If you don't take that hand of yours off my arm, sap, I'll put you away!"

There was something so murderously calm in his snarl, that the pedestrian backed up hastily. Then he got his nerve back. He had seen a patrolman approaching on the run.

"Officer! Arrest that man! He just endangered the lives of dozens of people!"

The little man gave the policeman a tight-lipped grin. "Hello, Kelly! You look sore. What's the beef?"

"What's the idea of the gunplay?"

"A mobster in a cab just threw a rock in that window over there. I thought for a minute it was a pineapple. That's why I did the shooting."

"Have you got a permit for that rod?"

"Don't make me laugh, Kelly. You know damned well I have! You ain't thinking of running me in, are you?"

The pedestrian who had first butted in sensed the cop's discomfiture.

"You're not going to let this little gun ruffian bluff you, are you, officer?"

Squint-eye chuckled. It wasn't a pleasant laugh.

"Do you know anything about law, mister? I got a permit for this gun. I'm a law-abiding citizen. I tried to stop gorillas in a taxi from making a getaway, while you were ducking to the sidewalk on your belly. Get the hell out of here and don't bother me!"

"Officer, I want to make a charge of disorderly conduct against him. I want to -"

The cop shrugged. He knew this little guy with the gun had a permit. The cop was leery about tangling with him. It made the cop angry at his own helplessness. So, human-like, he took out his anger on the innocent citizen.

"Shut up and don't start no arguments! Get back out of the way! Everybody - back up!"

Squad cars were arriving with the shrill wail of sirens. The crowd that had spilled into the street recoiled in a huddle to the sidewalk. There was increasing commotion. Police were advancing toward the locked front door of the real-estate office whose window had been so mysteriously smashed by a missile from a speeding taxi.

No one noticed the vanishing figure of the squint-eyed little man. That is, no one except Lamont Cranston.

Cranston saw the fellow turn the corner into Broadway, elbowing his way through the crowd like a swift little ferret. Cranston followed him, to see what he'd do - although he guessed what was about to happen. He wanted it to happen!

The man had given Cranston, and anyone else who might be listening, a fake reason for his quick departure before he started elbowing his way around the corner. He shouted to his clerk in the soft-drink shop:

"Hey, Louie! Take care of things for a minute, will you? I want to call the Daily Classic about this. It means I'll collect five bucks for a spot news tip!"

He didn't look as if he needed five bucks. And if he did, why didn't he use the phone in the soft-drink stand? The answer, of course, was that he wanted secrecy for that call of his.

Mobsters were being summoned! The little man was warning Oscar, and maybe others, that an attack of some sort had been made against the real-estate-office hangout.

The Shadow smiled grimly.

Squint-eye didn't know it, but he was doing something that the brain of The Shadow had willed him to do.

Crooks were dancing to a tune The Shadow had started to play when Moe Shrevnitz had hurled his rock through Oscar's dark window up the street.

Lamont Cranston pushed his way closer to the real-estate office, where police were grouped in front of the locked street door.

He was curious to see who the first arrival would be, as a result of Squint-eye's stealthy phone calls.

CHAPTER XI. THE THIRD STOOGES

LESS than a half mile from where The Shadow waited outside a smashed window, Harry Vincent had a waiting job of his own.

The Shadow was an inconspicuous bystander in a large crowd which had been drawn by the sight of police cars and the rumors of an outbreak of gang warfare near Times Square. There was no large crowd where Harry Vincent loitered, but he was also inconspicuous.

Harry was standing outside a corner cigar store. The corner was a stopping place for a cross-town bus line. A few people waited at the curb. Busses were frequent and the knot of people changed rapidly. But Harry took none of those busses.

His gaze was on an apartment house foyer not far from the corner.

On the third floor of that modest looking apartment house was a suite occupied by a famous theatrical producer, Archie Hiller. Stage folk called him Uncle Archie. But Harry Vincent knew there was nothing benevolent about the real Hiller. The instructions of The Shadow had made many things clear.

Harry kept glancing at his watch. It was now two minutes past eleven. Something ought to happen very soon. The Shadow had predicted that shortly after eleven Archie Hiller would come racing from his apartment and grab a taxi for a quick trip to Times Square.

It sounded miraculous to Harry, but as an agent of The Shadow, he was used to miracles. They never happened because of chance. They were the result of logical preparation on the part of The Shadow.

So Harry was not at all surprised when, at four minutes past eleven, Hiller came rushing into view on the dark sidewalk. A taxi was parked opposite the bus stand, and Hiller signaled it. Harry left his post at the cigar store and walked down the street.

He was opposite the cab when Hiller shouted an excited order to the driver:

"Times Square and make it fast!"

Harry grinned. The Shadow's plan was ticking beautifully on schedule. It was up to Vincent to make his end of it tick, too! He entered the apartment foyer as soon as the cab sped out of sight.

He took the elevator to the third floor. It was an automatic, self-service lift. That meant that there was no operator to remember Harry later. Skeleton keys took care of Hiller's door on the third floor. It was not too difficult a lock to crack.

Lights were still burning in the living room. Harry reconnoitered cautiously, afraid of the possible presence of a valet or a butler. But the suite was empty. The lights in the living room were lit because Hiller had left in so jittery a hurry that he hadn't stopped to turn them off.

Harry got busy with a swift search. His first concern was to investigate the kind of cigarettes that Archie Hiller smoked. He had been warned by The Shadow to look for menthol cigarettes. To his disgust, he had no luck.

The ornamented cigarette box on Hiller's desk contained four compartments. There were four popular brands for the different tastes of Hiller's guests.

A copper cigarette humidor suggested that it might be Hiller's personal choice. It was dented and worn looking. It was nearest Hiller's easy-chair. But Vincent drew a blank there, too. Nothing but a popular brand.

His eyes swept the top of the desk. He noticed a few tiny bits of loose tobacco on the desk top. It gave him an idea. Perhaps Hiller had very recently changed the contents of those boxes with fresh cigarettes. Harry began to nose farther around the room.

It was a good idea. In a closet, he found a wastebasket. Pawing through the trash, Harry discovered four empty cigarette packages, of the popular brands. On a shelf of the closet, tucked away at its dark rear, were four cartons. One package was missing from each carton.

Harry went back to the desk. He picked up Hiller's copper humidor and examined it more carefully. He spilled out the cigarettes and sniffed at its empty interior. He could detect the smell of a damp sponge and a bit of peeled apple. But there was a more pungent smell there, too.

An unmistakable whiff of menthol tickled Harry's sensitive nostrils.

It was grim proof that Archie Hiller liked to smoke menthol cigarettes, and was worried enough by recent events to try to hide that fact!

HARRY became more interested in the desk itself. It was a beautiful example of Chinese Chippendale. It had graceful, fragile legs and a curved, highly polished front.

There was a drawer in the curved front. A tiny keyhole showed that it could be locked, but it wasn't. Harry had no trouble in opening it.

He found nothing but a few bills, some old theater programs, odds and ends of pencils and string, a postage stamp or two.

He shut the drawer, careful to leave no fingerprints on the knob. He stared thoughtfully at the snakes.

The snakes were below the drawer on the curved front of the desk. There were two of them. They were made of brass, a sort of raised design on the antique wood. One snake had its brass head curved about the head of the other.

Harry Vincent instantly suspected the presence of a secret drawer. The desk itself was the sort of antique piece in which a cabinetmaker might easily build a secret receptacle for a man who had things to conceal.

Harry got busy with the brass heads of the snakes. Time was flying - he had no idea when the sly Hiller might return - but he persisted with patient skill. His manipulation was rewarded suddenly. The twined snake heads came apart diagonally from right to left. One head moved slightly up, the other slightly down. A small brass button was disclosed.

Harry pressed it.

A secret drawer shot open with the suddenness of a cash register. Harry could see now why there had been no crack to disclose the presence of a secret receptacle. The drawer filled the whole width of the curved front. The snake design hid its upper edge.

The papers in this compartment were a lot more interesting than the trash in the upper drawer. Harry's eyes gleamed as he examined them.

He found two strange clues.

One of them was a bill of sale from a famous mail-order firm. Hiller had recently purchased a two-story frame portable house. The parts of the house, numbered for easy assembling, had been consigned to a

queer destination. The consignment had gone to a theatrical warehouse that was controlled by Archie Hiller!

It was a clever spot to store the stuff without exciting comment. The warehouse was packed with scenery and sets, similarly numbered for quick erection on the stage of a theater. The portable house could gather dust in the warehouse until such time as benevolent Uncle Archie might want to make use of it in some grimmer surroundings.

The second document was the deed to a tract of land in upper New York, where the portable house had probably been erected. The deed had not been recorded. It was not made out to Archie Hiller. The ostensible owner was a dummy; someone Harry had never heard of.

A map accompanied the deed. Harry had already learned from the purchase price that the land itself had no real value. The map confirmed this. The property was situated in a rural, sparsely settled district. The conventional markings showed considerable elevation, circling hills, and the crosshatch of dense woodland.

Harry Vincent divined the ugly truth. This must be the well-guarded spot where the kidnapped Richard Benton was being held a prisoner!

Harry made swift notes of what he had found. He closed the secret drawer gently, careful to leave no trace of his search.

He departed from Hiller's apartment, but not from the building. In the rear of the deserted lobby, he found a flight of stairs that led to the basement. He hunted up the janitor. To the janitor, he made a cool bluff.

"Mr. Hiller asked me to find out if you got those menthol cigarettes all right. He sent 'em down to you, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir. He said to give 'em away, if I didn't like menthol in my tobacco. But I don't mind. I was glad to get 'em, sir. I can smoke almost anything."

"That's fine," Harry said, and withdrew.

He found a quiet spot to do a little telephoning. He called up Burbank and reported. Ordinarily, his job would have finished at this point. The usual routine would be to wait further orders from The Shadow.

But tonight was not a usual routine. The Shadow had ordered Harry to proceed on his own judgment. If he found a clue that warranted immediate action, Harry was free to move.

His smile tightened. That was the sort of order Harry liked. He grabbed a taxi and drove swiftly to the Metrolite Hotel, where he maintained a permanent residence. He telephoned from the desk to the hotel's private parking area and had his car brought out front.

Ten minutes later, Harry Vincent was on the road, his car filled with gas and oil. He headed swiftly upstate.

WHILE Vincent was thus busy, Lamont Cranston was not idle. Watching inconspicuously from among the crowd that loitered outside the smashed window of Oscar's real estate office, he witnessed the arrival of one of the suspects.

The first man to show up was Archie Hiller. Hiller stayed in the background. Like Cranston, he seemed to be mostly watching.

After a while, Suspect No. 2 showed up. This time, it was Oscar. There was nothing of the ragged Blind Tom about him. His eyes were alert and strained. A quick glance passed between him and Hiller, then Hiller faded.

Oscar shouldered through the crowd, to where police were waiting at the locked door of the real-estate office. He produced a key from his pocket and spoke in an assured tone.

"I'm the manager of this office. I was notified that there had been an attack on my property by a thug in a taxi cab. Shall we go in and make sure nothing was stolen?"

A cop kicked broken glass out of the way. Oscar inserted his key in the door. Lamont Cranston didn't wait to see this. He, too, had faded as swiftly as Hiller. He was on his way around the block to the rear of the real-estate property.

He found the alley through which Clyde Burke had been taken on the dangerous adventure which had culminated in a ferryboat "murder." Once inside the alley, Lamont Cranston had vanished. In his place was the black-robed figure of The Shadow. The Shadow forced a quiet entry to the back room of the office.

He didn't close that alley door. He left it slightly ajar, for a deliberate reason of his own.

Except for the washbasin and its plumbing, there was no sign that the wily Oscar had ever used this back room for a theatrical dressing room. The make-up table, with its jars and tubes and its tall mirror, was gone. So was the portable shower stall. But the trapdoor that led below was still hidden under a small rug in the center of the floor.

The Shadow pushed the rug partly aside, but not so far that he couldn't reach it from below. Lifting the trapdoor, he crouched on the wooden steps. He lowered the door partly over his head. But he didn't let it drop flat until he had twisted the rug above him, so that it would lie crookedly over the fallen trapdoor.

The Shadow went down dark wooden steps to the cellar room.

Meanwhile, police were ponderously busy in the real-estate office out front. There was nothing much to examine. The story of eye-witnesses proved that no burglar had actually gotten inside. The chunk of rock that had smashed the glass lay in the middle of the floor. It seemed merely a spiteful attack on the part of some jealous competitor.

That was the story which the smooth Oscar told the cops. When a policeman rattled the knob of the locked door to the rear room, Oscar had an easy explanation and an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry. I forgot to bring the key along with me. It doesn't matter, anyway. The room is just a junk heap. Old furniture and a few account books. It's obvious that no burglars got in. The only damage is a smashed window - and I've got insurance on that. So -"

Suavely, he got rid of the police.

When they were gone, Oscar locked the street door, made sure that the shades were drawn. He put out the lights. Then he unlocked the door to the rear room and went in with suspicious caution.

He hadn't told the police his real opinion concerning that queer rock hurling. He was afraid that it masked a clever burglary attempt on the part of The Shadow.

The moment Oscar examined the rear room, dread clutched at his heart. He saw that the alley door had been forced open. It was still ajar!

A gun gleamed in Oscar's hand. Ice-cold eyes moved toward the rug that covered the trapdoor.

The rug was crooked. It was wrinkled where someone had hastily shifted it. Oscar knew instantly that The Shadow or one of his agents had been down those hidden stairs, to examine the cellar room!

Murderous tension left Oscar's face, as he made a wrong deduction. His mind whispered fiercely that The Shadow had been downstairs, but he was not there now. The misplaced rug and the partly open alley door indicated swift flight. The Shadow had not had time for a search. The prompt arrival of police cars, the sound of cops' voices in the front office, had unnerved The Shadow. He had fled in panic, leaving a misplaced rug and an open alley door.

THIS was exactly what The Shadow intended Oscar to think.

The Shadow lay securely hidden while Oscar made sure that nothing of serious consequence had been uncovered in the room below the trapdoor.

Oscar went straight to the inner wall. He manipulated it with a speed born of long practice. A panel slid aside.

Two compartments were revealed within the wall. They stood side by side, one large and one small. The smaller one contained a telephone. The larger one was filled almost to its capacity by a tough-looking steel safe.

Oscar opened the safe, pawed anxiously through its contents. Then he heaved a hoarse sigh of relief. Nothing was out of place.

He picked up the hidden telephone from the smaller niche. He called no operator, but pushed a signal button. The phone was evidently directly connected to another, somewhere.

For a long time nothing happened. Then:

"Archie? This is Oscar!" Oscar swore with relief, as he established connection. "Just got back to your apartment, eh? I've been trying to get you. You were right about your suspicions. The Shadow was here! He sneaked in through the alley shortly after that rock was hurled through the window out front."

There was an unintelligible mumble from Hiller at the other end. Oscar chuckled.

"Nothing to worry about. He was scared away by the cops. He didn't learn a thing! If he had monkeyed with the panel, I'd have known it, the way I've got the mechanism fixed. But I went through the safe, just to make sure. It's O.K. You can go to bed and forget The Shadow."

He hung up the phone. The moment the connection was broken, a calm voice spoke behind him:

"Thank you, Oscar!"

Oscar whirled. The Shadow's gun looked as big as a cannon. It was pointed straight at Oscar's heart. Burning eyes stared above the gun muzzle.

"Don't try it!"

But Oscar did. He made a desperate grab to shut the open door of the safe. His other hand dived for a hidden weapon.

The Shadow leaped. His gun smashed against Oscar's temple, toppling him in a sprawled heap. A kick sent a half-drawn weapon skittering out of the crook's dazed clutch. Again, The Shadow's gun swung

hard. It was too grim an emergency to take chances.

Oscar groaned. He relaxed, as limp as a dish rag.

Quickly, The Shadow darted to the open safe. He had been prepared for surprise. He knew he was dealing with a conspiracy that was headed by the criminal genius of Benedict Stark, Prince of Evil. But a swift perusal of one of the papers The Shadow found drew a gasp of amazement from him.

The plot against Richard Benton was even more intricate than The Shadow had dreamed!

This paper threw a revealing light on the matter of the stooges who were being used to incriminate Benton and railroad him to the electric chair. There were three stooges, not two!

Two of Benton's doubles had already been callously murdered, but there was still one left. He was being kept in ignorance of what was going on. The typewritten report in the safe indicated that this third cat's-paw was being held in close confinement. He was allowed to read no newspapers, had no suspicion of the fate of the other two stooges.

The man was being kept in an ideal spot. He was aboard an unnamed yacht that was anchored in the Hudson, not far from the Riverside Drive estate of Benedict Stark!

Elated, The Shadow prepared for action. He tied up the unconscious Oscar and gagged him. He shoved him out of sight in the cellar room. Then The Shadow departed stealthily via the dark alley in the rear.

He sent swift telephone orders to Burbank. From Burbank he learned the details of what Harry Vincent had found out in the apartment of Archie Hiller. He learned about the portable house and the lonely tract of land upstate. His deep-set eyes gleamed with steady flame.

He added another order to the ones he had already given Burbank. He made swift arrangements for Miles Crofton to meet him at a certain spot on the Hudson River with the powerful, streamlined seaplane of Lamont Cranston.

The Shadow was at last ready to strike!

CHAPTER XII. THE PORTABLE HOUSE

A ROWBOAT was crossing the Hudson River.

It had left the New Jersey side from a shaggy cove at the foot of the Palisades. It was moving across the night shrouded river to a point just south of the Harlem River at Spuyten Duyvil. Above that point was the high rocky shore of upper Manhattan, where the mansion of Benedict Stark overlooked the river.

A quarter mile out from shore, a yacht was anchored. The goal of the rowboat was that anchored yacht.

The Shadow was at the oars of the rowboat. The oarlocks were muffled. The Shadow's powerful strokes dipped with soundless precision. The hiss of foam was no louder than the normal murmur of the tide.

When The Shadow had nearly reached his goal, he stopped rowing. He let the tide carry his drifting boat closer to the anchored yacht. The yacht was entirely dark except for the gleam of one porthole. It was a porthole that faced the New Jersey side. Whoever was aboard was taking no chances of having, his presence noted from the shore.

But the faint exclamation from The Shadow held no elation. He was staring at the yacht itself. It wasn't

Benedict Stark's yacht!

It was the Bluebird. The boat belonged to Archie Hiller!

The Shadow had hoped to link Benedict Stark directly to the identity of Benton's third double, who, The Shadow was positive, was aboard this boat. But perhaps the wily Stark was aboard, too.

Using one of his muffled oars, The Shadow sculled around the dark overhang of the yacht's stern. The tide had pulled the vessel close to the taut line of its anchor. The Shadow took advantage of that linked chain.

Leaving the rowboat tied with a short painter, The Shadow went up the anchor line like a cloaked monkey. The chain was slippery with grease, but the links were large enough to provide a fairly easy route to the deck.

Rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the deck planks. The Shadow glided to a companionway and went below. It was not difficult, finding the lighted cabin facing the New Jersey side. The voices of two men were audible in an indistinct mumble behind the locked door. But The Shadow didn't linger. He hurried noiselessly back to the deck.

Moving past the clutter of rope gear and the trim shape of a lifeboat slung on davits, he reached the rail directly above the lighted porthole. He tied a rope to the rail, so that it hung just short of the lighted circle below him.

The glassed cover of the porthole had been swung open. It was easier to make out the voices from this spot. But The Shadow wanted to see, as well as hear.

He hooked both feet to the rail and lowered himself headfirst. The rope gave him an added hold and helped him to maintain his upside-down balance. His eyes grazed the lighted edge of the porthole's rim.

Almost the first thing he saw was the third stooge! It was hard to realize that the man was not actually Richard Benton. But the voice of a second man made the deception clear.

"What are you worrying about? There's no danger of the trick being discovered. You look like Benton's twin brother. That's why you were picked for the job!"

The Shadow recognized the other man. He had a mop of coal-black hair and a quick, nervous grin. He was the thug named Charlie, the pal of the murderous Dave.

"I ain't worried about the job," the stooge complained. "I'm sick of being kept a prisoner in this damned cabin. Why all the mystery? Why can't I read newspapers? Are you trying to hide something from me?"

"Don't be a dope," Charlie said. "You're getting five thousand bucks. Five grand ain't hay! You can read all the newspapers you like, after you bump Benton."

Listening, The Shadow realized the grim answer to the stooge's lack of newspapers. The crooks didn't want their man to learn that two other stooges had already been used - and that both had received death, instead of an easy five grand.

Charlie laughed soothingly.

"You ain't got long to wait. We're bringing Benton back to New York in the morning. He'll be in Manhattan before the sun rises. And he'll arrive in such a way that it will take a damned good dick to find him before he's ready for the murder rap."

"Yeah - and I take all the risk!"

"Listen! All you do is to kill a guy, make a sweet getaway - and Richard Benton goes to the electric chair for the guy's murder. This time, Benton will have no out."

"What do you mean, 'this time'?" the stooge grumbled. "Have you tried it before with someone else and bungled?"

"You're crazy!" Charlie said. He yawned noisily. "Have a drink, then get some shut-eye. That's what I'm going to do."

CHARLIE walked to the cabin door and unlocked it with a key he took from his pocket. He relocked the door on the outside, imprisoning the stooge.

But long before that, The Shadow had regained the deck from his dangerous acrobatic position, and was gliding below to the corridor that led amidships.

Like a black wraith, he followed the unsuspecting Charlie to his own cabin. Charlie was obliging enough to leave his door open. A light glowed. There was a clink of glass against a bottle.

The Shadow could have slugged Charlie, but he didn't want to be seen by the thug. Silently, he opened the door of a dark cabin that adjoined Charlie's. There was a bulkhead door at the not-too-distant end of the corridor. It led to an open deck. The Shadow tiptoed swiftly there.

He jerked the bulkhead door open and slammed it.

Noise of that slam covered The Shadow's swift race backward along the corridor. He heard a startled cry from Charlie. But before the thug could dart from his room, The Shadow had gained the darkness of the adjoining cabin. Gun in hand, Charlie tore past without stopping.

The thug raced to the open deck, to search for an intruder. The delay gave The Shadow the brief time he needed. He entered Charlie's room. His gloved hand dived beneath his robe and came out with a small glass vial. Into the open whiskey bottle went the contents of the glass vial.

Then The Shadow retreated to the darkness of the room next door. His trick was helped by a natural fact he had grimly counted on. Charlie had left the bulkhead door open behind him when he had raced through. There was a breeze along the lower deck. It slammed the bulkhead door shut.

To Charlie, that ended the mystery. He came back, cursing at himself for his nervousness. He poured himself a generous drink, too upset by his recent alarm to notice that the liquor was a bit unpleasant in his throat.

He sat down for a while. Then he yawned noisily. Finally, he shambled over to his bunk and sat down. His head dropped. He swung up his legs and stretched out. In a few minutes, he was snoring.

The Shadow slipped a key from Charlie's pocket. The key got him into the cabin on the deck above. The stooge thought it was Charlie returning. By the time he realized his error, it was too late. The Shadow had a hand over the man's yelling mouth.

He struck hard at the wobbling head. The blow dazed the man. A second blow put him scientifically to sleep.

Slinging the inert victim over his shoulder, The Shadow carried him up on deck. A rope lowered the man to the moored rowboat below. As soon as the body of the stooge rested in the boat, The Shadow threw

the loose end of the rope overboard. Then he went down the anchor chain.

He untied the borrowed rope from his captive and dropped it overboard. He smiled grimly as he watched it sink. As for Charlie, the drug would keep him harmless for many hours.

The Shadow rowed back across the Hudson to the cove at the foot of the Palisades. A seaplane waited there on the dark surface. Miles Crofton helped The Shadow to transfer the unconscious stooge to the plane.

The seaplane taxied out into the broad river. It headed into the wind. Suddenly, its dripping floats lifted from the dark surface. The plane curved gracefully upward.

When it was a black speck in a black sky, Miles Crofton gunned it to terrific speed. He headed upstate.

Staring at the unconscious double of Richard Benton, The Shadow uttered a sibilant whisper of laughter. There had been plenty of deception in this case - and there was going to be more!

The Shadow was going to perform a little substitution stunt himself!

HARRY VINCENT stood on a desolate country hilltop, staring at the dark shape of a house. His heart beat with elation. He knew he was staring at the portable house which had been shipped here from a theatrical warehouse on the orders of Archie Hiller.

There was no mistaking the place Harry had checked it with the location on the map he had seen at Hiller's apartment. The nearest village was ten miles away, on a dirt road. The route over which Harry's car had bumped through the darkness was little more than an ancient rutted lane, thickly grown over with weeds.

Obviously, the property was too remote to be visited by neighbors. It was hemmed in by thick underbrush. Harry suspected that the property had gone to rack and ruin since the original owner had died or moved away. It was an ideal spot for a kidnap hide-out.

Harry could see no light in the house. When he approached cautiously and tried the front door, he found it unlocked.

A swift survey through the dark rooms puzzled him. There was no sign of a living being. There wasn't anything, in fact, except the four walls of the portable structure and the cheap inner partitions that separated the rooms. No furniture. No carpets on the floor. Nothing!

But Harry was positive he was on the right track. He snapped on a small flashlight and descended to the cellar.

The cellar seemed a lot more ancient than the house. It was earth-floored. Over most of the earth was a thick growth of weeds. The few bare spots that showed looked curiously blackened.

Harry made a quick deduction. Archie Hiller, or his agents, hadn't dug this cellar. It was a relic from the occupancy of the original owner.

The weeds proved that. They wouldn't sprout so thickly in a newly dug cellar. Up to a short time ago, they had been growing in wind and air and rain. The blackened earth suggested that the original house had burned down. Hiller had built his portable house right smack over the same cellar.

Was there a sinister reason for this?

Vincent believed so. He searched every inch of the floor. Without this careful search, he would never have discovered the existence of the hidden trapdoor.

The trapdoor was covered with a hard-packed layer of earth. But Harry, pushing aside the growth of grass that surrounded it, noticed a square crack that hid the existence of a shaft below the cellar.

He was reaching into his pocket for a knife, when he stiffened suddenly. A scraping sound reached his ears from below!

With a quick gesture, Harry snapped off the gleam of his torch. Turning, he fled noiselessly from the cellar. He crouched at the head of the wooden stairs at a point where he could peer below, without himself being seen.

The earth-covered trapdoor in the cellar was rising. Light from a much larger torch than Harry carried revealed the features of a man. It was a thug with sullenly twisted lips and eyes the color of frozen mustard. It was the killer named Dave!

Tonight, Dave was even uglier than usual. His sandy hair, wet, was plastered to his head. Water dripped from him as he emerged from the shaft. He was soaked from head to foot. His shoes squished as he leaned over to shut the trapdoor.

Dave didn't seem to like being wet.

"A hell of a place to hang out!" he snarled to himself. "Why did Hiller have to pick a well? Anyone would think -"

He snapped out his torch as he walked grumblingly toward the stairs. That gave Vincent a chance to fade noiselessly through the house and out the back door. From a clump of bushes, he watched the dripping Dave emerge presently.

Dave looked a little more presentable. He had changed to dry clothes from some hiding place which Vincent hadn't discovered upstairs. He wheeled a motorcycle from a growth of scrub oak across the rutted lane that led up the hill to the cottage. Dave disappeared on the motorcycle, heading deeper into the desolate country.

If he had driven the other way, he'd have discovered Vincent's car, parked without lights; but he didn't. He was heading for a secret cache of food somewhere, Harry decided. Or maybe liquor.

VINCENT didn't waste time thinking about that. He darted back into the cellar. In a twinkling, he had the trapdoor lifted. A wooden ladder led downward into the water-filled depths of a well.

It looked like an impossible place to find a kidnapped prisoner - but Harry had seen Dave come out, none the worse for his submersion. There must be some way to stay under that water and live.

Vincent descended to the dank surface of the water and drew a deep, lung-filling breath. Then he continued down through the icy-cold water. He was going fine, when he almost lost his hold on the ladder. His questing foot encountered no more rungs below him. He had reached the end of the ladder.

But not the bottom of the well!

Vincent's torch was a waterproof one. He snapped it on and sent its rays spreading murkily downward. The ladder was nailed securely to the side of the shaft. From its lowest rung hung a knotted rope. The rope touched the bottom of the well.

The electric torch disclosed something else. There was a small circular opening at the side of the shaft leading away like a water-filled tunnel from the bottom.

Harry's delay had used up most of the air in his lungs. He climbed back to the top of the ladder and drew in another deep breath. This time, he knew what he had to do.

With a quick rush, he forced himself down the ladder and the knotted rope that hung below. Before his inflated lungs could carry him back to the surface, he dived for the tunnel entrance.

A vigorous stroke or two and a kick of his powerful legs carried him onward - and upward! Harry was not surprised that the tunnel slanted upward. It had to, if a human being lived beyond it.

Harry emerged in a small earthen chamber lit by the feeble glow of a lantern. One glance and he knew his dive had been successful. He was staring at the pale face of Richard Benton!

The kidnapped lawyer was bound and gagged. He looked half-starved and horribly weak. Vincent slashed his bonds and removed the gag.

"Thank God!" Benton gasped, in a barely audible voice.

Harry shot eager questions at him. Benton was not able to talk very much, but his hoarse gasps confirmed The Shadow's theory about the case.

Benton had been lured from his New York home by a fake message. He had never reached the neighboring State capital where he had seemingly blackmailed a governor and murdered an accomplice to cover his own guilt.

He tried to say more, but Harry Vincent stopped his husky mutterings. This was no time for talk. The ugly Dave might return to the well at any instant. It was necessary to get the kidnapped lawyer out of his prison before that.

Orders of The Shadow had been explicit: Stealth and deception. Above all else, deception!

At Harry's command, the trembling Benton drew a deep breath. Together the two men dived down the slanting water tunnel that connected with the bottom of the well. Vincent reached for the rope to steady himself. As he did so, it was jerked upward out of his grasp!

His air-filled lungs made his body start to rise through the water. But he threw himself desperately sideways, dragging the lawyer with him.

Vincent knew exactly what had happened. Dave had returned to the cellar above! He had seen some clue to the presence of an intruder, left by the overeager Vincent. Descending the well, he had tugged at the knotted rope and had felt the pressure of Harry's hand.

All the murderous Dave had to do was to race up the rungs of the ladder and shoot two helpless victims as their heads bobbed to the surface!

ALL this flashed through the brain of Harry Vincent as he twisted desperately back to the entrance of the slanting water tunnel, dragging the half-drowned Benton with him. Their bodies shot upward. But through the tunnel, instead of the well.

They emerged in the earthen prison chamber somewhere beneath the ground in the rear of the portable house.

The air of that prison chamber was fetid and stale, but it felt good in Harry's almost bursting lungs. He dragged the gasping Benton to the muddy floor of the chamber.

There was terror and a wild beseeching hope in the glazed eyes of the lawyer. He was depending on Harry to save him.

Vincent shook his head slowly. His face was pale. A hopeless grimace twisted his lips.

Dave knew now that there were two men in the rat hole guarded by the dank waters of the well. One was a victim; the other was a rescuer. But as far as the murderous Dave was concerned, both were victims!

The crooks hide-out had been discovered. The safety of Dave and the rest of the gang was in peril. To Dave's thuggish brain, there could be only one swift solution to this unexpected danger.

Kill! Kill first, and think afterward! Harry Vincent knew that he and Richard Benton were doomed!

CHAPTER XIII. THE MAN IN THE WELL

THE SHADOW'S seaplane droned onward through the night.

It flew high, a mere speck in a black, starless sky. The Shadow knew that the drone of its powerful motor was nearly inaudible on the earth far below.

Leaning slightly outward, careful to protect his head from the roaring gale of the slipstream, The Shadow studied the distant terrain through powerful night glasses.

It was a queer sort of country for a seaplane to be flying over. Miles Crofton's swift piloting had left the Hudson River far behind. The seaplane had veered its course at a point well below Albany.

There was no sign now of river or lakes. The black countryside was a monotonous pattern of plowed farmland, cut into tiny crisscross squares by the ribbons of roads.

A forced landing, in plowed country like this would be almost certainly fatal, even for a land ship equipped with wheels and stout shock absorbers. For a seaplane, with nothing but floats on its undercarriage, contact with the ground would be utter suicide.

The first bouncing jar would hurl the ship headlong. It would smash into smithereens! The Shadow and Miles Crofton - and an unconscious stooge who looked remarkably like Richard Benton - would be killed instantly.

The Shadow, however, was not courting death. Nor did he intend Benton's double to die. On the life of this unconscious tool of a cunning supercriminal depended the whole clever scheme of The Shadow.

Piercing eyes turned away from the tiny slit of the cabin window. The night glasses were laid aside. The Shadow, having verified his air position, consulted a map. Then he spoke crisply to Miles Crofton.

Crofton nodded. The seaplane's course altered. It headed more nearly due north. Prosperous farmlands began to dwindle. The country below began to get shaggy with scrub oak and timber. Hills shouldered upward in the night, enclosing gaunt and remote valleys.

Suddenly, Crofton uttered a brief cry. He pointed with a gloved hand.

Another valley was visible. It was deeper and blacker than the others. It seemed as flat as a pancake.

The starless sky brought no reflected twinkle from it, but The Shadow knew why that remote valley in the hills was so black and so level.

Water!

Crofton circled the seaplane in the sky like a wind-tossed speck. He cut off the roar of his engine. Down in a dizzy spiral plunged the seaplane under the tug of gravity. It came in for a perfect landing. It tore across the lake in a hiss of spray and drifted to a rocking stop.

Except for the small shape of a stone house at one end, and the concrete spillway of an enormous dam, the lake was hemmed in by a thick tangle of underbrush.

Actually, it wasn't a lake at all. The Shadow smiled grimly at sight of the dam and the stone house. The house was a water gate, inhabited at night by a single watchman. The dam blocked off millions of gallons of drinking water.

The place was an enormous reservoir.

But The Shadow had only one interest in the place. It provided a safe landing for his seaplane - and the mysterious farm owned by Archie Hiller was not many miles away!

Miles Crofton began to inflate a rubber boat. On the floor of the seaplane's cabin, the unconscious stooge stirred. He began to groan weakly.

The Shadow bent over him. It didn't suit his plans to have his victim recover consciousness. The Shadow, having formulated his plans well in advance, was prepared to keep his victim an inert log. Into the hollow of the groaning man's elbow went the sharp point of a hypodermic needle.

There was a faint cry, a dazed thrashing of arms and legs then the criminal double for Richard Benton relapsed into dreamless sleep. It was a sleep that would endure many hours.

CROFTON lowered the prisoner into the inflated rubber boat. The Shadow took the oars and rowed toward the shore, leaving Crofton to guard the drifting seaplane.

The rowboat touched at a spot not more than fifty feet from the stone structure of the water gate. There was no sound in the darkness. But The Shadow sensed the presence of a hidden watcher.

He stepped calmly ashore, lugging his unconscious burden.

"Don't move!" a tremulous voice shouted suddenly from the blackness of the underbrush. "If you make a move, I'll shoot!"

A man came hesitantly out of hiding, with a leveled pistol. It was the watchman from the water gate. He had seen a seaplane land on the forbidden stretch of water he had been hired to guard. A boat had come ashore with what looked like the gaunt forms of a killer and a dead man.

The frightened watchman thought he was watching the final disposal of a murdered victim who had been taken for an air ride.

The watchman had a flashlight, but he was afraid to turn it on for fear of disclosing where he stood.

"Don't move, or I'll shoot!" he repeated harshly.

"It's all right," The Shadow said. "There's nothing wrong. I've got to get to a telephone."

His voice didn't sound like a criminal's.

"Why did you land on the reservoir? It's against the law."

"I had engine trouble."

"Who's that dead man you brought ashore?"

"He isn't dead. He's badly ill. That's why I've got to use your telephone. My friend needs a doctor in a hurry."

"Step a little closer, so I can see you clearly. I warn you - if you're lying, I'll shoot!"

The Shadow stepped slowly forward. He moved warily, however, on the balls of his feet. He was ready for an instant leap aside. He knew what would happen when the jittery watchman got a good look at him.

His caution was justified. The watchman uttered a terrified yell when he saw the black-robed figure emerge from the darkness. He fired instantly.

But The Shadow had flung himself aside at the moment he saw the tensed arm quiver. The flaming bullet missed its target. The watchman had no chance to recoil and fire a second shot.

The pistol was wrenched from his hand. Gloved fingers caught at his throat. He was like a child for the superior strength of The Shadow. The battle was over almost before it had begun.

But The Shadow didn't manhandle his victim any more than necessary. He tied him with stout cord that came from a pocket beneath the black cloak. A gag went into the man's jaws. The Shadow carried him swiftly to the gatehouse and stowed him away in a small shed behind the structure.

As The Shadow had hoped, the shed proved to be a garage. The watchman's car was there. A glance at the gas gauge brought a sibilant laugh of triumph from The Shadow. This was the only part of his planned movements that had depended on fate.

Fate was good!

The car disappeared along a clay road through the scrub oak, carrying The Shadow and the drugged body of Benton's double. Once more, The Shadow consulted his map. The facts concerning Archie Hiller's mysterious land purchase had been transmitted to The Shadow by Burbank. Together with the map, they guided The Shadow to the most desolate region of the wooded countryside.

Avoiding one or two small hamlets, The Shadow reached the rutted lane that led to the top of a wind-swept hill. He drove without lights. He halted his stolen car at a considerable distance from the hilltop and hid it in a covert of bushes. Then he proceeded on foot.

Like Harry Vincent, he found the portable house dark and apparently deserted. He searched the bare rooms from roof to cellar. The cellar interested him most, especially the weed-grown floor and the blackened marks from an ancient fire.

Also, like Harry Vincent, The Shadow suspected that the original farmhouse had long since burned down. The portable house had been erected over the old cellar.

He saw the evidence of where a dripping man had stood. A moment later, he became aware of a cleverly camouflaged trapdoor in the earthen floor.

He was about to examine it, when he heard a queer, muffled cry from below. He melted backward and disappeared into the gloom.

An instant later, the trapdoor was flung violently open. A man's head appeared. A single glance at his face disclosed that the man was Dave, the murderous gunman who had tried to kill Clyde Burke by tossing him from a ferryboat.

DAVE had a waterproof torch in his soaked hand. He had scrambled up the wooden ladder from the depths of the well. His torch shone downward. There was a gun in his clenched hand.

His face was cruel with murderous anticipation.

Actually, Dave had just discovered that a rescuer of Richard Benton was in the secret chamber beyond the wall. Dave had trapped that unknown rescuer. He was waiting for the heads of the two helpless men to rise to the surface of the well.

No heads appeared. Harry Vincent's desperate underwater dive had brought himself and the half-drowned Benton backward into the slanting tunnel. They had risen to the chamber beyond the well, where Benton had been kept so long a prisoner.

Dave realized the truth, after a slow, deadly wait with poised gun. An easy kill had been deferred. Dave cursed viciously. He liked easy kills. With a grunt, he moved his cramped muscles and started to rise from his crouched position.

Before he could straighten, The Shadow was diving at him.

It was a mistake! Dave was of tougher material than the frightened watchman at the gatehouse on the reservoir. The Shadow's zeal to take this gunman alive and force him to talk almost cost The Shadow his life. His grasp at Dave's gun was batted aside. Dave's soaked body squirmed like an eel. He fired with vicious fury.

Flame creased The Shadow's thigh. He rolled over, kicking furiously. There was a grunt of pain from Dave, but a mere kick in the stomach couldn't stop him. He was on his knees with a convulsive motion. Again his gun muzzle flamed.

The bullet went high. The hand of The Shadow had clamped on the murderous wrist a scant split second before Dave's finger pressed the trigger. They fought back and forth on bent knees in a grotesque parody of men at prayer.

Once The Shadow slipped and was momentarily pinned on his back. But only momentarily. His grip on his foe was like steel. As he fell, he used his strength to turn the fall into a double somersault for both men.

The struggling Dave was pulled head downward and over. The Shadow's long legs kicked high. He followed his foe in a backward somersault that rolled both men to their knees again.

Now, the fight was a different story. Dave had lost his gun. Without a gun, he was like a snake without fangs. His muscle was trigger muscle. But he fought like a maniac.

It was useless. A black-gloved hand tore loose; the hand doubled into a fist. The Shadow's fist struck Dave behind the ear. The killer collapsed.

Panting, The Shadow rose to his feet. It was a signal for Dave's mustard-colored eyes to blink wide open. He had been only shamming. He bellied forward on the earth floor like a swimmer. His hand

caught up the gun which The Shadow had kicked aside.

He fired, twisting the flaming muzzle over his hunched shoulder.

A bloody furrow ripped across The Shadow's forearm. But he got his fingers around the barrel of the hot gun, pushed it sideways, trying to turn it on the killer.

Dave was like a madman. The lust to kill drove every semblance of reason from his brain. As the gun jerked, a bullet missed The Shadow's leg by a miracle. Another one wounded Dave.

That wound was the thug's death warrant. His grasp weakened. The Shadow, using every ounce of pressure in wrist and hand, felt the gun move suddenly aside. Before The Shadow could avert the tragedy, Dave's own finger sent a bullet smashing into the flesh of his body.

The slug tore through Dave's vitals. The Shadow knew the crazed killer had inflicted a mortal wound on himself, when he heard the rattling gasp and saw the gush of blood from his mouth.

Dave died with his ugly eyes wide open. Their mustard-yellow glaze became fixed. This time, there was no subterfuge about it.

THE narrowness of his own escape from death made The Shadow shudder as he staggered to his feet.

But there was no time for weakness. Dave's murderous pose at the mouth of the well, when The Shadow had first discovered him, suggested that Benton was hidden somewhere beneath the depths of the water.

Harry Vincent was probably down there, too! Otherwise, why should Harry have disappeared so strangely after locating the portable house in this grim wilderness?

The Shadow picked up Dave's waterproof torch. He inhaled deeply. Then he descended the wooden rungs of the well's ladder.

At the bottom of the ladder, he sent the rays of his light downward. They disclosed the mouth of the slanting tunnel that led away from the bottom of the well. The Shadow upended his body and dived, using a fierce kick against the lowest rung of the ladder to propel his submerged body deeper.

His inflated lungs made the dive difficult, but he managed to get his head and shoulder into the opening of the tunnel. A wriggle shoved his body through.

He ascended like a cork up the slanting length of the water tunnel, emerging with a gasp at the dry lip of the underground cavern. The cavern was just above the level of the water in the well shaft. That was why air filled it, instead of water.

The sight of The Shadow drew a cry of joy from Harry Vincent. Harry was lying, panting, at the back of the cave alongside another man. Once glance and The Shadow knew that his long search had come to an end.

He had located the kidnapped Richard Benton!

Benton was too weak to talk, but The Shadow didn't want talk now. Vincent had already recovered from his exhaustion. He helped The Shadow to drag Benton in a long dive down the slanting tunnel and up through the well to its dank surface in the cellar.

Benton relaxed with a groan when he was hauled to safety. But the work of The Shadow, and of Vincent, was still unfinished. The Shadow issued terse orders to his dripping agent. Vincent nodded and

picked up the dead body of Dave.

He carried the body from the house and disposed of it in a thicket. He returned to the cellar, where Benton lay in exhausted terror.

Meanwhile, The Shadow was busy, too. From his parked car, he took the unconscious form of Benton's double and raced back to the house with him. He weighted the stooge's pockets, and his own, too, with stones. It made the descent into the well easier.

The Shadow took the stooge down with him.

He got the unconscious man past the opening of the slanting water tunnel and up into the interior of the cave. Then he tied and gagged him exactly as Benton had been.

A grim substitution had been accomplished! It would be impossible for crooks to realize that the man now tied up in the cave was not Richard Benton, but a double hired to impersonate him. The two men looked as alike as two peas in a pod. Staring down at his drugged prisoner, The Shadow laughed sibilantly.

But there was still more work to be done. The most ticklish part of the substitution remained to be accomplished. Richard Benton himself was destined to play a major role in this night of intrigue and murder.

The Shadow returned from the well to the cellar of the portable house.

A penciled note took care of the problem of Dave's disappearance. According to the note, the bored Dave had run out of liquor. He had left the house to get some more. The prisoner was safe below. He was tied up tight in the cave. He had already become unconscious from lack of food and of breathable air in the underground chamber.

So the note said. It would prevent too rigid an inspection of the drugged stooge when criminals appeared to remove him for a final murder frame-up. The fact that he had been drugged would not become apparent. Crooks, reading Dave's note, would be prepared to find their prisoner unconscious.

Supported by The Shadow and Vincent, the real Benton was led back to the car hidden in the underbrush.

The Shadow waited in concealment. He was certain that a cunning sequel to a kidnapping was about to occur. The talk he had overheard between the stooge and Charlie aboard Hiller's yacht made that clear.

The Shadow was not surprised when the van arrived.

It was a theatrical van, used to transport scenery from theaters to warehouses. It lumbered along the rutted lane from the direction opposite that which The Shadow had arrived from the reservoir. Its route indicated that it had come from New York City.

It halted opposite the house where criminals believed Richard Benton to be a helpless prisoner.

The Shadow, watching from a well-chosen spot nearby, saw the dripping figure of Benton's double carried from the house. The crooks had no idea of the truth. They chuckled as they stowed the unconscious stooge inside the van, with a man to guard him.

There were four men in all. They looked tough and businesslike. Having stowed "Richard Benton" out of sight, the men started to dismantle the portable house.

They worked swiftly. In amazingly quick time the entire house came apart, piece by piece, and was stowed away inside the theatrical van.

When the job was done, a fifth man descended from the seat of the van. He had been sitting there so quietly, hidden by the darkness, that The Shadow had not realized his presence.

But he recognized the soft, hypocritical voice. It was the voice of Archie Hiller!

Hiller stared at the blackened, weed-grown cellar where the house had stood. It was open to the sky now, as it had been for many years. There was no indication that a portable house had covered it temporarily.

"Very nice work, boys," Hiller chuckled in his oily voice. "Very nice, indeed!"

CHAPTER XIV. INVITATION TO MURDER

ARCHIE HILLER'S laugh was one of triumph. The fact that Dave was missing did not make him suspicious. Hiller had found the note which The Shadow had left. He had fallen for it, hook, line and sinker. He had no inkling of the truth - that Dave's corpse lay hidden in dense shrubbery not five hundred feet from where the van was parked.

The Shadow's clever reference in the note to the fact that the prisoner had become unconscious from the bad air in the underground cave, was enough to prevent too close an examination of the drugged stooge. The Shadow's hypodermic-needle mark went undetected. Benton's double was shoved into the van.

Archie Hiller took it for granted that the real Richard Benton was still this helpless prisoner.

The Shadow listened to a low-voiced conversation between Hiller and one of his men. It verified some of the things The Shadow had already deduced. It added fresh facts.

"That portable house was a swell idea," the man said. "If the rest of the job goes off as easy, Benton is cooked."

"He'll be cooked, all right. In the electric chair! He's going to be framed so nicely for murder that he'll swear that he did it himself!"

"Can you trust the stooge?"

Hiller laughed harshly.

"Don't worry. He's under lock and key aboard my yacht. Charlie is taking care of him. He hasn't seen a newspaper since he agreed to play ball for five grand. He doesn't know that two other guys who look like Benton accepted the same offer, and wound up in the morgue. I can't afford to let guys like that live. They might get blackmail ideas."

Hiller spoke as calmly as if he were discussing the weather.

"The first stooge got too smart. So I killed him. The Shadow nearly found out the truth from the second stooge; but I took care of that, too. I can take care of everything - including you, if you ever get a smart idea to put the bee on Uncle Archie!"

"Get ideas? Not me, brother!"

The other man spoke hastily, as if he were scared. He changed the subject.

"Nobody will ever tumble to the fact that we built a house in a desolate neck of the woods like this."

"You're telling me," Hiller chuckled. "Look at that cellar over there! Weeds growing, thick, like they always did. That's what's going to make it so tough for Benton when he tells his story to the police. He'll only make a liar of himself! The natives from the villages around here will swear that no house has stood here for nearly fifty years."

"What about the water tunnel to the underground cave?"

"Dave knows what to do, and how to get rid of the water. When Dave hops the train back to New York, the place will be like we found it. Just a cellar full of weeds and a dry old well shaft."

"You don't miss a trick," the man said.

The Shadow, listening grimly, knew that Hiller had missed the most important trick of all. He didn't know that the real Richard Benton was safely in the custody of Harry Vincent!

HARRY was, at this very instant, listening to important disclosures from the frightened lawyer. Crooks had been careless in Benton's presence. They had taunted him with the name of the man for whose murder Benton would pay the penalty in the electric chair.

"Who is he?" Vincent asked eagerly.

"Paul Hardy."

"Hardy?"

Vincent didn't recall the name at once. Paul Hardy was the young man who had tried to help Benton's wife after the lawyer had disappeared.

"He's a fine young fellow," Benton said huskily. "I like him a lot. So does Claire. That's what the thugs are counting on - Claire's liking for the young man."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since I was kidnapped, Paul Hardy has been attentive and helpful to my wife. She's much younger than I, more nearly Hardy's age than mine. Get the dirty idea?"

Vincent nodded. "It will look as if you were jealous of Hardy. So jealous that you came out of hiding to kill him."

"Who in the name of Heaven," Benton groaned, "could hate me so insanely that he'd cook up a hellish mess like this?"

"Have, you any enemies?" Harry asked quietly.

"None that I know of."

"Do you know Benedict Stark?"

"Of course." Benton looked puzzled. "As a matter of fact, we attended college together."

Vincent's grim expression startled him.

"Surely, you're not hinting that Stark has anything to do with this conspiracy?"

Vincent didn't reply directly. He asked another question.

"Did you ever have any dispute with Stark? Think back and think hard. It might be something you would consider trivial."

Richard Benton groaned.

"All I can think of is our college days. We did have some rivalry. Stark was insanely anxious to win honors at college. He always was a homely man, you know. Girls never went near him. So he concentrated on mental achievements. He tried to win every medal at the university. He and I were top men in the class." Benton shrugged. "It seems too silly a matter to recall."

"Nothing is too silly, where Benedict Stark is concerned," Vincent replied. "Tell me about it."

"As I said, we were both top men in the class. The battle for honors was between Stark and myself. I won every prize for which we competed. It got to be a joke on the campus. Stark was furious, because he esteemed himself as a mental wizard. But I didn't think he hated me, until the day before we graduated."

"What happened?"

"He came to my room. He was smiling. It was hard to say whether he was joking or not. But he told me something very queer."

"What did he say?"

"He said to me: 'Richard, you have taken every college prize on which I had set my heart. My ugly face has made me a laughingstock on the campus. You have made a laughingstock of my brain. But don't underestimate me. Some day, we'll see who is really smart!' "

"I thought so!" Vincent said, with a shudder. "The man is a monomaniac! He's cracked on the subject of his own superior intellect. Stark meant every word he said that day. He's a sadist, a criminal at heart!"

"But he was good to me after we were graduated. I had a hard time getting started with my law practice. Stark threw business my way. He helped me toward success."

"That's his devilish way of enjoying a cruel revenge," Vincent said. "You aren't the first man Stark has gone after. He always builds his victims up first, before he destroys him. Believe me, I know!"

There was silence in the dark covert where the two men were conversing in whispers. Suddenly, there came a gasp from Benton. He was staring at the calm face of The Shadow.

The Shadow had approached without sound. He had heard Vincent's last remarks. He was aware of the lawyer's incredulity.

"The truth," The Shadow assured Benton. "The vicious truth!"

He turned to Harry Vincent and told him what had happened in the vicinity of the portable house. The house was gone with the van and the unconscious stooge who Hiller thought was Richard Benton. The van had rumbled away in the direction of New York. The last act of a triple crime was almost ready.

Time was pressing. Action was necessary.

THE SHADOW drove the reservoir watchman's car. Benton was in Harry Vincent's car. They drove down the rutted lane that led away from the desolate mountain hide-out.

When they reached the reservoir, the seaplane was still on the man-made lake.

The Shadow left Vincent ashore, to release the bound watchman and then to return to New York.

Benton was rowed out to the seaplane by The Shadow in the collapsible rubber boat which had brought Benton's criminal double ashore.

Miles Crofton helped the lawyer aboard. The Shadow followed. The seaplane slanted up into the black sky. It flew high and fast.

Presently, the Hudson River showed like a tiny shoestring far below. Crofton altered his course. The seaplane banked and followed the river. It continued with arrow-like speed to the same spot from which it had originally taken off.

Presently, it floated in a reedy cove beneath the Palisades, on the New Jersey side of the river.

Crofton's piloting job was nearly done. A short hop remained. But before he could make that final hop, grim things had to be accomplished by The Shadow and Richard Benton.

Benton's part was dangerous. A single error would mean death to him. But he listened to The Shadow's orders and nodded agreement.

Once more a rowboat crossed the sleeping Hudson toward the out-jut of upper Manhattan. The Shadow rowed to the anchored yacht of Archie Hiller.

Charlie, the thug who had been placed aboard to guard Benton's double, was still dead to the world in his cabin. The Shadow's drug had done its work well. Charlie would learn nothing when he awoke. The Shadow made certain of that, by throwing the bottle of drugged whiskey overboard. In its place he put another bottle of the same brand, taken from the cabin shelf. A sniff at its contents would give Charlie no hint of the truth.

A visit to the cabin on the upper deck would merely confirm Charlie's belief that everything was normal.

He'd find that the stooge who had been hired to impersonate Richard Benton was still in his locked cabin, growling as usual about his enforced imprisonment and his lack of newspapers.

Richard Benton had been well coached by The Shadow. The second part of a clever scheme of substitution was now complete, with the presence of Benton aboard the yacht. Richard Benton was going to impersonate his criminal double!

"Are you sure it will work?" Benton asked in a frightened tone.

The Shadow's sibilant laughter reassured him.

Benton remained aboard the yacht. The Shadow rowed back across the Hudson to where Miles Crofton awaited him in the seaplane.

Presently, the ship roared upward into the black sky. It made its last hop. It flew down the East River to the private seaplane anchorage used by Lamont Cranston.

Only a single figure noted the arrival of the plane. He was the night watchman employed at the landing float. He was well paid by Cranston to keep a discreet silence about the plane's comings and goings.

Cranston hurried back to the Cobalt Club, where he lived whenever he was in town. It was quite late when he arrived, but his appearance excited no comment from the night man on duty. Cranston's comings

and goings were always rather irregular.

There was a letter at the desk for Cranston. He was not surprised, when he opened it in the privacy of his room.

The note was from Paul Hardy.

THE message was filled with puzzlement and alarm. Hardy apologized for bothering Cranston with so urgent an invitation to call on him in the morning. The Shadow's eyes skipped impatiently over the formal opening of the note. He got to the meat of it instantly:

I have just received a most peculiar letter. It is unsigned, and seems to be vaguely threatening. Some of the things in it suggest that perhaps Richard Benton wrote it. It says that unless I remain at home tomorrow morning, I will regret it. It demands also that I invite Lamont Cranston to be there with me.

Naturally, I thought at first of notifying the police. I did not do so because I did not want Mrs. Benton alarmed. And maybe Benton didn't write it at all, although it hints at his authorship. Will you pardon my dragging you into this, and come to see me tomorrow?

Probably the whole affair is harmless and the work of some crank. At any rate, I hope so!

Sincerely,

PAUL HARDY.

The Shadow's eyes were grim when he finished reading the note. To him, there was nothing harmless about it.

It sounded like the crooked-brain of Benedict Stark. Stark had never been able to link the harmless figure of Cranston with The Shadow. But Stark suspected that the two were the same. Was this demand on Paul Hardy part of a sinister murder joke?

The Shadow divined that it was; Lamont Cranston was being invited to witness the murder of Paul Hardy by the third double of Richard Benton! Cranston was going to be forced by his own testimony to send Benton to the electric chair for a crime Benton didn't commit!

But there were certain things that even Benedict Stark, the Prince of Evil, didn't know.

The sibilant laughter of The Shadow whispered softly in the darkness of Lamont Cranston's room at the Cobalt Club.

CHAPTER XV. THE CLOSING NET

THE home of Paul Hardy was a modest two-story dwelling in the residential section of Flatbush. It was a

place of quiet, tree-lined streets. In front of each house was a small lawn and a trimmed green hedge.

When Lamont Cranston drove up alone in his personal car, he was not surprised to find Paul Hardy's home in a neighborhood of this type. Police precincts were well scattered. It was a perfect setting for a swiftly executed crime.

Paul Hardy answered the doorbell himself. He seemed embarrassed as he greeted Cranston. But he was obviously frightened by the peculiar unsigned letter which had forced him to summon Cranston to his home.

"I'm sorry to have annoyed you," he said. "But I must admit I'm glad you came. One of the other two gentlemen has already arrived. I expect the third in a few minutes. All three of you have been more than kind."

"All three?" Cranston asked sharply. "You mean that the letter requested you to summon three people? Who are the other two?"

Hardy didn't reply. He was already leading the way into his living room. A man was waiting there, seated comfortably in an armchair. There was a suave smile on his face. He rose and shook hands with Cranston.

"Glad to see you. A queer business, isn't it?"

"Very queer," Cranston replied dryly.

The man was Archie Hiller! He looked harmless and benevolent. He kept stroking his little fluff of goatee with a timid gesture.

Hiller was well acquainted with Cranston, having met him many times at the opening performances of Broadway shows. He chatted with a great show of friendship. Cranston finally cut through his talk with a quiet question addressed to Paul Hardy.

"Who is the third gentleman whose presence you expect?"

"Benedict Stark," Hardy said. "I've already shown Mr. Hiller the letter I received. Would you like to see it?"

Cranston nodded. He read the unsigned note with interest.

It was a triumph of innuendo. It hinted at anger on the part of the unknown writer at Hardy's attentions to Mrs. Benton. It suggested, without actually saying so, that Hardy had been making love to Claire Benton in the absence of her missing husband.

It threatened reprisal, unless Hardy made a proper explanation. And it demanded the presence at the conference of Lamont Cranston, Archie Hiller - and Benedict Stark! Hardy was certain that the note had been written by Richard Benton; Hiller was quick to agree. Cranston made no comment.

The fact that three witnesses had been summoned seemed to reassure Hardy. Nobody, he declared, could intend violence in the presence of three onlookers. Perhaps Benton wanted to settle the matter in a friendly manner.

Again Hiller agreed. Again Cranston was silent.

He knew why witnesses were to be present. Hiller and Stark - and Lamont Cranston, too - were there

to rivet the guilt of murder on an innocent man!

"When do you expect Mr. Stark?" Cranston asked.

"He should be here now. Doubtless, he'll arrive in a moment."

Paul Hardy and his two guests waited, smoking cigarettes. Cranston was grimly amused to notice the care which Hiller took to identify the brand of cigarettes he smoked. He produced a package of a popular brand, after refusing the menthol cigarette which Cranston offered him.

"Sorry. I never smoke anything but this brand. I can't stand menthol tobacco; never could. It tastes like medicine to me."

Cranston murmured a polite reply. Inwardly, he wondered when the blow-off would come.

ACTUALLY, events were already under way. A dark sedan was halting at the curb of the street at the rear of the Hardy home. It was a quiet street. There were no pedestrians in view at this early hour.

The house behind Hardy's was empty. A "To Let" sign was posted on the front door. Crooks had been well aware of this situation before they had formulated their final murder plan.

Behind the wheel of the parked sedan was a black-haired, well-dressed thug, with a nervous grin on his thin lips. It was Charlie, the pal of the dead Dave.

Charlie had awakened that morning on Hiller's yacht, with a slight headache and a feeling that he had slept too long. But he had no suspicion that he had been drugged by The Shadow.

Why should Charlie suspect trouble? When he had gone to the locked cabin on the upper deck of the yacht, he had found Benton's double waiting, as usual. The stooge was still grouchy about his enforced imprisonment and his lack of newspapers. Charlie had grinned cheerfully.

"Cut out the beefing, pal! We're all set. Let's go!"

He didn't know that a clever substitution had been accomplished. Instead of a hired murder stooge, Charlie was talking to Richard Benton himself.

Nor did Charlie tumble to the trickery when the unconscious stooge was placed in the sedan. Charlie knew that this second figure had been brought from upstate in a theatrical van, after having been taken from a secret cave beneath a portable house.

Before the stooge was stowed away in the car, a bullet was fired into his leg.

That bullet was important. It was supposed to pin the guilt of Paul Hardy's murder on the luckless Richard Benton.

Charlie could see both men, as he stared back from the front seat of his parked car. The real Richard Benton sat upright on the rear seat, pretending to be the stooge. The unconscious stooge lay on the floor of the car, covered by a lap robe. The bullet that had been fired into his leg had made a severe wound.

"You all set, pal?" Charlie growled to the real Benton.

Benton nodded. His mouth was dry. He could feel the excited thumping of his heart. He croaked an unintelligible murmur and showed Charlie a brief glimpse of his gun.

"O.K.," Charlie said. "You know what to say and what to do. Everything has been figured out. Hiller will

take care of your getaway after the shooting. I'll take care of Benton. We'll hand the cops a killing and a wounded prisoner in one sweet little blow-off!"

Benton walked quietly across the front yard of the house in the rear of Paul Hardy's home. When he reached the house, he ducked quickly aside and vanished into an alley that led to a detached garage. There was a fence behind the garage, but it was a low one. Benton had no trouble getting over it.

He was now at the back door of Hardy's home.

The lock of the back door had been tampered with. Certain necessary parts of the mechanism had been removed. Benton had no difficulty in opening it. He stood in the rear hall, listening. He could hear the faint talk of three men from the front room.

He recognized the voice of his young friend, Paul Hardy. He could also make out the tones of Archie Hiller and Lamont Cranston.

Benton drew a deep breath. His hand tightened on the butt of his gun. He tiptoed to the door of the living room and flung it suddenly open. A leap took him into the room.

THERE was a gasp, as the three men saw the armed intruder.

"Benton!" Archie Hiller cried, before anyone else could say a word. "Don't shoot, for God's sake!"

"Put down that gun, Richard," Paul Hardy said. "You were crazy to write that letter, and crazier to come here! I've done you no harm. I'm your friend!"

"Friend, hell!" Benton shouted hoarsely. "You mean you're Claire's friend! A dirty, slimy skunk. Making love to my wife while I've been on the run, hounded by police!"

"That's not true," Hardy said. His face was pale. "You ought to know me better than that. Put down your gun and let's talk like sensible men."

"If you come near me, I'll kill you!"

"Take his gun, Hardy," Archie Hiller cried encouragingly. "He's bluffing! He doesn't dare to shoot. Make him hand over the gun!"

Hardy glanced toward Lamont Cranston. The latter nodded.

"Keep back!" Benton warned.

"You're excited, Richard," the young man said soothingly. "Claire and yourself have never had a truer friend than I. I promise you I can explain everything. Let me -"

He got no further. There was a spurt of flame as Benton jerked the trigger. The rapid crash of pistol shots filled the room with thunder.

Paul Hardy clutched at his chest. He reeled backward and fell to the floor. For a second or two, he lay there in the spasmodic agony of death. Then he rolled on his face.

Benton raced for the rear doorway.

Lamont Cranston watched Archie Hiller.

Hiller made a remarkably quick recovery for a man who, an instant earlier, had seemed terrified. His

hand dived into his pocket and pulled out a gun. He fired at the fleeing murderer.

Benton staggered as he raced out of sight to the rear hall.

"I got him!" Hiller shouted. "He's wounded! I shot him in the leg!"

Hiller had done nothing of the kind. His statement was a lie. Hiller had aimed deliberately wide of his fleeing target. The bullet had plowed into the door frame six inches to the left of Benton's thigh.

But Hiller kept up his fake cry of jubilation.

"He can't escape! I shot him in the leg! Come on, Cranston! After him!"

Cranston did his best to take up the chase, but Hiller had a trick ready for that, too. He used his fake excitement as an excuse to block off Cranston from too quick a pursuit. He stumbled at the hall doorway. A leg thrust itself between Cranston's. Both men tripped and fell in an awkward huddle.

Cranston didn't mind the delay. In fact, he added to it himself by thrashing around on the floor with Hiller. His ears were alert to hear the distant sound of a police whistle.

Meanwhile, Richard Benton in his role of a murderous stooge had fled across the back yard of Hardy's home and had scaled the fence. He emerged on the sidewalk of the street in the rear.

Charlie had the door of the sedan open.

"Did you get Paul Hardy? Did you plug him?"

"Yeah."

"O.K. Here we go! Help me toss out Benton!"

He had flung the lap robe off the wounded body of the unconscious stooge in the back of the car. A swift heave and the body of the fake Benton hit the sidewalk.

There was a taut grin on Charlie's lips. He thought he had tossed out the real Benton! He knew that Archie Hiller had planted the idea in Lamont Cranston's mind that Benton had been shot in the leg.

And now Benton was lying on the sidewalk, bleeding, and unconscious - shot in the leg, according to the testimony of an eyewitness who had seen him kill Paul Hardy!

"Let's go!" Charlie shouted to the man he thought was Benton's double. "Hop in the back. I'll take the wheel for the getaway!"

It was then that Charlie had his first terrified realization that a perfect crime had been ruined! Richard Benton crashed his gun butt against Charlie's skull. As the thug reeled, Benton dropped the pistol and grabbed Charlie by the throat.

At the same instant, a police whistle shrilled.

Benton was a lawyer, not a crime fighter. He was jittery with excitement. The result was that he struck too hastily with his gun. And he should never have dropped the weapon to clutch Charlie's throat.

Instead of knocking the thug unconscious, he had merely dazed his man with a glancing blow. The shrill sound of police whistles warned Charlie that cops were approaching.

He tore Benton's hands from his throat and staggered him with a vicious kick.

As Benton fell to the sidewalk alongside the unconscious stooge, Charlie sprang to the wheel of the parked car. He had left the engine idling. He put the car into swift motion.

But before it could roll a dozen feet, the roar of police guns halted Charlie's getaway. The telephoned warning of The Shadow to police headquarters earlier that morning had been acted upon by Inspector Joe Cardona. Cardona had lain hidden for more than an hour in that rear street, with a squad of picked men.

They were hard-boiled cops who knew how to shoot. Two of Charlie's tires exploded with a bang.

He saw instantly that flight was impossible. Snarling, he leaped from the stalled car, protecting himself from the fire of the police by using the car as a shield.

Charlie was a cornered rat, and just as dangerous! A cop staggered and fell. Another swayed, coughing, behind a tree. Charlie darted to where Benton and the wounded stooge lay sprawled on the sidewalk. His gun flamed. Instinct was all that saved Benton. He flung himself flat behind the unconscious stooge. The bullet was buried in the stooge's body.

Charlie cursed. His hot gun muzzle shifted an inch or two as Benton tried to roll away. His finger tightened on the trigger.

A shot was fired, but it didn't come from Charlie's gun. Charlie took a police slug right smack through his spine. He was as dead as the stooge when police faces stared grimly down on him.

With a crisp command, Cardona took charge. He rushed Benton back to Hardy's home.

Paul Hardy was still a limp huddle on the floor. There was triumph in Archie Hiller's eyes. But the triumph changed to terror when he saw the unhurt figure of Richard Benton walking into the room with Inspector Cardona.

"Tell Mr. Hiller who you are and why you're here," Cardona rasped to the panting lawyer.

Benton obliged.

Hiller tried to brazen things out.

"Benton killed Paul Hardy! I saw the killing! So did Cranston. I don't know anything about a double, but I do know that Benton fired the shots that killed Hardy!"

"I fired the shots," Benton agreed calmly, "but I didn't kill him. I used blank cartridges... Get up, Paul, and tell him all about it."

It was Hardy's turn to oblige. When he rose, obviously unhurt, Hiller backed up, his face the color of chalk.

"You cooked your own goose, Hiller," Cardona told the quivering theatrical producer. "You shouldn't have been so damned careful to tell Cranston that you had shot Benton in the leg. A guy was shot in the leg, all right, but he was the fake Benton - and he was shot hours ago, at your own orders!"

CARDONA leaped forward to handcuff the rigidly staring Hiller. But before he could take three steps, he was clutched by Lamont Cranston and flung violently to the floor.

A gun had flashed from the pocket of the trapped producer. Its flame creased Cranston's arm, as he

saved the life of Joe Cardona.

Hiller fled toward the rear doorway of the living room. But he halted almost instantly. His last escape was cut off. A policeman was racing through the corridor, with drawn gun. Hiller fired and missed. The cop's bullet drilled through Hiller's arm.

His gun dropped. As it fell to the floor of the corridor, Hiller flung himself flat alongside it. His left hand scooped up the weapon.

Cranston might have averted the last cowardly act of a trapped criminal, if it had not been for the awkwardness of the cop. The cop was too eager. He collided with Cranston, as the latter dived to wrench the gun from Hiller's hand.

There was an ugly report in the dark hallway. Hiller died instantly by his own hand. He had sent a bullet ripping through his brain!

For a moment, Cardona cursed with baffled rage. Like all police, Cardona hated to see a criminal take the suicide route. He preferred to have them end where they belonged - in the hot seat of the electric chair!

But after the first stunning disappointment, Cardona recovered his good nature.

"We've got the master criminal behind the whole thing," he said. "Thanks to The Shadow, we've got the right man. Hiller hired the three stooges. It was easy for him to make 'em up to look like Benton, because Hiller was in the theatrical business.

"He killed the first stooge at the State capital. He killed the second stooge in the grounds behind the estate of Benedict Stark. And he intended to kill the third stooge after he had handed up Richard Benton as the murderer of Paul Hardy!"

Lamont Cranston didn't say anything. As The Shadow, he knew that Cardona's reasoning was correct up to this point. There was only one flaw in it. The master criminal in the plot was not Archie Hiller.

Benedict Stark was the man! The Prince of Evil was the guilty leader!

A moment later, Cranston murmured Stark's name. But not accusingly. There was a polite smile on Cranston's lips. He shook hands quietly with an archcriminal against whom he had not a shred of legal proof.

Benedict Stark had just entered the room, with cool effrontery!

"How are you, Cranston?" he greeted. "Mr. Benton, I'm delighted to know that you have proved your innocence. I'm sorry I arrived here late, Mr. Hardy. But, in view of all the shooting and bloodshed, perhaps it's just as well. I'm a peaceful man, not used to crime or violence. Thank God, Archie Hiller is unmasked at last as the master mind behind all this murder and conspiracy!"

"You think Hiller was the boss?" Cranston asked softly.

"Of course! Who else could it be?"

Cranston was silent. Once again, a wily foe had slipped through the closing net of The Shadow!

The bullet of the thug Charlie had cut down the last of the three doubles who had impersonated Benton. Charlie, too, was dead. His ugly partner, Dave, had been killed at the farmhouse upstate. Hiller's suicide

had put a final period to a story of treachery and death.

There was still Marge and Thornton, of course. And Oscar, the fake blind man. All three of them might rivet the guilt on Benedict Stark - provided they could be found!

The Shadow had small hopes of finding them. Stark was too clever a criminal to leave loose pawns lying on the board. Marge and Thornton and the wily Oscar were either already out of the country - or more likely, dead!

Three times The Shadow had battled Benedict Stark, the Prince of Evil. The result was still the same.

A partial victory, a grim defeat! Richard Benton had been rescued from the shadow of death. His name was now cleared. He could resume his place as a decent member of society.

But the Prince of Evil still had evaded the law!

Benedict Stark was smilingly shaking hands with Lamont Cranston. A flicker of cold amusement burned in the depths of Stark's eyes.

That glance was a sneering challenge. Stark already half suspected that Lamont Cranston and The Shadow were the same personality.

The Shadow realized that a final titanic struggle was bound to come. There could be only one answer. Both men sensed it. One or the other must die!

Benedict Stark, or The Shadow! Was it to be crime or justice? Life - or death?

Only the future could tell. Before many more exploits in The Shadow's amazing career were to pass, Benedict Stark and The Shadow were bound to meet in a death battle!

THE END