



MERRY MRS. MACBETH

Maxwell Grant

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- ? [I.](#)
- ? [II.](#)
- ? [III.](#)
- ? [IV.](#)
- ? [V.](#)
- ? [VI.](#)
- ? [VII.](#)
- ? [VIII.](#)
- ? [IX.](#)
- ? [X.](#)
- ? [XI.](#)
- ? [XII.](#)
- ? [XIII.](#)
- ? [XIV.](#)
- ? [XV.](#)
- ? [XVI.](#)
- ? [XVII.](#)
- ? [XVIII.](#)
- ? [XIX.](#)
- ? [XX.](#)

I.

REHEARSAL was over at the Half Moon Theatre.

Costumed as Romeo, Alan Fenway finished his impassioned plea to the balcony where the ghost of Hamlet's father was standing with folded arms. Vera Scharn, otherwise Lady Macbeth, ceased her somnambulistic prowling, tucked her dagger into the sash of her ruffled negligee and shrugged her way off stage.

In the background, the Three Witches quit their chant of "Daily Double, boil and bubble" and left the huge cauldron which smoked with compressed steam in the glow of artificial firelight.

Oswald Bodelle turned around in seat D-3, gave a broad-faced smile and queried:

"Well, Terry, what do you think?"

Terry Dundee took off his tortoise-shell glasses, gave a sharp squint of the shrewd eyes that flanked his long-beaked face and responded:

"You're asking for it, Ossie. Confidentially--"

"Never mind the rest," interrupted Bodelle, with a warding wave of his fat hands. "But since you're being honest, tell me this." Tone lowered, Ossie put the question sincerely. "Can you kid the public, into thinking it's good?"

"Why not?" queried Dundee in confident style. "A wacky idea usually goes over with the chumps, and this is about the wackiest yet. Mixing about half of Shakespeare into a musical is something different. Good title, too: 'Merry Mrs. Macbeth,' only she doesn't look so merry."

"She does in the opening." This came from an earnest looking man who had just arrived from the steps at the side of the stage. "You see, there's a prologue where she sings a parody to the Merry Widow Waltz, telling how Macbeth has just been slain. Then she goes into her dance."

Ossie Bodelle shoved a big thumb toward the arrival and said to Terry Dundee:

"This is Fred Guylan. He wrote the script. Owns a piece of the show, too."

Dundee nodded as though accustomed to meeting such people. It was the kind of nod that reserved opinion; then, feeling it would be politic to say something, Dundee put the compliment:

"She's a good actress, Vera Scharn."

That brought a worried look to Guylan's already nervous face. He was a rabby man, and in keeping with his style he threw an appealing look at Ossie Bodelle, who handled the situation quite blandly.

"Thought I told you, Terry," remarked Bodelle. "Vera Scharn is just the understudy for Lady Macbeth. She plays Desdemona as a regular part."

"Then who's the leading lady?"

"The regular Lady Macbeth? A girl named Joy Trevoze."

"Joy Trevoze?" Dundee blinked. "Never heard of her. Has anybody else?"

"A lot of people will," returned Bodelle, planking his big hand on Dundee's shoulder. "They've got to hear about her, if you take over the publicity for this show. It will be your job to make them--or else."

Guylan immediately looked relieved while Dundee looked puzzled. Then:

"I don't get it, Ossie," said Dundee. "A smart promoter like you passing up a good bet like Vera Scharn for a nobody like this Joy Trevoze."

Before Bodelle could explain, a spokesman did it for him.

Alan Fenway, the leading man, came down from the stage. He was very hot under the ruffled collar of his Romeo costume.

"Bodelle doesn't pass up any bets," stormed Alan. "He's a smart promoter all right, but he didn't promote this show. What he promoted was Howard Harthorne."

Dundee's eyebrows went up.

"The big chewing gum guy?" Terry's tone was incredulous. "I thought he'd lost his extra shirts on those last two flops he backed. How come he fell for Merry Mrs. Macbeth?"

"He liked the cauldron scene," returned Bodelle. "It made him think of bubble gum. That right, Guylan?"

Guylan gave a feeble smile that Alan didn't share. For all his frills, the Romeo boy was pugnacious.

"Why lie about it, Bodelle?" Alan's fist was acquiring an itch. "Harthorne would have backed any show that included Joy Trevoise in the package. Where is Joy right now when she ought to be here for rehearsal?"

"Out with Harthorne, I suppose," returned Bodelle. "She always is."

"And always is the word," retorted Alan. "From the moment Harthorne gave Joy the glad eye at the summer theater where she and I were playing stock, you did your best to fix them up with a beautiful friendship!"

"Why not, since a show went with it?"

"A show!" Alan accompanied his sneer with a disdainful look at Guylan. "This farce still lacks imagination. Why don't you put in Harthorne as King Lear so he can ogle at Lady Macbeth?"

"Not bad," remarked Bodelle. "Make a note of it, Guylan."

"And we'll write you in for a Cupids costume," Alan turned to Bodelle. "So you can go shooting arrows at Harthorne. Real ones, with poison tips, and let's hope you don't miss."

"Easy, now."

There was belligerence in Bodelle's glare as he rose from seat D-3 and matched his bulk against the lithe figure of Romeo. But a difference of some fifty pounds didn't phase young Alan.

"You've said a few things about Harthorne yourself," reminded Alan, "such as wishing he'd break that long neck of his when he stretches it for a look at the chorus line when they're coming downstairs to rehearse."

Alan's indignation brought an indulgent laugh from Bodelle. There was something subtle about Ossie, though his style was elephantine. At Alan's words, Bodelle turned and nodded knowingly as he glanced toward the three tiers of dressing rooms off to the right of the stage.

"You win, kid," said Bodelle. "If I'd known how you felt about Joy, I wouldn't have promoted Harthorne. Only it's too late now."

"And why?" demanded Alan. "Joy isn't suited to the part. She doesn't belong in this show. Ask Guylan."

There wasn't time to ask Guylan. The playwright was beginning to hem and haw the moment his name was mentioned. That brought more contempt from Alan.

"Don't ask him," sneered the loquacious Romeo. "He's afraid of offending Harthorne. But here's a man who can give an honest opinion"--Alan was swinging to Dundee--"and he'll tell you that Vera Scharn is the right bet for Lady Macbeth."

Dundee gave one of his emphatic nods.

"I've already said it," he declared. "Vera would be a cinch for a good press job. What other names are in the cast?"

"Zachary Verne for one," put in Bodelle. "He's playing the ghost."

"He is!" Dundee spread his hands and looked around in happy surprise. "Old Zach Verne! No wonder he was giving us the side glance from that balcony! Why I've known Zach for years, only I didn't recognize him in that rig. Where did he go?"

"Out for coffee I guess," returned Bodelle, "unless he's taking a nap up in his third-floor dressing room. He either does one or the other."

"Good copy, Zach," approved Dundee. "I'll get him interviewed, and plenty."

"You're taking the press job, then?"

"I'm considering it." Rising, Dundee put on his tortoise shells to give his listeners a sharper scrutiny. "Only don't let this leading lady business develop into a scandal. It won't give the show a good start, if any."

"That's up to Bodelle," snapped Alan. "He sold Harthorne on the show, with Joy as bait. If he can prove to Harthorne that Vera is better, all right."

"Maybe I could," conceded Bodelle, "if somebody could talk Joy into dropping out. That's your department, Alan."

"Talking to Joy?" Alan gave a snort. "Our conversation consists of notes that I leave on her dressing table. She chucks them in the wastebasket without reading them."

Bodelle shrugged.

"All I've suggested is for her own good," pursued Alan. "If she will jump this horse opera, so will I. There's a little theater company ready for tour with spots wide open for both of us."

"Why not go with them, Alan?"

"And give Harthorne the argument that I ran out on the show, proving that I'm the heel he says I am?"

"No. I guess that wouldn't do." Bodelle clamped a big and friendly hand on Alan's shoulder. "You're in a tough spot, fellow. I'll do what I can to help you out."

Bodelle's face showed the sincerity that went with his tone and Alan's resentment gave way to a mood of appreciation. Dundee noticed this as he looked from one to the other, scarcely noticing Guylan who was standing between. As rabby as ever, the playwright looked as though he were trying to say something.

"All right," decided Dundee, turning away. "Keep things under control and I'll see what stories can be planted. We need something sensational."

Going up the steps to the stage, Dundee found that Guylan was following him and turned to give the timid man a parting nod. Then with a gesture toward stage rear, Dundee commented:

"Looks nice, the cauldron set. What are you going to do, jack-knife it on and off whenever you need the witches?"

Guylan shook his head.

"We'll have to fly it off," he replied. "It isn't as heavy as it looks. There's the rigging we're going to use to test it"

Guylan pointed high to a sand-bag hanging above the right wing, stage front, and Dundee saw a rope running over one pulley to another near the back of the stage, then down behind the scenery of the wing.

Approving the simplicity of the device, Dundee started out through the stage door, while Guylan wearily removed a chair that was near the right front of the stage.

"For Mr. Harthorne," remarked Guylan, referring to the chair. "Only he didn't come to see the rehearsal.

"He never comes any more." Guylan gave his head a sad shake. "I'll have to ask him why when we meet at his apartment this evening."

Terry Dundee caught those comments before he reached the stage door, but reserved opinion, even to himself, until he reached the darkness of the outside alley. There in the dusk of the gathering evening, Terry Dundee looked back and chuckled.

It was an ugly chuckle, indicating that Mr. Dundee had learned all he wanted--and more--regarding Merry Mrs. Macbeth!

II.

IF Terry Dundee hadn't tried to include the entire Half Moon Theatre in his final glance from the street, he might have seen the figure that moved from within the depths of the alley.

With a glide that would have done credit to the balcony ghost, the figure moved silently to the alley's mouth and there took up Dundee's trail. Even then, it was doubtful that Terry could have spotted the stalking form if he had looked back.

At no time did the tall stalker reveal himself along this darkened street. At all times he was shadowy, giving only the impression of a figure in a dark cape. Apparently he had been waiting to pick up Dundee's trail and did not intend to lose it nor let his part be known.

Hesitating only momentarily, Dundee gave a wide berth to the dim-lighted front of the grimy sidearm lunch room where Zachary Verne had his coffee after rehearsal. Terry knew what it would mean to hold a chat with the blathering old character actor; Verne would give him reminiscences galore and expect to see them all in print.

Other business was more pressing, the sort that Dundee wanted to conclude secretly.

By the time Dundee had reached a better-lighted neighborhood, there wasn't a trace of the man who stalked him. By then, Dundee's destination could have become apparent to anyone who knew.

On a side street very close to Broadway, Dundee paused between a shoe shine parlor and a hot dog establishment; then stepped to a narrow doorway just between. Striking a match to light a cigarette, Dundee turned and gave the street a double-squinted survey. Then he reached behind him, turned the door knob and performed a back twist into a little entry which disclosed a flight of steep stairs leading up.

Terry Dundee went up the stairs. They creaked under his weight and in the half-light filtering from upstairs windows they showed dim-painted words of many years ago: "Walk one flight up and save five dollars."

Dundee could really chuckle at that one.

He was walking up one flight to make five thousand and maybe a lot more. At the top, Dundee paused and listened before entering a doorway to the left. He was waiting for sounds of the street door opening below, for creaks from the dingy old stairs.

The sounds didn't come until after Dundee had gone through the upper door and closed it.

The room that Dundee had entered was an office with another door on the far side. Going through that door, Dundee reached a hallway belonging to an adjacent building. At the end was a door that looked like a locked closet. There was fresh wallpaper beside the door and when Dundee pushed a bulge in that paper, a button responded underneath. An elevator rumbled and stopped; Dundee opened the door, entered, and pressed the car button that took him to the third floor.

Here was another corridor leading through the rear of a Broadway building. Opening what looked like the door of a fire exit, Dundee went through a short passage, pulled up before another door and pressed a visible button that buzzed a coded signal.

It wasn't long before a heavy bolt was drawn and Terry Dundee was admitted to the most lavish lair known to man or beast.

Though many persons had heard about these premises, few had seen them, and still fewer knew of the special entrance with its private buzz-signal. Terry Dundee had reached the innermost of the private offices of Meigs Thurland, Manhattan's most eccentric and energetic theatrical producer.

The ways of Meigs Thurland were both stupendous and unscrupulous and his huge private office proved it. The place was a mass of plush, in furniture and draperies, while the other decorations consisted of framed show-bills advertising the numerous productions that Thurland had presented to the hungry public.

All the setting lacked were the financial statements. They were in the big safe behind the even bigger desk that stood upon an elevated platform. Those records were a tribute to Thurland's talent for turning red ink into black, simply by letting other people take the loss.

Thurland's show-bills formed a veritable cavalcade of successful shows that had been gathered from the junk-pile, polished, and refurbished for popular consumption at a fraction of the cost that the original investors had squandered.

Nothing wrong with that sort of business, at least not the sort that Thurland openly avowed. Of course there was the side that Thurland seldom talked about and then only by innuendo. How had some of those magnificent productions hit the junk pile in the first place?

As for Thurland himself, he could most aptly be described by the term "a presence." He was showing that quality now, after admitting Dundee into the plush-lined rendezvous. Back behind the huge desk that showed his replica in its highly polished surface, Thurland was leaning upon his folded arms in a Napoleonic fashion.

Even Terry Dundee felt uneasy in this presence.

No special characteristic of Thurland gave him that singular importance. There was nothing formidable about thin, sleek hair, carefully parted above a rounded face that wore a perpetual half-smile. Thurland's eyes were mild, in a way inquiring, with their lazy lids that lifted only on occasion.

However, when added, those features formed a whole which by its very lack of individual strength precluded all notion of weakness. Somehow Dundee's self-assurance was always deflated when he met with Thurland. Subtly, almost accidentally, Thurland made such visitors worry, giving him an immediate edge.

What jarred Dundee on this occasion was the fact that Thurland hadn't bolted the private door.

All Thurland had done was drop the big plush curtain hiding the door's alcove. That gesture meant that he

expected the conference to be brief.

"I was around at the Half Moon," began Dundee, rapidly. "The set-up is just like I figured. Harthorne is chucking a barrel of coin on account of the Trevoise jane.

Thurland's eyelids lifted for more.

"Vera Scharn is the stand-in," continued Dundee, "and she'll have to play the lead if Joy Trevoise misses many more rehearsals. Joy's boyfriend, Alan Fenway, is about nine-tenths off the beam. He hasn't any understudy so he can't keep tabs on Joy and Harthorne. Every afternoon he's tossing woo at a balcony ghost, if that's any consolation."

Whether Thurland enjoyed this thumb-nail description, he didn't reveal. His lips kept the same smile, but his eyes gave a brief turn toward the curtained doorway. Fearing that the interview might be clipped short, Dundee gave a nervous glance in that direction too.

What Dundee saw made him blink and squint more closely. Terry could have sworn that the plush curtain stirred just as he looked at it.

The great maroon drape was motionless on second glance, and it didn't occur to Dundee that the weight of those massive folds was responsible. Dundee took it that the curtain hadn't moved at all and wrote off the illusion as another evidence of the somewhat hypnotic effect that Thurland's presence induced.

True to form, Thurland helped the cause along with one of his customary dry remarks.

"Don't worry, Terry." The tone was a bit caustic. "Nobody knows that we do business--or do they?"

"There's one guy might," returned Dundee. "He knows about everything that isn't his business, so they tell me."

Inquiry showed in Thurland's eyes.

"I mean The Shadow." put Dundee abruptly. "He's made trouble for a few of my friends and not so long ago, either."

"You must have the wrong kind of friends," observed Thurland. "I thought The Shadow only dealt with crooks."

Dundee started to say something; then thought better of it.

"Of course The Shadow may have his own definition of crime," continued Thurland, "but if so, it doesn't agree with the law's. I always provided against meddlers who misinterpret legal matters."

Dundee nodded.

"I guess The Shadow would be too smart to put his neck out," he decided. "Funny for me to even think about him. Guess it was what I heard them saying over at the Half Moon. If anything happened to Harthorne, I might be able to guess who did it. That's sort of The Shadow's speciality too."

Thurland's eyes showed a glint that Dundee had rarely seen before. Terry had won his point; Thurland would listen. Leaning forward on the big desk, Dundee stood wagging a finger like an attorney pleading before a magistrate.

It was incongruous for a man whose ways were close to crime to sell an argument to a financial wizard who was a master at the art of cover-up, with no compunctions in the process. But Meigs Thurland

wasn't to be the final judge in the cause that Terry Dundee broached.

Behind the maroon curtain stood a silent listener, that same elusive trailer who had dogged Dundee from the neighborhood of the Half Moon Theatre.

He was a judge who could not only listen, but who was qualified to take a hand in whatever was to come!

III.

THE pressure was off where Terry Dundee was concerned. For ten minutes straight he'd poured his report on the Merry Mrs. show while Meigs Thurland, listening idly, kept gazing at an ornamental ship's clock which stood on the desk, as though timing the length of Dundee's harangue.

It wasn't Thurland who interrupted; it was the clock. It gave six solemn dongs, which meant seven o'clock, shipboard time. Dundee waited patiently until the strokes were completed; those bells always called for silence, another of the peculiarities of an interview with Thurland.

Without waiting for the inquiring lift of Thurland's eyelids. Dundee summarized his findings.

"There's the nut-shell, Mr. Thurland," Terry declared. "Get Harthorne sore, have him junk the show, and it's yours for cheap. If it's a flop, what can you lose? If it's a hit, you can pay Harthorne a percentage of the net to pay off what little you do owe him."

Thurland gave Dundee a strangely cold stare, one that would have withered Terry if he hadn't known what it really meant. The stare was part of Thurland's technique toward withering the wrong people when they put forth such questionable propositions. It was a habit with Thurland to carry the ethical pretense to the limit.

All the while though, Thurland was making notations in flourishing fashion on a sheet of paper. Finishing these, he glanced at the sheet, crumpled it and tossed it into a wastebasket.

"How much will Harthorne have in the show. Terry?"

"About a quarter million, including what he's letting a few small-fry toss in as a favor to them."

"That's about what I figure." Thurland gave a nod. "How much would you appraise it for?"

"As a bankrupt job? Twenty grand at best. About ten percent is tops for scenery that fits nobody's order and costumes that are only good for moth feed. Only this rates below regular."

"Because of unnecessary expenditures?"

"Right. Like two complete sets of gowns and what-not for Lady Macbeth because Vera and Joy don't shape the same. And extra stage equipment like that hoist for the cauldron set I was just telling you about."

Thurland made a few more notations, then gave his head a slow, sad shake.

"Too bad, that scandal business, Terry."

"You mean chances of a run in between Alan and Harthorne over that Trevoise dame?"

"Exactly. It might ruin a good show, Terry. So good a show"--Thurland reached for the telephone; then laid it aside--"so good a show that I was almost going to call Harthorne and ask for a half interest as

co-producer. But no, it wouldn't do."

As though finding a straight business deal impossible, Thurland made a few notations on another sheet of his pad; then suggested:

"Do you know, if Joy Trevoise left the show, it would really solve Harthorne's problem. Maybe she ought to take that Little Theatre tour with Alan Fenway. We could get another leading man for Merry Mrs. Macbeth."

"Only there wouldn't be any Merry Mrs.," returned Dundee. "Harthorne would really junk the works if Joy quit--"

Dundee caught himself with that one. He was carrying the ball a lot too fast.

"I've been reviving some old time musicals lately," remarked Thurland, reflectively. "Odd the public doesn't appreciate such fine shows the way they should."

Dundee could have told Thurland why. If anyone could trade on a name in name only, that gentleman was Meigs Thurland.

"Picture it, Terry!" Thurland continued, spreading an arm as though casting a sweeping panorama on the opposite wall. "A grand new musical offering under the aegis of Meigs Thurland, with the startling title of Merry Mrs. Macbeth!"

Dundee didn't know what aegis meant, but the rest of the picture pleased him.

"Now if something should eliminate Harthorne," observed Thurland, "the show wouldn't have to be junked. If I bought the Half Moon Theatre, something which I've contemplated, I could make a deal to help the other backers. I suppose they're all deserving chaps like Guylan, the playwright."

Knowing just what Thurland's deals were like, Dundee didn't have to agree that Guylan was deserving. Terry watched Thurland wad another sheet of paper for the waste basket in preparation for another series of notations.

"Equity would take care of the actor situation," reminded Dundee. "There's some good people in the cast, Zachary Verne for instance."

"A fine chap, Verne," nodded Thurland. "There's always an opening for him in any of my revivals. Of course they don't pay the money they did when they were fresh. We had a few heart-to-heart discussions on that subject, Zach and I."

"This ghost part suits Zach nicely, so we'll keep him there. I'm thinking of someone else, though, who has a longer future. If Harthorne should drop out for any reason, I imagine Joy Trevoise would be too grieved to stay. That would leave Vera Scharn."

Dundee gave an eager nod.

"I could really do a job for Vera--"

"Better talk to her then," interposed Thurland. "There are a lot of ways Vera could help. Yes, I might say that the fate of this show is in her hands, like--well, for instance--"Like the dagger she lugs around." put in Dundee.

"An excellent analogy, Terry. Now of course there are other persons who must not be forgotten."

"Like Alan Fenway--"

"We've placed Alan. He goes with Joy Trevoise. I'm thinking how Ossie Bodelle might come in--"

"Or go out," added Dundee with a chuckle. "He's done one promotion job and that's enough."

"More than enough, perhaps." Thurland spoke very dryly. "I think it would be best to let Ossie still have his say, particularly as he may say too much."

Thurland took a final look at his notation and tossed the paper in the basket as he pulled the cord of the desk lamp. The room went dark, except for dim wall brackets that flanked a curtained archway. Stepping down from behind the desk, Thurland beckoned Dundee in that direction.

The archway led to Thurland's private bar, and very soon the clink of glasses was drowning the low-toned conversation that passed between the producer and the stooge who styled himself a press agent. Dundee was getting confidential instructions regarding coming negotiations with Vera Scharn.

Those clinking sounds reached the thick curtain that hid the screened entrance to the office. This time when the drapery stirred, a vague figure stepped into the gloom of the darkened office.

Like a creature practiced in ghostly ways, the obscured figure reached the desk and dipped into the waste basket to acquire Thurland's pencilled jottings.

Louder words then came from Thurland's miniature bar-room.

"I'm telling you, boss, these fellows play it safe." Dundee's drink was making him argumentative. "They're like a night-club crowd, in fact those are the spots where they hang out. Call any of the class joints and ask for Louie. You'll get service."

"We may not be wanting any of their service," snapped Thurland, sharply. "It might lead back here."

"Not a chance. Whoever answers, you just tell him you're calling for Joe. He'll ask what you want and you tell him."

"Then he passes the word along?"

"Why not?" Dundee sounded pleased. "The only guys that know about the password are the kind that pay dough on the line--like me."

"You mean when you have it."

"When I haven't, I don't ask favors. So how about it, boss. Do I pass the word if I need quick action?"

"Very well, Terry, only call me first. If you can't reach me, use your own discretion."

Glasses were settling on the bar and voices were coming toward the door. The figure beside the desk was on the rapid glide, back to its original curtain. The drape was closing with a slight ripple when Thurland and Dundee reached the office.

The ship's clock toned seven while the pair were crossing to the secret exit. There, Thurland parted the curtains and opened the door for Dundee, keeping his hand on the bolt, intending to lock up immediately after Terry's departure.

There was no one in the fire tower when Dundee stepped there. The mysterious visitor was a thing of the past, like the clock bells that had told the half hour. As to the future, that same visitor had gathered facts,

both documentary and verbal, that covered the preliminary details of Thurland's scheme to sabotage Harthorne's show.

Tragedy was hiding behind the farcical title of Merry Mrs. Macbeth. Should it strike, its cross-purposes would be a twist of strands that only The Shadow could unravel!

IV.

SEVEN-THIRTY and Alan Fenway wasn't amiable.

There was nothing of the Romeo in Alan's tuxedo-clad figure as he paced the living room of Harthorne's small but ornate apartment, glaring at the other occupants as though they were to blame for Joy's absence.

Oswald Bodelle was present, as was Fred Guylan, the former encouraging the latter to drink more of Harthorne's very fine Scotch.

"It was three thirty when Joy phoned," recalled Alan, bitterly. "She said she was going somewhere for the cocktail hour." Turning his too handsome face toward the mantel, Alan glared at Harthorne's best clock. "Now it's after seven thirty. A fine cocktail hour that lasts four hours!"

"They last till the drinks run out," returned Bodelle, "and by then you've forgotten what time it is. Say--maybe they've gone back to the theater!"

"Who, Joy?" sneered Alan. "She'd shrink at the thought. Maybe Harthorne would go there though on account of his investment."

"I'll call the back-stage phone."

After fumbling with the dial, Bodelle made the call and finally gained a reply. He reported the results of a brief conversation.

"It was Vera," said Bodelle. "She's rehearsing those lines from the second act, the long ones. Looks like she's counting on being Lady Macbeth."

"Good luck to her," grunted Alan. "What do you say, Guylan?"

The playwright gave a timid nod.

"Stick to it then, both of you." Alan included Bodelle in his glance. "I'm going to throw the same argument straight at Joy when she gets here--if ever--"

Alan hadn't long to wait. A key clicked in the lock and the door opened to admit a wavering Joy Trevoze, propelled by Howard Harthorne. Reeling in from the hallway, Joy reached a chair on the far side of the ample living room and landed with a half-flounce.

"What time's it?" Joy demanded. "Dinner's at eight, you know. We told them so at the Club Fiesta."

Alan was giving Joy a highly dramatic glare which she returned very prettily, quite out of keeping with Lady Macbeth.

A definite blonde, Joy had a face as babyish as her pretty blue eyes, and she looked as though she wouldn't know which end of a dagger was the handle. Her smile was winsome, but it changed into a pout when she saw Alan's frown.

"Told who?" demanded Alan. "Some of those thinly disguised thugs who hang around there?"

"The Fiesta is very nice," insisted Joy, "and so are the people."

"Which people?" sneered Alan.

"I used to do a single at those luxury dumps. I know what's behind some of those fancy false fronts."

Joy's lips compressed tightly and her eyes turned away. She remembered that she wasn't on speaking terms with Alan. Planting a hand on the girl's shoulder, Alan started to draw her to her feet when Harthorne intervened.

He was a big man, Harthorne, with a spreading sag to the big jaws of his blunt face. His eyes had an outward slant as though drawn down by his heavy jowls, and their steely glint matched the gray streaks of his grizzled hair.

Harthorne confined his booming tone to his cavernous mouth, a habit acquired from shifting wads of chewing gum.

"We were patronizing the Club Fiesta" Harthorne told Alan. "We talked to the customers, not the hired help."

"Nice people, weren't they?" inquired Joy, speaking directly to Harthorne. "So interested in hearing about the show!"

"One chap even wanted to buy into it," nodded Harthorne, brushing Alan aside. "At least he hinted at it."

"You mean Lamont Cranston," confirmed Joy. "He and Margo Lane are the ones who expect us back for dinner. They said they'd stay right there until we returned."

"Better hurry then," decided Harthorne. "We don't want to be more than half an hour late."

Joy started to rise from the chair, then settled back with a weak headshake.

"I need a few minutes rest," she pleaded. "I always do when I switch from Manhattans to Martinis."

Joy sank back while Harthorne poured himself a drink. He was chatting jocularly about Cranston's offer to buy into the show, largely for the benefit of Guylan.

"Get rid of that worried look, Fred," laughed Harthorne, clapping the timid playwright on the shoulder. "If I go broke, Cranston can spare a million to pick up where I left off."

"It's not money he's worrying about," put in Bodelle. "It's rehearsals. Now if Joy--"

"Joy has an understudy," interrupted Harthorne. "She can learn her part rapidly by watching Vera."

"Learn it easy," muttered Joy from her chair. "Just watch Vera. That's what she's there for."

Further conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. Before Harthorne could answer it, a similar summons chimed from the front door. Leaving the telephone to Bodelle, Harthorne opened the door and admitted Zachary Verne.

He was an eccentric sort, this character actor who paraded the castle ramparts. Without his ghostly regalia, he looked fatherly. He removed his broad-brimmed hat with an exaggerated sweep and made a profound, dramatic bow, only to raise a beaming face and give the group a smile.

Hand clapped to his chest, Verne threw back his shoulders and dipped his long chin into his artist's tie, as though to deliver some oration. Harthorne stopped him with a gesture toward the telephone, where Bodelle had begun a conversation.

"It's Terry Dundee," informed Bodelle, turning from the phone.

"He stopped at the theater hoping we'd still be there. Says he's arranged some press stunt. Want to talk to him?"

"Not now," returned Harthorne, with a glance at the clock. "It's almost eight. Tell him I'm taking Joy to the Club Fiesta. He can meet us there about ten."

While Bodelle was relaying the information, Alan finished writing a note and carried it over to Joy who was lounging deep in the chair, her eyes closed. Joy didn't notice the note until it fluttered into her lap. As she read it her eyes were momentarily angry. Then her lips curled into a smile which was difficult to translate.

Rising, Joy told Harthorne that she was going home to dress and that he could stop by for her in half an hour.

At a nod from Harthorne, Bodelle announced that he and Guylan were going Joy's direction and would take her in their cab. The trio departed, leaving Alan staring at the closing door. He turned suddenly and gave Harthorne a savage glare.

"Maybe Joy isn't the only one who needs an understudy," snapped Alan. "The same may apply to the leading man."

"Meaning yourself?" inquired Harthorne in his indulgent boom. Now, now, Alan! You wouldn't run out on me would you?"

"Not without Joy I wouldn't."

"Only Joy isn't running out. You offended her, Alan, suggesting that her friends at the Club Fiesta might belong to that lousy tribe you knew around the night clubs."

"I said I knew about them," corrected Alan, angrily. "Anyway, they might be better friends than any you can name. If you want to take that as an insult, you can fire me."

"And find another Romeo?" laughed Harthorne. "I wouldn't have to look far."

He gestured to a chair where Zachary Verne had seated himself to enjoy a Scotch and soda. Tinkling his glass in one hand, Verne performed a bosom clamp with the other.

"I played a valiant Romeo in me time," affirmed Verne, dramatically. " 'Twas better far than my rendition of the ghost of Hamlet's sire. Ah, how the fair Juliets forgot their lines when gripped by the warmth of me verbal rapture."

"Try it with the ghost costume," snapped Alan, opening the door as he spoke. "Any Juliet would swoon at sight of that mug of yours. Well. I guess we're only old once."

Whether Alan included Harthorne in that last remark, he didn't specify. He punctuated it with a door slam and was gone before Harthorne could begin a deep-rooted chuckle for Verne's benefit.

"Finish your drink," Harthorne told Verne, "and have another. It's good for old age. You'd think we were

getting decrepit, the way Alan talks."

Laughing indulgently, Harthorne went into another room to change into his evening clothes.

Outside, Alan Fenway paused while stepping into a cab to glare back at the barred windows of Harthorne's first floor apartment.

It was evident that Alan didn't like Howard Harthorne. It was to render itself even more apparent before this evening ended.

V.

LAMONT CRANSTON was listening intently while Joy Trevoise chattered about Merry Mrs. Macbeth, but he wasn't listening to Joy Trevoise.

He was overhearing the near end of a telephone conversation in a booth at the Club Fiesta.

The man in the phone booth looked like a night club lounge. He was the bouncer, ex-officio, of the Club Fiesta. Night-clubs had long since found it expensive to rely upon a professional strong-arm squad for ejecting troublesome customers.

Such rough ways led to lawsuits. So rather than be liable, the newer night-clubs were using a smart technique. They let the patrons begin a brawl among themselves and carry the fight outdoors, where the final slugging was administered.

The sluggers promptly disappeared and were rewarded for their services later. Owners of the night-clubs could shrug away the fact that an unruly patron had insulted some unknown customer who had settled the score outside the place.

Quite unthinkingly the proprietors of spots like the Club Fiesta were creating a mob-at-large, which by its very policy of anonymous membership, could undertake certain enterprises on its own.

Some recent and puzzling crime currents bore traces of having come from this particular source, which interested Lamont Cranston, alias The Shadow.

It was why Cranston had been frequenting the night clubs, and tonight he was striking luck.

For one thing, the glossy thug in the phone booth answered to the name of Louie, which they all did. By way of countersign he was calling the other man Joe.

So far Cranston hadn't uncovered anything very serious concerning the Louie-Joe combination; but he had hopes. If something vicious developed, Cranston had hopes of cracking it.

Cranston wasn't catching much of the conversation that "Louie" passed to "Joe," because Joy Trevoise was talking too loudly. Joy had shifted her chair and was throwing a crossfire at Margo Lane, who was seated on the other side of Cranston.

A patient, sympathetic brunette, Margo was trying to calm the blonde's effusive style, but Joy was too indignant to be hushed. Even Howard Harthorne, on the far side of the table, was finding it difficult to edge in words.

"And Alan is typically ungrateful," Joy was saying. "You know how show people are, Miss Lane--or do you? He thought a midsummer's dream would last forever, and that we'd go on playing stock together. No ambition; that's the way with all actors."

"And actresses?"

Margo dropped the question hoping it would stop Joy and give Cranston a better chance to hear the conversation in the phone booth. But Joy didn't miss a beat.

"If you mean me, I'm ambitious," asserted Joy, with a proud toss of her head. "In one season I've become the star of the year's best musical, no less. But Alan is already tiring of being the leading man, while the show is still in rehearsal. Am I right?"

Joy turned to Harthorne with the question and received a nod.

"Maybe he's jealous about you, Howie," continued Joy, patting Harthorne's hand. "But why should he be? You've been so kind and understanding, and after all, the show is yours, isn't it?"

Harthorne was understanding all right, in a way that Margo didn't overlook. Since the show was his, he considered Joy as part of it.

Giving a glance at Cranston, Margo caught a shrug that meant the phone conversation was lost. All the important discourse had come from the other end of the wire and now the man in the booth was hanging up.

"It's a shame to worry you with all this," Joy was telling Harthorne. "I'm grateful, though, if the others aren't. Take that catty Vera Scharn for instance. She ought to consider it a privilege to rehearse my part, only she doesn't."

Harthorne gave his lower lip a quizzical thrust that drew the slack from his jowls.

"Vera would do anything to get me out of the show," confided Joy, "You've noticed how viciously she's acted, haven't you?"

There was a broad smile from Harthorne.

"I thought that was the way of Lady Macbeth."

"That's Vera's alibi." acknowledged Joy "Anyway, I'm not quitting"--Joy's lips firmed defiantly--"not until you do, Howie. I've told Vera so."

Cranston was watching happenings in the phone booth. Through with his call from "Joe" the man called "Louie" was dialing other numbers. None of them answered, but he waited a precise time for each. Cranston had an idea why, and his steady eyes showed a sharp glint from their calm-faced background. This looked like a coming assignment for The Shadow.

"I don't trust Bodelle, either." Joy was still concentrating on Harthorne. "I heard him say once that he got you into this and that he could get you out."

"That's the way with all promoters," laughed Harthorne indulgently. "They wouldn't be good if they didn't think they were. You aren't suspicious of Guylan, are you?"

"I am," affirmed Joy. "Those little rabbity men are always dangerous. Guylan thinks the show is all his because he wrote it, and he'd murder anybody who tried to take it away from him."

"Nobody has tried."

"You're the only person who could. Watch out for Guylan if he gets any more worried than he is."

Despite herself, Margo felt that Joy's words made sense. The blonde certainly wasn't scatter-brained, and she had a way of getting right to the point. What was more, Margo was always ready to accept a woman's opinion on little men like Guylan. Away from male company, they often lost their rabbit-like ways and showed their wolfish traits.

Final judgment, though, would have to wait until there was a chance to look over the persons named by Joy. Wondering if Lamont thought the same, Margo glanced his way and saw him calling for the check.

Margo's wrist watch showed just ten o'clock.

Cranston had disappeared when Margo glanced his direction. Beside the vacant chair stood the waiter who gave an apologetic gesture.

"Your friend's gone over to the cashier's desk," the waiter explained. "It's the rule here when anybody wants to change a hundred dollar bill or over. He said he'd be back shortly."

"We really ought to be going," insisted Joy. "We can't wait all evening for that publicity man--what was his name?"

"Terry Dundee," replied Harthorne. "All right, Joy, I'll take you home and leave word for him to call me later. Can we drop you off, Miss Lane?"

Margo gave a half-nod as she kept watching past the cashier's desk where she was sure she glimpsed the blackness of Cranston's evening clothes merge with the darkness of a side exit beyond. If Cranston had decided to become The Shadow, he probably wouldn't be back for a while.

Turning to speak to Joy and Harthorne, Margo saw that both had left the table. Margo glanced in the direction of the empty telephone booth.

There, Margo glimpsed Joy turning one direction and Harthorne going the other. More important, however, was the figure that slipped suddenly beyond some potted palms just past the phone booth. It couldn't have been The Shadow, for there was no reason why he should have returned if expecting outside trouble.

It might have been anyone from the brief glimpse that Margo gained. It might have been an illusion, but she saw a door close beyond the palms.

For a full minute, Margo stared. An important minute, as she was to later realize, for it would have allowed anyone time to get around to the front street or do a complete sneak somewhere else. For the present, however, Margo could only conjecture that the departing figure was the man who had answered to the name of "Louie."

Then, when the booth phone suddenly began ringing, Margo knew her guess was wrong.

From a table where Margo hadn't noticed him, the smoothie who called himself "Louie" arose and sidled to the booth.

He probably expected a call from some member of his clan, and he was acting more cautiously than before. Some people were passing the booth, so when he entered it, this man who served as a go-between decided to close the booth. When Margo saw him reach for the handle of the folding door, she knew there was no chance to overhear the conversation. So Margo arose and turned away.

All this in a matter of a mere two seconds, yet by that slender margin, Margo Lane missed her chance to become the sole witness of a singular and baffling crime.

A revolver shot sounded, its report curiously muffled. Margo instantly thought of the telephone both as the logical source, since she knew the glossy man was a criminal type. Turning about, Margo's eyes riveted with an unbelieving stare.

The door of the booth was tight shut and the tuxedoed man was still inside. He was swaying, with one hand on the door handle, the other holding the telephone receiver. His face, peering through the pane, showed a sickly expression that was turning into a distorted glare. He was like some trapped demon assigned to his own little corner of a hideous inferno.

He wasn't a killer, that glossy man of crime, he was the victim!

On the floor outside the booth, lying where somebody had flung it, was the revolver that had fired the death shot, a curl of smoke coming from its muzzle.

Yet nobody was within a dozen feet of that scene of crime, nor could the murderer have traveled that far in the moments allotted. Even to reach those potted palms would have been impossible!

Incredible, this crime, yet horribly real, as Margo could have testified. She was realizing that nobody could have approached, let alone dash away, during the brief interval when her vigilance had relaxed.

Death in a phone booth, delivered through a closed door by an invisible murderer whose gun lay where it couldn't be. A fitting tragedy, this, a note macabre in the melody of a show called Merry Mrs. Macbeth!

VI.

PEOPLE were crowding to the phone booth, doing what they could to aid its occupant, who was coughing his last breath; but he was planked against the door so heavily that no one could shove its middle hinges inward.

Two husky waiters pushed through the group to lend their shoulders to the task. Drawing closer as though magnetized, Margo Lane heard one of them identify the dying man:

"Stevie Clabb."

The name was vaguely familiar to Margo. She recalled that the fellow was some minor racketeer who had squirmed himself out of trouble not so long ago. But Stevie hadn't managed a squirm this time.

As the door finally shoved inward, Stevie's body gave a backward flop, then a forward topple and landed a sheer mass of dead weight at the scattering feet of the morbid persons who had been attracted to the scene.

One waiter picked up the revolver, very gingerly, while another reclaimed an object that Margo hadn't previously noticed, a short lead pencil that had rolled across the floor. Staring first at each other, the waiters next looked to the phone booth. They let their eyes meet in a gaze so mutually bewildered that it was almost funny.

A single mental question held every onlooker spellbound: How could this thing have happened?

The first to snap out of it was Margo Lane.

First to be gripped by the common awe produced by so fantastic a crime, Margo had a head-start on the rest. Besides, she should have expected something of this sort, knowing the extent of Clabb's criminal connections.

If only Lamont had stayed to witness--or perhaps prevent--this perfect crime by which someone had clipped the human link leading back to the original phone call!

But Cranston was somewhere outside, waiting as The Shadow, for crime to occur in a place where it hadn't!

Under such stressed thoughts, Margo didn't consider that outside crime might still be due, all nicely arranged by Mr. Clabb before he had been paid off with a death shot. What Margo wanted was to find The Shadow and inform him of the past, not the future.

No chance of using the side exit, which Margo was sure that Cranston had taken, for staring people were standing in front of it, drinking in the riddle propounded by Clabb's body, the mystery of death in a sealed telephone booth. However, the onlookers were still so stunned that the news of tragedy had not been passed along to the front of the club where guests were still coming in and going out by the big revolving door.

That was the way Margo went out.

So dazed was Margo that she didn't realize she had reached the sidewalk until she heard Joy shouting in her ear:

"Margo! Where were you? I was looking all around for you!"

Looking around on her own, Margo blurted the question:

"Where's Mr. Harthorne?"

"Right here." It was Harthorne who responded with a booming laugh as he came through the revolving door. "There's some kind of excitement going on inside, but I didn't bother to look into it. What we want is a cab."

Harthorne addressed the final sentence to a door man who was attired in a gaucho costume. The fellow waved for a cab, but before one could pull up, a squatty man with a long-beaked face hustled up from somewhere, waving one hand while he adjusted his tortoise shell glasses with the other.

"Miss Trevoise--Miss Trevoise--"

Turning at the call, Joy gave the arrival a cold stare that didn't ruffle him.

"I'm Terry Dundee," the beak-faced man announced. "Recognized you from the press photos that Ossie Bodelle gave me. Hello"--Dundee turned and thrust out his hand--"this must be Mr. Harthorne. Sorry I was late. Couldn't get a cab over from the subway."

Dundee's apology sounded like an alibi to Margo. Maybe he was the person who had called Clabb earlier and then made a trip through the rear of the Club Fiesta to kill the glossy crook. It was difficult though to picture Dundee as the invisible murderer who had staged such a puzzling crime.

Besides, Harthorne's actions were speaking louder than Dundee's words. Harthorne might be the man who was trying to cover up his tracks, the way he was urging the door man to hurry up the cab. Maybe Harthorne had arranged for some one to call "Louie" and use the name of "Joe" and then had grown worried when Cranston noticed Clabb's activities in the phone booth.

Or to do Harthorne justice, his anxiety to get a cab might be due to Joy's hurry to be leaving here which in turn threw the suspicion on Joy. So far as Margo knew, either one might be the murderer, though how

was another question.

A question for The Shadow to answer if Margo could only find him!

Spotting The Shadow in anything resembling darkness was strictly impossible as Margo should have realized before she started looking around. But Margo's nerves were so distraught, she found it hard to even think; otherwise she'd have noticed what was happening as the door man gestured her into an arriving cab, along with Joy.

Two tuxedoed men stepped up very suddenly, blocking Harthorne before he could follow the girls into the cab. One of them usurped the door man's privilege, by slamming the cab door, ending with a gesture for the driver to get going. Then the cab was away, with Margo and Joy riding in the folding seats which were set up to receive them.

In the rear seat were two men, each with a revolver. Those weapons were definable by the frigid muzzles that they pressed against their prisoners. Margo felt the chill just below her neck, while Joy received the pressure in the middle of her bare back.

The Club Fiesta was just across from Central Park and the cab driver lost no time in whisking into a maze of curving roads. Here was the trouble for which Lamont Cranston had been watching, but he wasn't on hand when it arrived.

For once, Margo Lane was forced to believe that The Shadow had become himself too soon!

Back at the Club Fiesta, Harthorne was punching it out with the tuxedoed huskies who had stopped him from getting into the cab. Dundee was pitching in to help his future boss.

Across the street a very harried young man was springing into an open roadster. He'd seen Joy Trevoise get into the cab that had bolted away so suddenly and he lost no time in taking up the chase. The young man was Alan Fenway.

Further down the street, a couple of well-dressed loungers hurried into a waiting cab and ordered its driver to follow Alan's car. They were members of the tuxedo clan; this cab was a regular hack that hung around the Club Fiesta, on regular call for such customers.

A strange cab was wheeling up at the moment. Its driver, a quick-faced fellow who answered to the name of Shrevvy, was here by arrangement with The Shadow. He was thinking he'd find his cloaked chief waiting for him, but Shrevvy didn't.

Instead, another pair of well-groomed rowdies hopped from obscurity right into Shrevvy's cab and told him to join the caravan, backing the order with brandished guns.

The whole trail couldn't have covered much more than a mile. Suddenly swinging down a dirt bridle path, the lead car stopped on the hump of a stone bridge, and the two men ordered the girls to get out, while Alan's car, missing the turnoff, kept along the regular roadway.

Once her high heels struck the dirt, Joy Trevoise became scrappy. She couldn't see the faces of her captors, but she slapped at one in the darkness. A moment later, the gentlemen gunners and their friendly cab driver were milling around, grabbing the girls and trying to suppress the screeches which Joy began and Margo duplicated now that there was no other choice.

A pair of headlights suddenly glared upon the unequal struggle. They belonged to the cab that had followed Alan's car. It hadn't missed the turn-off and now its tuxedoed passengers were springing out to help suppress the girls. As they came, they beckoned their driver along.

He came, but not into the glare of the headlights. Instead, he made a swift detour along the fringe of darkness and arrived in reverse style across the low rail of the bridge. Even then he wasn't visible in the usual sense; instead, he loomed as a vast blot of living blackness, lunging squarely into the five-man cluster.

A living blot that delivered a sardonic laugh of challenge, that of a fighter who mocked such trifling odds as five to one.

The Shadow!

VII.

IT was a far cry from the scene of inexplicable murder that had called Stevie Clabb as victim, to this spot where friends of the phone booth corpse were trying to complete a kidnap job. Yet Stevie's pals were even more amazed than he had been when a bullet stabbed him out of nowhere.

If ever a group of crime-makers had been taken totally off guard, these were.

At sight of a cloaked attacker looming huge into the glare of the headlights, the tailor-made crooks scattered, only to converge as The Shadow wheeled back into the darkness. Thinking they had scared this superfoe, they lurched for that same darkness, waving their guns.

The Shadow met them promptly. As their bodies blocked the headlights, he swooped down from the darkness of the bridge, hoisted the first man that he met and heaved him right into the rest.

Puny guns were stabbing wildly, uselessly. Plucking each rising opponent. The Shadow kept up his heaving tactics while the others dodged, which was all the more to the Shadow's favor. With nothing to stop them, crooks were going headlong over the low parapet of the bridge and each man who dodged became easier prey for The Shadow's speedy mode of violent seizure.

Amid the sounds of thwacking splashes, Margo grabbed Joy and started her up the path to safety, right into the blaze of another pair of headlights. There, another pair of tuxedoed enemies were flinging from a cab, passing threats at a huddled driver as they surged by.

That scared driver happened to be Shrevvy, but he wasn't as frightened as he pretended. It wasn't an accident when he banked one elbow on the button of the horn.

The result was a raucous blare, for like every experienced hackie, Shrevvy didn't believe in musical noises as an aid to clearing traffic. Half-startled by the clamor, the two reserves swung about, each clutching a girl with one hand and a revolver in the other. But before the pair could vent their violence on Shrevvy, The Shadow reached them.

A fierce laugh, a swirl of living blackness, accompanied by the swing of heavy guns, and the last of the tuxedoed tribe were reeling for the timber. The Shadow stabbed two blind shots to spur them, and as Shrevvy raised his hand from the horn button, a long, taunting laugh gave echo.

Like their splashing comrades, the two reserves could now be numbered among the exotic fauna of the Manhattan woodland.

It was The Shadow who sprang into Shrevvy's cab and ordered a quick departure. The cab slithered into reverse, did a quick wheel on the drive, and was off, much to the amazement of Joy and Margo, who couldn't understand why their rescuer had left them flat.

The answer came promptly, in the form of Alan's roadster. Finding he'd lost the trail, Alan had reversed

it. Assuming that this would happen, The Shadow hadn't wanted to complicate his own affairs by staying around.

Proof of The Shadow's judgment was amplified by the sound of police whistles and distant sirens. Other cars were stopping along the drive and very soon Harthorne came hurrying from a cab accompanied by Dundee, and behind them several police from a patrol car.

Harthorne must have flagged the cab some distance from the Club Fiesta for neither he nor Dundee--nor for that matter the police--seemed to know anything about the phone booth death of Stevie Clabb.

In fact Harthorne's suspicious eye was fixed on Alan, considering him solely in terms of Joy's abduction. Noting it, Joy spoke to Harthorne:

"You saw that note that Alan handed me, didn't you, Howie?"

"Which note?" inquired Harthorne. "The one at the apartment?"

Joy nodded. Then:

"Didn't you read it? I left it in the waste basket."

Harthorne looked a trifle annoyed at his own oversight, and Alan snapped up the opportunity.

"So that was it," chided Alan. "Another conspiracy behind my back!"

"Don't be a fool!" stormed Harthorne. Then, turning to Joy:

"What did the note say?"

"Only that Alan wanted to meet me outside the Club Fiesta at ten. He had a silly suggestion that we could drive to Connecticut and get married."

"But you found out about it!" put in Alan, to Harthorne. "You arranged for that bunch of night-club rats to crawl out of their upholstered sewers and fake a kidnap."

Harthorne's manner instantly changed. Though Margo hadn't liked the man during their brief acquaintance, her previous mood could have been likened to a tossing of bouquets, compared to her new sentiments. For Harthorne dropped whatever he had resembling gloss and became a coldly calculating character.

"So you recognized the kidnapers," asserted Harthorne, accusingly. "Not only that, you term their job a fake. Those alibis won't help you, Fenway."

"Won't help me?" echoed Alan. "What alibis do you mean?"

"You hired your friends to carry Joy away," tabulated Harthorne. "You fixed them to help you stage the hero act. Now you are covering up for them, and to complete your stupidity, you supposed that Joy would be impressed and accede to your idea of an elopement."

Two sizeable cops took hold of Alan while he punched the air a few feet short of Harthorne's ample-jawed face.

"Attempted assault and battery," added Harthorne, "and now"--he paused while Alan struggled with the officers--"now it's a case of resisting arrest. Enough charges against you, Fenway, to keep you in jail longer than the record run that Merry Mrs. Macbeth will have on Broadway."

What Alan tried to say in reply wouldn't have been printable even if it had been coherent.

"Of course I doubt that Joy will press those charges," continued Harthorne, indulgently, "and I, for one, would not do so against her wish."

This time Alan only glared.

"What Howard means." interpreted Joy, "is that you are only looking for an excuse to leave the show and pose as a martyr if you can't be a hero."

Margo began to regret that Joy hadn't gotten in the way while The Shadow was tossing people over the sides of the bridge.

"So I'm looking for an excuse!" snapped Alan, finding words at last. "I'll show you how I stand on that. I'll leave it just the other way around. If Harthorne wants to get rid of me, let him press those charges. Otherwise I'll stay with his show until it flops, even if it takes three weeks!"

Out of all this, Margo was suddenly conscious of Terry Dundee. He seemed to be weighing all that was being said. Good press copy, the leading lady of a musical show being rescued by the leading man, but with the backer involved, it might turn into something of a scandal.

Or was Dundee thinking of a far more sensational story back at the Club Fiesta, where the amazing murder of Stevie Clabb might soon be linked through the tuxedo mob with the questionable kidnapping of Joy Trevoze?

If those thoughts were in Dundee's mind, he didn't express them. With a shrug, Harthorne decided to drop the charges against Alan. He gave a pleased nod when the police announced their intention of hunting down crime's missing links, the tuxedoed wild men who were trampling the flora of Central Park.

Everybody started off to Harthorne's apartment, since Joy and Margo were lacking too many high-heels and shoulder straps to pass muster at the Club Fiesta. Nobody talked much during the trip, but Margo felt sure she had heard enough to give Cranston a tangible report on the proceedings that he had missed.

Except those proceedings at the phone booth!

It chanced that Cranston was viewing that scene himself. Returning to the Club Fiesta in search of other tuxedoed gentry, he had found the lot gone, with one startling exception. Stevie Clabb, the real link in the case, was still lying on full display right where he had eventually dropped.

The case was really bewildering to the police detectives who had been summoned to the Fiesta, even though they hadn't yet begun to connect it with the Central Park affair. Plenty of witnesses had heard the shot and turned to see Clabb imprisoned in the phone booth while the revolver was still bouncing on the floor.

Others could testify to the prelude that Margo had seen; namely, with no one else close at hand. The interim between his entry and his death could not have been more than a half dozen seconds at most.

The detectives were examining the gun and were positive that it must be the actual death weapon. The only other clue was the pencil that had also been picked up outside the booth. Whether it belonged to Clabb or the murderer was still a puzzle, but it rated as a minor matter with the detectives.

Not so with Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow. To his keen mind that trifling clue was the vital key to crime!

VIII.

THE next day the police line-up was given a de luxe touch by the appearance of several tuxedoes which, though as bedraggled as their occupants, were a classier display than usual.

These prisoners admitted all points except one. None of them, so they said, had taken a hand in the forcible removal of Joy and Margo from the neighborhood of the Club Fiesta. All that had been engineered by parties malicious and unknown, probably the two men who had battled Harthorne on the sidewalk and then fled.

Under severe grilling the prisoners stuck to one story; they claimed that they had trailed along to rescue the girls from their actual captors, dangerous characters who had managed to escape the police net.

Admitting that they operated under the code-word "Louie" when called upon by anyone using the countersign "Joe," this crowd softened their own case by asserting that their purposes were purely protective, and had been such last night.

They explained the set-up thus:

Someone had phoned the Club Fiesta stating that a young man named Alan Fenway intended to run away with Joy Trevoise, the actress, in full keeping with her wish. However, opposition was to be anticipated from Howard Harthorne, probably through the use of hired thugs.

It was the business of the "Louie" group to prevent this, so when they witnessed Joy's forcible seizure, they had sped along to save her. When Alan showed up, the "Louie" crew scattered, having meanwhile fought a pitched battle with murderous gunners on the little bridge.

None of the "Louie" crowd had been armed; therefore, they'd been forced to jump from the bridge after their successful rescue of the girls. Such was their story and they'd been smart enough to get rid of their incriminating revolvers before the police captured them.

While the prisoners were being remanded for a further hearing, Margo Lane found time for a few quiet words with Lamont Cranston.

"Nice work, Margo," Cranston approved. "I'm glad you didn't recognize faces or remember details."

"I couldn't," confessed Margo. "There was a lot of darkness and everything was very confused."

"And besides, Joy couldn't remember anything."

"That's right." Margo smiled, recalling a brief and bewildered account that Joy had rendered. "I guess Harthorne instructed her as well as you did with me."

"Very probably. Those crooks were smart, throwing some of the burden on him. He doesn't want a scandal out of this."

"Maybe they were too smart, Lamont." Margo looked across the room and watched the tuxedoed prisoners file out. "After all, you let them off rather easily."

"Not too easily, Margo. Their wings are clipped and badly. I'll be on the lookout for the rest of them."

"You mean there are more?"

"Unquestionably. They will crop up if occasion demands. Then we'll be able to sift the whole truth of this

episode."

Cranston was studying faces as he spoke. Among those who had come to police headquarters were all the principals of the show *Merry Mrs. Macbeth*, including the men behind it.

Harthorne and Alan were keeping wide apart as were Joy and her understudy, Vera Scharn. Maybe Vera considered it part of her day's work to observe how Joy acted when giving testimony to police. At sight, Vera was really fitted for the part of *Lady Macbeth*; sinuous of form, shrewd, disdainful in demeanor, she was quite the type to slink around with a dagger.

It struck Margo that Vera might be a good slinker with a gun as well.

"There's somebody who could have murdered Clabb, confided Margo. "What do you think, Lamont?"

"A good point," nodded Cranston, eyeing Vera. "If she phoned Clabb and called herself Joe, she'd have had good reason to eliminate him later. He could have traced a woman's voice easier than a man's. Still, let's reserve judgment until we've studied the others."

In chronological order those others consisted of Oswald Bodelle, whose big bluff countenance was strictly pokerfaced, marking him the promoter that he was.

"Strictly a horse-trader," defined Cranston. "The kind who would prefer making his swaps in midstream."

Next was Fred Guylan, the playwright whose brain-child was in jeopardy.

"Speaking of horses," continued Cranston, "Guylan is a dark one. He'd do anything to save *Merry Mrs. Macbeth*--in terms of the play itself, not Joy or Vera."

"He's more like a rabbit, Lamont."

"But rabbits can travel, once they get started," reminded Cranston. "We'll keep an eye on Guylan."

Third on the list was the tall silent man who played the ghost of Hamlet's father but who now stood undisguised. Arms folded, Zachary Verne wore an amused smile, such as a veteran actor would assume after witnessing a second-rate show.

"Verne thinks he's good," decided Cranston, "and probably he is. He's been ambitious in his time."

"You mean he's no longer interested in the stage?"

"Quite the opposite, but his interest is on a cash basis. If this show goes broke, he'll look for whatever else he can get. But Verne no longer has a future."

"In that case," Margo argued, "he ought to stick to *Merry Mrs. Macbeth* as long as he can."

"He'll stick," assured Cranston. "To the last dagger, while it pays. Still, he feels that show business owes him more than it can ever pay, or rather the big men in the business do."

"In that case Verne shouldn't like Harthorne."

"Harthorne is hardly in show business yet. If Verne wanted recompense for his wasted past, he'd make demands elsewhere."

With a gesture, Cranston dismissed Verne and indicated the last of the visiting delegates, Terry Dundee.

"Something of a coincidence," mused Cranston, "that even before Dundee takes on a publicity job, a big story breaks."

"You can't mean that Dundee framed a kidnapping and a murder!" exclaimed Margo. "Why, he'd be crazy!"

"Most press agents are," reminded Cranston. "Still, Dundee would hardly play things that strong, unless he has some other motive."

A sudden question popped to Margo's mind.

"How could Dundee have learned that Alan wanted to run away with Joy?"

"That's something for you to look into, Margo."

"For me? How?"

"By going over to the theater with Joy. I've heard she actually intends to rehearse--under police protection, of course."

"Another of Dundee's stunts, now that he's officially the press agent of the show?"

"No. Orders from the police commissioner. He thinks the law should keep a close watch on this business. I'm having lunch with him at the Cobalt Club and he will probably bore me for a few hours."

Knowing all about Cranston's ordeals with the platitudinous Police commissioner, Margo nodded sympathetically. Then:

"If Dundee framed the stunt he must have known that Louie crowd pretty well."

"Like all press agents," reminded Cranston, "Dundee gets around a lot."

"There was that time interval while Clabb made all those phone calls without getting any results--"

"Without getting answers, Margo. He got results. I checked while he was calling. He allowed six rings each time."

"You mean he was calling the different chaps who showed up outside? The same that were just on display?"

"Exactly. Six rings meant the Club Fiesta. Clabb must have slipped a few details to someone else, during the time we lost track of him."

By this time, the objects of Cranston's survey all had gone. Margo was nodding slowly, as Cranston remarked that it was time that they should leave, too. As they went through the door to the corridor, Cranston added a final summary.

"Anyone could have murdered Clabb," confided Cranston. "Harthorne, Joy, anyone connected with the Mrs. Macbeth show, or even some outsider who hasn't yet shown in the picture."

Cranston's statement ended in a note that had the slight marks of a satirical laugh.

"The only persons whose innocence is really well established," he added, "are those gentlemen who went swimming in tuxedos, plus the rest of their fancy tribe. They were Clabb's own friends and bread. They would have squealed on any of their crowd who double-crossed him."

They were stopping beside a telephone booth. His hand on the door, Cranston added:

"That's why the police aren't questioning Clabb's crowd. They want the murderer to be over-confident on the chance he may reveal his hand."

"But how can they hope to find the murderer?" queried Margo helplessly. "They haven't an idea how the crime could have been committed!"

"They will have," replied Cranston, calmly. "after I demonstrate the full process to our friend, Commissioner Weston."

Margo stared, totally agog.

"Somebody planted death quite neatly," explained Cranston. "It was an automatic system, sure fire the moment Clabb went back into that phone booth. He was waiting around for some of his pals to check back, which made it all the more certain."

"But how was it planted?"

"I'll show you." Calm as ever, Cranston drew an automatic from his pocket. "I shouldn't be carrying this around police headquarters," he added, "but it won't take five seconds. Of course I need a pencil stub, too." Cranston produced one as he referred to it. "That was the all-important clue."

As Cranston turned to the phone booth, Margo saw that it was the same common type that Clabb had entered at the Club Fiesta. The door was hinged in the center, forming an inward V. Setting the pencil crosswise beneath the trigger guard, Cranston shoved the automatic into the V until its muzzle reached the gap between the door halves. Then, pressing the door further open, Cranston narrowed the V and thereby wedged both the gun and the pencil.

"Here's what happened when Clabb entered the booth," continued Cranston, starting to draw the door shut by its handle. "See how the V crack narrows, clamping the muzzle even tighter? Notice how the halves of the door are spreading toward us, pushing the pencil back against the trigger?"

Margo nodded without moving her riveted eyes.

"Clabb was in the booth when he pulled the door," reminded Cranston, "and he tugged hard when it jammed. That revolver had a hair-trigger and the pressure of the pencil snapped it. The recoil kicked the gun clear and the pencil flew with it. The wallop from the bullet only helped Clabb slam the door all the harder, once the wedge was gone."

Instead of demonstrating the thing further, Cranston reclaimed his gun and pencil. Pocketing both, he took Margo by the arm and steered her out to the street so the daylight could counteract her daze.

"See you later," said Cranston, "after I've educated the commissioner. Meanwhile don't phone me--at least not from a pay-booth."

It took a while for Margo to shake off the shudders as she rode to the Half Moon Theatre in Shrevvy's cab. Cranston was right; anybody could have planted that death trap, whether a patron of the Club Fiesta or someone who had sneaked in and out.

The problem now was: Find the murderer!

IX.

BACK stage, the Half Moon Theatre was as cavernous as some weird grotto and every bit as mysterious.

Set with the parapets of Castle Elsinore, the place looked ready to receive a ghost at any moment, and it provided chills which belonged to midnight rather than early afternoon. Margo started off toward the wing only to pull up with another attack of creeps.

So soon after learning the details of a modern murder, as divulged by Cranston, Margo was strictly avoiding box-like spaces bearing any similarity to telephone booths. She'd encountered such a space, which though considerably larger than a phone booth, was equally sinister, for it was a place where murder supposedly was brewed.

Margo had run into the cauldron set which had been wheeled behind the wing. Not needed for rehearsals it would probably stay there until the stage hands found time to rig it to the special rope which ran up over the double pulleys.

Even without the attending witches, the cauldron looked formidable. It reminded Margo of one of those huge pots in which cannibals were reputed to stew hapless missionaries. A silly analogy, but it gave Margo another shiver as she shied away from the thing.

And then her shudders froze. A voice had spoken, somewhere beyond the wing, over toward the metal stairway that led up to the three tiers of dressing rooms. A man's voice, but indistinguishable in words as well as tone, here in these cavernous depths of the silent theater.

Rigid, Margo listened, doubting her own ears. Then came a reply in a woman's voice, which by its clearer tone could be understood and identified.

"Of course I'm going through with it." The voice belonged to Vera Scharn, a hard, cool contralto.

"It's to my advantage, isn't it, to get rid of that Trevose snip?"

The man's voice replied, evidently in the affirmative, but with a low persuasive tone which gave no carry to the words.

"I'll do it my way." was Vera's sharp retort. "Maybe I'll work on Alan; he's the best bet right at present. But I'm not eliminating Harthorne."

A few brief words in the man's voice. Then:

"I said I wasn't eliminating Harthorne." Vera spoke as though she meant it. "I'm not even taking chances where he's concerned. If you don't believe me, I'll let you read the note that I'm sending to Meigs Thurland. You'll find it on my dressing table. If you want to play along, you can. That's that."

Vera ended with a light but significant laugh that showed a certain sympathy toward the man who heard her words. As for Margo, who now knew that the voices were human, fear changed to curiosity and she was more than eager to learn the identity of Vera's friend. But when Margo started to step by the cauldron, she brushed it with her wrist and the clash of a bracelet brought a dim but echoing clang.

Fearful that the sound was heard, Margo did a quick reverse out to the center of the stage and under the sheltering parapets of the imitation castle. By the time she was sure that the clang had escaped notice, Margo's opportunity was gone. There was a rattle from the stage door, out beyond the steps that led up to the tiers and voices announced that other persons were arriving back stage.

Sneaking across stage and down some steps on the other side, Margo reached the auditorium proper

and picked her way to the middle aisle. By then more people had come in through the stage door and it was impossible to guess who had talked to Vera.

Margo saw Oswald Bodelle. He was coming down the steps from the right of the stage and his broad face was topped by a derby hat, tilted at a rakish angle which gave it an impromptu look. Seeing Margo, Bodelle halted abruptly; then recognized her with a slight tip of his hat.

Maybe Bodelle was surprised at finding someone already in the theater, but he could also be worried if he'd been the man who had talked to Vera. Margo was about to label him candidate number one, when she heard the slight thud of a seat beside her. Turning about, Margo met the nervous gaze of Fred Guylan.

The rabbit playwright could have come in through the lobby door, provided it was unlocked, but it was equally likely that Guylan had copied Margo's cross-stage sneak and come down by the steps on the left.

Staring toward the stage again, Margo saw two men who were changing nods. At least some members of the company were on a cordial basis. One was Alan Fenway, the other Zachary Verne. Neither of them particularly interested Margo, because her mind was groping for the missing link.

That link was Terry Dundee.

The fact that Dundee wasn't anywhere in sight didn't prove he wasn't around. Any rifts among the personnel of Merry Mrs. Macbeth hadn't evidenced themselves until Dundee had decided to join up, and Margo hadn't forgotten Cranston's admonition that Dundee would bear watching.

Besides, there was that mention of Meigs Thurland.

Everybody had heard of Thurland. It didn't take much mental addition to calculate how Thurland might figure. Today's newspapers had headlined Merry Mrs. Macbeth because of Joy's adventure. It was still a question whether the news was adverse or helpful, but in either case Thurland might be interested.

Some people said Meigs Thurland bought shows cheap and sold them to the public at top prices. Others could point to times when the famous but eccentric producer had risked his own shirt and a whole clothes-line of others backing some extravagant proposition. Bankruptcy had been a habit with Thurland and it was one of his famous quips that a man never knew business until he had been through three such experiences.

But that in turn made Thurland's position equivocal. His failures could have been planned rather than involuntary. Thurland's ways and means were something that Margo could not begin to judge, but she was sure that Cranston would be able to answer. The net result was that Margo had acquired a very valuable bit of information.

Then thoughts of Thurland blanked from Margo's mind.

Vera Scharn had suddenly appeared from the door of a first tier dressing room. As Margo watched the dark girl stroll toward the stage door, Joy Trevoise entered, accompanied by Howard Harthorne and a brace of men who looked like headquarters detectives. Vera evidently thought the same, for she passed some quip that Joy didn't like. Turning, Joy appealed to Harthorne, who laughed it off. Then he caught Vera's eye and gave her more than a passing glance.

Maybe Vera did have ideas regarding Harthorne. Margo was thinking that one over, when Dundee appeared from beyond the electrician's board. How Terry had arrived, and when, was a trifling mystery

in itself, but he'd evidently been using the back stage telephone or pretending to do so because it was located in that general direction.

Like all the others, excluding Harthorne, Dundee could have been here earlier. He was looming again as the most likely person who had chatted in cool undertone to Vera near the cauldron set.

More people were arriving as if on schedule. Minor members of the cast, the girls of the chorus, and even the three witches. The electrician turned on some stage lights and conferences began. Both Bodelle and Guylan climbed the steps to the stage to have their say on various questions. There were so many persons moving about that Margo found it impossible to keep track of all of them,

One of the detectives had gone back to the stage door; the other had come down into the auditorium to take a seat near Margo's. They were handling everything in a routine way. Margo relaxed and let time take its course. Things went smoothly for about half an hour.

Suddenly Harthorne's big voice boomed. As backer of the show he expected results this afternoon. Waving his arms imperiously, Harthorne strode across the stage and reached a chair which was set in front of the right wing, evidently placed there particularly for him.

Clatters sounded from the steel stairs as the chorus girls flocked down from their dressing rooms, wearing costumes for a scene from A Midsummer Night's Dream, which had been crazily interpolated into the rest of Guylan's Shakespearean potpourri. The clatter subsided as the girls sat down on the lower steps, forming a quadruple bank up toward the second level.

Somehow the setting was far less grim than was to be expected. It even fitted the term "merry" which formed so important an adjunct to the show's title. However something more ominous was due in this rehearsal.

That thing was death, unrehearsed.

X.

THE lull that began proceedings was something to be long remembered. It formed the prelude to a startling scene that Guylan couldn't have written into his script, no matter how hard he'd tried.

They were waiting for Guylan, who had stepped off stage somewhere to check over his manuscript. Harthorne was impatient, an actor in his own right, the way he kept rising from his chair, only to sit down again and spread his arms in a dramatic gesture of annoyance.

Bodelle had gone to look for Guylan and tell him that the boss was peeved; at least that was the plausible explanation for Bodelle's temporary absence. There wasn't any sign of Dundee, which gave Margo the notion that Terry had gone back to the telephone, though she was to doubt that opinion later.

The various actors were in their dressing rooms, or should have been, yet that too was a question. Whatever the case, they wouldn't be needed until after the chorus had tried out its number. Then there was likely to be a slight tiff as to who should play Lady Macbeth.

Whether Joy Trevoise intended to try the part cold or let Vera Scharn run through it as a sample, would probably be left to Harthorne. Whichever his choice, Joy wouldn't like it, which would suit Vera immensely, since she could play sweet or temperamental as occasion demanded. It looked like Vera's chance to test her wiles on Harthorne and plan her future policy from the result.

Such was Margo's thought, and perhaps others shared it, for the atmosphere was tense. It happened

however that everyone was looking too far ahead.

The climax came like an opening gun.

Harthorne's big impatient voice boomed one word:

"Ready!"

Somebody put that signal to his own insidious use. It was lucky for Harthorne that in giving the call, he rose from the chair that had been placed for him. For the response was an attempt at sudden doom that came as silently as it was unexpected.

The thing caught Margo's eye too late for her to shriek a warning. The detective seated near her saw it too and came to his feet, but not in time to shout.

As though Harthorne's single word had released it automatically, the quarter-ton sand bag that was hitched to the rope intended for the cauldron set came plummeting down from the fly-gallery, straight toward Harthorne's head!

It missed Harthorne by inches only because he had risen from his chair. The crash came when the huge weight reached the chair itself and shattered it to match-wood. Such splintering was trifling, however, compared to the smashing impact on the stage. With a terrific crackle, the flooring split apart as the sandbag punched right through.

Warding flying bits of wood as he turned, Harthorne gazed in horror at a gaping hole where he had been mere moments before. Then, as shrieks came from everywhere, he ducked away from a huge, snakelike monster that came whimpering upon him with great embracing coils

It was only the rope, slithering cross its pulleys. Its loose end had come up from behind the wing that hid the cauldron set, near the rear of the stage, over toward the first floor dressing rooms. The rope lost its lifelike appearance as the end came down with a final thwack.

Until then, all the witnesses were stunned, totally forgetful of each other's existence. It was Harthorne, the intended victim, who first called for action, and the two detectives responded to his shout by rushing to the stage, one from the auditorium, the other from the stage door.

"Find out who did it!" bawled Harthorne. "Find out who tried to murder me!"

The detectives were pulling revolvers, brandishing them to cover everybody. They were barking orders alternately.

"Stay where you are, all of you!"

"That goes for everybody in sight!"

"If you're hiding anywhere, say so!"

"Don't count on that scenery stopping bullets. It won't!"

Evidently that final argument counted, for certain persons came suddenly into sight, so suddenly in fact that they might have been in view before the sand-bag's crash, but merely overlooked.

One was Oscar Bodelle. He halted in the midst of what seemed a run, near a front wing at the right, not far from where Harthorne stood.

Another was Fred Guylan. He was on stage proper, about midway between the hulking parapets of the imitation castle and the wing where Bodelle had halted. From the frantic expression on his face, Guylan looked as though his brain had stopped running with his legs.

Terry Dundee wasn't anywhere in sight. Before he could show himself, other persons captured full attention,

A dressing room door came flying open, just to the right of the stage, and as the detectives aimed in that direction, Alan Fenway stepped in sight. His face looked puzzled, but only momentarily; then, seeing the guns, he started to shy away, only to be halted by commands to stay. From high above, there was a clang of footsteps. People looked up to see Zachary Verne, whose dressing room was on the top tier. Half-finished with his make-up, the old character actor kept one hand to his face, while the other rested on the balcony rail.

Like the chorus girls who sat gasping on the first flight of steps, Verne could see the ruin that the sand-bag had caused. He didn't have to call down and ask what had happened.

That question was reserved for Joy Trevoise.

As if in echo to the other sounds, the door of Joy's dressing room opened and the blonde appeared, sliding her arms into a dressing gown. She saw Harthorne's face and must have observed its pallor, for Joy stammered:

"You--you're all right, Howie?" Harthorne pointed to the punctured floor and Joy gave a little scream, as though expecting the devil himself to come popping up from that jagged pit. Joy didn't seem to catch the idea of the sand-bag, not even with its rope stretching up and out of the hole in the stage.

There was no sign yet of Terry Dundee.

Before anyone could really note or speculate on Dundee's absence, Verne gave a hoarse call from the balcony two levels above the stage. It was odd, that excited tone from the character actor who was used to taking all parts calmly. Verne's very gesture betokened tragedy as he pointed down to something which he alone could see, located in the cauldron set behind the rear wing.

The detectives started for the witches lair, with other persons following. The witches themselves were absent; their dressing room was on the second tier and they were coming from it now. They saw the sight below and gave startled shrieks.

Lying beside the cauldron, rolled partly beneath it, was the body of Vera Scharn.

Joy's understudy was clad in the regalia of Lady Macbeth, except for one item. Vera's outstretched hand lacked the dagger that she was supposed to carry. That dirk had done its deadly work upon its owner, for the front of Vera's costume was dyed with a flood of deep crimson.

Vera Scharn had been slain with a single stab, but the death dagger was gone!

The horror of this scene made the staring group forget the near-tragedy that had brought them to this spot. Harthorne's escape from the falling sand bag seemed trivial compared to the murder of Vera. Yet the two strokes, one a hit, the other a miss, were closely associated.

A man's voice spoke grimly from amid the group; his finger pointed and all eyes followed it.

Among the persons who had converged here as though drawn by some magnetic force was Margo Lane, and like the rest she saw the thing to which the finger pointed.

It was a large, heavy floor cleat, directly below the rear pulley of rigging that had been arranged to test the hoisting of the cauldron set. The end of the rope had been attached firmly to that cleat, with a series of elaborate hitches, and the end was still there.

The rope had been cut, just above the cleat, probably with the same blade that had murdered Vera, for there were traces of blood upon the frayed rope tufts.

Right then, Margo noted the man who pointed. To her surprise she saw that he was Terry Dundee, the one person who hadn't appeared promptly after the crash of the sand bag. But it wasn't Terry who made the next discovery.

Alan Fenway gestured past the cauldron, in the direction of the stage. There, just past the wing, was the death dagger, driven into the floor at an angle, as though the murderer had flung it in haste.

Rather timely, both of these discoveries, so far as the men who made them were concerned.

Dundee had stymied any questions regarding his whereabouts by calling attention to the severed rope. Alan, by spotting the knife, had drawn eyes away from Vera's body, but not long enough for him to reclaim something that no one had so far noticed. Joy's sharp eyes, surveying the dead form of her rival, saw the object that Alan might have been thinking about.

It was a note, clenched in Vera's left hand.

One detective was examining the dagger. The other plucked the note from Vera's fist after Joy gestured to it.

The note read:

Meet me behind scenes before rehearsal. I can explain matters if you will listen. Don't miss this chance. You may regret it.

Looking over the detective's shoulder, Joy saw the note and recognized the handwriting. For once those blue eyes of hers took on the ferocity that suited Lady Macbeth, the costume that Joy was wearing in duplicate of Vera's.

Joy's accusing glare was directed straight at Alan.

"So you wrote this!" stormed Joy. "You're sending notes to Vera, now that I won't talk to you. Why, you--you--"

Recalling Vera's fate, Joy stopped short. Whatever word she had intended to add, the term "murderer" would have been more appropriate at this moment.

Taking the hint, the two detectives stepped forward, intending to clamp handcuffs on Alan. They were stopped by a brusque voice which accompanied arriving footsteps. Turning they saw Police Commissioner Weston, bristling to the tips of his clipped mustache.

"I'll take care of this case," announced Weston. "Give me the facts and an arrest will follow. Meanwhile search the theater and make sure that no one else is here."

Though stern, Weston's expression was triumphant. Not that he was pleased by this new murder. Even though the perpetrator had flunked a double job by missing Howard Harthorne while slaying Vera Scharn. Weston's solace lay in the fact that the murderer's hand was shown.

It was plain to Margo that he had learned and believed Cranston's break-down of the telephone booth riddle. Clear though that solution was, it remained blind where the tracking of the murderer was concerned. Any enemy of Clabb's could have been regarded as a suspect.

Now the quest was really narrowed. Clabb's death could definitely be written off to someone connected with Merry Mrs. Macbeth.

The Clabb case, with all its sinister planning, now rated purely as a prelude to the major crimes intended. The motive behind Clabb's death revealed itself quite clearly. If Clabb had lived, he would have been the one man who might have named the murderer who had just now split even in a double stroke.

So simple, so restricted did Vera's death seem in comparison to Clabb's, that Weston spoke as though he could crack the present riddle for the asking. But with the commissioner was a calm-faced man who did not agree.

Singular that Lamont Cranston, who had solved the sealed phone booth riddle through sheer deduction, should foresee difficulties in the cracking of a mystery that seemed purely a process of elimination with all the suspects actually on hand.

Or was it singular?

Behind that masklike countenance of Cranston lay the keen brain of The Shadow, which never discounted the intelligence that some other person similarly might mask.

The criminal mind that had so cunningly contrived the phone booth murder would not have exhausted nor even exerted its ingenuity with such a preliminary.

To Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow, it was a certainty that the death of Vera Scharn, if solved, would supply factors unique in the annals of crime.

XI.

IT wasn't pleasant sitting in the company of a murderer. What made it worse was not knowing who the murderer was.

Such was the situation when Commissioner Weston finished his grilling of the suspects. Alan Fenway had a good enough explanation for the note and thereby tossed the question of a murder right around the circle.

"I didn't write that note to Vera," admitted Alan, after a show of reluctance. "It was my daily note to Joy, and I put it on her dressing table."

"Then why didn't I find it?" sputtered Joy, angrily, "or did you forget which room was mine?"

Alan shook his head and relaxed in his chair. Like the rest, he was sitting at a table which the commissioner had brought to the center of the stage.

Commissioner Weston turned to a new arrival, his ace inspector, Joe Cardona. When Cardona was on the job, Weston forgot all about asking opinions from Cranston, except when Joe was stumped. So far, the inspector wasn't.

Poker-faced, Cardona turned to Joy and asked bluntly:

"Didn't you find that note, Miss Trevoise?"

"Not until I saw it in Vera's hand," returned Joy. "No, not until then."

"And when was that?"

"Why, after Alan pointed to the knife."

"You're sure you didn't see it before?"

"Before when?"

"Before Miss Scharn was murdered, for instance."

Joy's eyes blazed anew with the flare that they had recently acquired. Before she could speak in her own behalf, Harthorne boomed an interruption:

"This is outrageous, accusing Joy of murder!"

"I'm not accusing," retorted Cardona. "I'm just asking."

"Then ask something else," stormed Harthorne. "What motive could Joy have in murdering Vera Scharn?"

"Professional jealousy, maybe."

"But Vera was only Joy's understudy."

During this debate between Harthorne and Cardona, Margo was making frantic faces at Cranston, only to receive a gesture that meant to wait. No matter what Margo might supply in reference to the case, Cranston preferred to hear it later.

"Murderers have sometimes planted evidence on their victims," observed Cardona, coolly. "The rule might apply in this case. For all we know, Joy might have found Vera cutting the rope, and decided upon revenge on your account, Harthorne."

It was a neat trick, intended to excite Joy into some unguarded statements, but Harthorne blocked it.

"There was blood on the rope," he reminded, "so Vera couldn't have cut it--and Joy wouldn't."

"Maybe not," conceded Cardona, "unless she'd changed her mind and was liking Alan here instead of you."

It was Harthorne's turn to purple, but he managed to restrain himself. Harthorne gave a forced laugh.

"You'll be accusing me next," he declared, "only it won't go, Inspector. Most everybody saw Vera after I had taken my place in my usual chair; at least they'd seen her go to her dressing room."

Commissioner Weston put in a few words.

"We've eliminated you, Harthorne," he declared, "so don't try to be facetious. You couldn't have killed Vera any more than Verne could have"--Weston gestured toward the character actor, then waved his hand at an upward angle--"because he was up in his third tier dressing room and couldn't have come down or gone up."

"Naturally not," agreed Harthorne. "The whole chorus was sitting on the steps. You're eliminating them too, of course."

"Of course."

"Then why not quiz the real suspects?"

With that question Harthorne gave a sweeping gesture that stopped short of Joy. Cardona gave a nod as though accepting Harthorne's notion, then slipped in a quick summary that covered Joy's case.

"Joy could have placed that note in Vera's hand," the inspector insisted, "or she could have planted it on Vera's dressing table and decoyed her with it. But for that matter"--Cardona came quickly to the point before Harthorne could provide some new objection--"there are others who could have done the same thing."

Cardona looked squarely at Bodelle, only to receive one of Ossie's broad, bluff glances.

"I was looking for Guylan," stated Bodelle. "Ask anybody. They'll all tell you that I was."

"They'll testify that you said you were," returned Cardona. "Maybe that was just the alibi you gave them."

Bodelle shrugged at that one and Cardona snapped the question:

"If you were looking for Guylan, why didn't you find him?"

"Ask Guylan," suggested Bodelle. "He ought to know where he was. Maybe he was lurking around the witches' cauldron waiting for Vera to show up. I wouldn't know, because I wasn't there."

Before Cardona could turn Guylan's way, the playwright was on his feet, uttering frantic denials.

"No, no! I didn't do it!" Guylan's hands were trembling. "I'll tell you where I was!" He made a shaky gesture toward the rear of the stage. "I was over by the castle, checking the script. The light was better there and I had room to spread the pages. I dropped a few and you'll find them there."

Letting Guylan rave, Cardona turned to Dundee. As the final suspect on the list, Dundee anticipated the inspector's question by thumbing across his shoulder.

I was making a telephone call, inspector. I didn't even hear the crash. Just came back and saw the wreckage."

"Who were you phoning?" demanded Cardona. "Maybe he'd have a time alibi for you."

Dundee's pointed face betrayed a shrewd expression. He knew how little chance there was for such an alibi to stand. People didn't notice or remember the exact minute of a phone call unless they were told to do so, particularly when it concerned a moment of crime.

"Sorry," said Dundee, as though it didn't matter. "Nobody answered. My friend wasn't home."

Face by face, Cardona looked over the various suspects, listing each name on a pad as though to emphasize exactly which persons were to regard themselves liable to instant arrest. Paying no attention to the varying expressions, Cardona finished the list and planked it in front of Weston, who read the names:

Alan Fenway

Joy Trevoise

Fred Guylan

Oscar Bodelle

Terry Dundee

It was Weston's turn, so the commissioner rose to the occasion. From the table he lifted the death dagger and studied its long, sharp blade. Then:

"To whom did this belong?"

"To Vera Scharn." it was Harthorne who answered the commissioner's question. "She carried it when she played Lady Macbeth."

"You mean it went with the costume?"

"That's right."

Promptly, Weston swung to Joy Trevoise.

"You had a dagger to," he reminded. "Where is it?"

"I--I don't know," Joy admitted. "It's been several days since I rehearsed and that was the last time I saw it. In fact, I was looking for the dagger when I heard the excitement on the stage. It--well, it wasn't in my dressing room."

"It was an exact duplicate of this one?"

"Why, yes, as well as I remember."

"Could this be your dagger?"

Joy started a reply, then hesitated, horrified, before catching a warning glance from Harthorne. Switching to a mood of denial, Joy caught herself again and stammered:

"It--it shouldn't be, but it might. I really--in fact I'm not able to say. They were both just daggers, that was all--stage properties, you know. Nobody would take them seriously."

"Somebody did, with this one."

Grimly, Weston replaced the dagger on the table, looked over the group, and turned to Cardona. The commissioner could read the inspector's poker-face simply because Cardona would have relaxed it if he'd wanted to give a special bit of advice. Beyond Cardona was Cranston, his face even more inscrutable, which meant that he was merely letting the commissioner make up his own mind.

Weston's decision was as prompt as it was surprising. With a husk wave of dismissal, he announced:

"That's all. You can all go, but be on call. Keep Mr. Harthorne posted as to your whereabouts. We'll summon you as wanted. Meanwhile, we'll quiz the stage hands and the chorus girls. Some of them may know more about this murder than any of you."

It was as though the law had given up all effort toward cracking this unsolved crime, but Weston certainly could not have stopped at this point. Perhaps his inspiration came from the great shapeless coil of rope that still lay near the shattered floor at the side of the stage.

Given enough rope, a murderer would hang himself, maybe.

In this case, maybe not.

XII.

THAT able newspaper reporter, Clyde Burke, was taking note of everything that Lamont Cranston gave him across the table in the little restaurant.

They often got together there, because the reporter was actually an agent of The Shadow. He could plant the news that his chief thought best. As he made his notes, Clyde kept grinning sidelong at Margo Lane. Margo still couldn't get it, meaning Weston's policy of letting five suspects go scot-free. Noting Margo's puzzlement, Cranston gave an explanation that made it all the more baffling.

"This is off the record. Burke." began Cranston. Then, to Margo: "You see the commissioner had it planned beforehand."

"What planned?" echoed Margo. "Vera's murder?"

"Of course not. He simply planned to keep the suspects under surveillance, not in custody."

"Then he knew Vera was going to be murdered!"

"Wrong again." Cranston's cryptic expression relaxed. "The commissioner already had most of those persons listed as suspects in the attempted kidnapping of Joy Trevoise. That's why he went to the theater to quiz them."

Affairs true state began to dent Margo.

"Vera Scharn was on the original list," continued Cranston. "She could have been behind that kidnap job, you know. So when Vera was found murdered, Cardona simply removed her name and substituted that of Joy Trevoise."

Margo's ideas were clearing rapidly.

"You mean Joy thought Vera hired that tuxedo crowd?" she exclaimed. "And murdered Vera for revenge?"

"Could be," put in Clyde. "An eye for a tooth is the rule nowadays. Blonde and brunette; diamond cut diamond, and all that sort of stuff."

"Let's drop that phase of it," suggested Cranston. "First, we'll sum Weston's policy. He knows now that somebody isn't fooling, which by his way of reckoning is all the more reason to stick to his plan."

"Only his plan didn't work," declared Margo, "and it's dangerous to leave a murderer at large."

"If he clamped everybody in jail," reminded Cranston, "he'd never pick the killer at all. Weston was working blind in looking for a kidnaper, but he's all set to trap the murderer, because he has a line on the next move."

"You mean there is to be another victim?"

"Apparently there was to have been a victim. That sand bag had a target, didn't it?"

"Why, yes! It dropped straight for Harthorne. Now I see!" Margo's eyes opened wide. "So Weston thinks the murderer will make another try!"

"Exactly. That's why everyone has to report to Harthorne. Whatever protection Harthorne wants, he'll get. What's more, he'll be sworn in to help spring the trap."

The thing struck Margo as being very clever, so clever that she wondered if Cranston had suggested it to Weston. While Margo was recalling that Cranston hadn't spoken to Weston at the theater, Cranston reminded her that she in turn had not given certain details that she had promised.

"That's right!" exclaimed Margo. "I'd forgotten about Vera talking to somebody behind the wings."

Detail by detail, Margo repeated Vera's words: how she had said she was going through with something and that it would be to her advantage to get rid of Joy. Following that, Vera had mentioned working on Alan, but added that she didn't intend to eliminate Harthorne. Pointed statements those, but open to varied interpretations, as Margo realized when she repeated them from memory.

And then:

"Vera said something about Meigs Thurland!" exclaimed Margo. "You know, the famous producer. She said that she was writing him a note; that she'd leave it on her dressing table. What could that mean, Lamont?"

"It could mean almost anything," returned Cranston, "that is, where Thurland is concerned. Specifically, it would indicate that Thurland wanted to buy out Merry Mrs. Macbeth, because he has a habit of liking everybody else's good shows. All this is still off the record, Burke. Just keep jogging Margo's memory while I phone the commissioner."

Margo hadn't remembered anything more when Cranston returned from the phone booth. It was Clyde who asked eagerly:

"Did you get him?"

"You mean Weston?" smiled Cranston. "Of course. He was right where I expected."

"At Harthorne's?"

"Yes. I asked him if he'd found a note in Vera's dressing room and he said no. And speaking of notes, he mentioned something odd. Remember the one that Alan wrote to Joy last night?"

The question was addressed to Margo, who nodded.

"Joy said she threw it in Harthorne's waste basket," continued Cranston, "but he hasn't found it. Naturally, Harthorne believes Joy, but he doesn't believe Alan."

"But if Joy read the note," argued Clyde, "Alan must have written it."

"Harthorne admits that much," explained Cranston. "What he thinks is that Alan reclaimed the note and took it along with him, just so Harthorne couldn't read it. Only Weston doesn't agree."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing specific, but I could guess what was on his mind. He thinks that Alan and Joy faked the whole thing between them."

"Then they're playing Harthorne for a sucker, keeping him all agog so he won't quit backing the show?"

"That's the general idea." Cranston gave a slight, grim smile. "Only it has one flaw. If Weston is right, he's

wrong in thinking either Alan or Joy would try to sand-bag Harthorne. If they did, he wouldn't be their backer any more.

The case was getting quite paradoxical, but Clyde remembered that this was usual when Weston began to theorize.

"Of course there are other suspects," remarked Cranston, "and one of them knew certain plans that Vera was making in regard to Meigs Thurland."

"On account of what Margo overheard," nodded Clyde, "but couldn't that link up with Alan or Joy?"

"Vera spoke about Alan," reminded Cranston, "which means he wasn't there. Margo heard a man's voice answer, so the person couldn't have been Joy."

Questions were popping hard through the individual minds of Margo Lane and Clyde Burke, but the questions were more or less mutual. The list, in a sense, seemed narrowed down to three suspects: Oswald Bodelle, Fred Guylan, Terry Dundee.

To which had Vera spoken and was that man the one who later murdered her?

Had Vera actually been decoyed to the cauldron set or had she merely picked up Joy's note and decided to talk to Alan, only to find the murderer instead?

Who was the murderer--and why? Motives were plenty, but insufficient. Bodelle had promoted Harthorne about as far as he could and was probably through with him, Guylan might be at his wit's end because of the rivalry between Joy and Vera along with the Alan question, all of which traced back to Harthorne. Dundee would do about anything for publicity, but unless he had an ulterior end, he'd certainly stop short of murder.

There certainly must be a new factor, at least in the background. That brought thoughts back to the fresh name that was looming larger in the case: Meigs Thurland.

Maybe Lamont Cranston had that name in mind when he glanced idly at his watch and noted that it was seven o'clock. Remarking that he preferred dinner at eight, Cranston arose and said he'd join Margo in an hour.

Then, in parting, he added:

"By the way, Harthorne intends to cooperate with the police. They're watching his place tonight, but they won't be tomorrow."

Looks of puzzled query came from Clyde and Margo.

"Harthorne is calling a meeting at his apartment tomorrow evening, instead of an afternoon rehearsal at the theater. The police won't be necessary, because there will be enough people to watch each other. You and I are invited"--Cranston had turned to Margo--"so we may as well be there. Don't let me forget, Margo."

As if Lamont would forget!

Margo was beginning to laugh at that one as Cranston strolled away, until she realized that in mentioning tomorrow's appointment, he had sidestepped the fact that he was going somewhere now.

Certainly not to Harthorne's or he would have said so. Glancing at Clyde, Margo saw that the reporter

was sharing her own idea.

Both were of the positive opinion that a gentleman named Meigs Thurland was about to receive a secret visit from a personage called The Shadow!

XIII.

THE ship's clock on Thurland's magnificent desk was clanging six strokes. The sound made Dundee restless. It was bad business, facing Thurland's narrow-slitted eyes, waiting while those slow clangs passed. It gave Thurland time to add more momentum to whatever words he intended to fling.

A pause until the last bell's echo died. Dundee gave a quick glance at the curtained door, wishing he could use that exit right away. Thurland had left it unbolted, indicating that the interview would be brief, but he wasn't letting Dundee leave just yet.

Before Dundee could rise from his chair, Thurland's tone grated heavily.

"Of all the preposterous notions!" spoke Thurland. "Grabbing the girl was bad enough, dropping that sandbag at Harthorne even worse, but you didn't have to murder Vera!"

Dundee spread his hands hopelessly.

"You can't be serious," he returned. "You know I wouldn't go that crazy!"

"No?" Thurland's query was a crisp scoff. "Wasn't it your idea to phone somebody called Louie and speak for Joe?"

Staring nervously at the curtain, Dundee thought he saw it stir, as he had imagined the night before. Rather than let his nerves get the better of him, he gripped he desk and stared back at Thurland.

"Only I didn't make that Louie call," insisted Dundee. "Somebody else must have had the idea. Maybe--"

"Maybe me?" interrupted Thurland. "That's really good. You'll be saying next that I came to the theater and tried that double job today."

"I'd never accuse you, Mr. Thurland--"

"Quite right you wouldn't." Thurland's tone hardened as he leaned back in his chair. "If dropping sand-bags was my specialty. I wouldn't let them miss. If you didn't try it, who did?"

Dundee shook his head in a manner which Thurland didn't consider convincing. Thurland's tone became an encouraging purr.

"I mean tell me who's supposed to take the rap," suggested Thurland, "according to your calculations. The police will certainly blame it on somebody, or didn't you think of that?"

"I swear--"

"Easy, now, or you'll be telling the truth," reminded Thurland. "Stick to your policy, Dundee, but give me some line on the outcome."

"Young Fenway knew about that night club mob," reminded Dundee. "He had good reason to want to get rid of Harthorne. Since Vera didn't like Joy, Alan might have stabbed her."

"Better say did stab her," decided Thurland. "Yes, Alan is a much better fall-guy than either Bodelle or Guylan. Still, I wouldn't overlook their possibilities."

With a nod of quick agreement, Dundee came to his feet and turned toward the curtain. It trembled slightly at his approach, but Terry didn't see it. He was turning at Thurland's harsh tone.

"Not that way!" called Thurland. "You'll visit me openly from now on. Understand?"

Dundee didn't.

"Why shouldn't you come to see me?" demanded Thurland. "Things are going bad with Merry Mrs. Macbeth, aren't they? The leading lady almost kidnapped, her understudy murdered, the money man dodging sand-bags--does the show need a press agent?"

Deciding that it didn't, Dundee shook his head.

"You never even took the job, see?" Down from behind the big desk, Thurland was pouring advice close to Dundee's ear. "You came here to see if I needed a publicity man for any of my shows. I asked you how badly Merry Mrs. was jinxed and you said you guessed Harthorne was through with it. So I'm calling Harthorne to find out."

It was a bold notion, and quite in keeping with the reputation of Meigs Thurland. The amazement which had halted Terry Dundee turned to complete admiration.

"You mean you'll be at Harthorne's conference tomorrow evening?"

"Very probably. I'll see you there, Terry."

As on Dundee's previous visit, Thurland extinguished the desk lamp, but instead of ushering Terry to the bar, he showed him to the door. Not the curtained doorway, but the regular entrance to this innermost of Thurland's private offices. It was too late for any of Thurland's employees to be at work; nevertheless, Thurland went ahead to sidetrack the few who remained, rather than have them see Dundee coming from a place where they hadn't seen him enter.

It was during this interim that the heavy curtain swayed beside the hidden door.

Again a figure glided across the thick plush carpet to Thurland's desk, a form which in that darkened room was far too shadowy to be distinguishable. It reached the desk and placed something there; then made a quick return trip out through the curtained doorway.

When Meigs Thurland returned a few minutes later, he remembered the hidden door and bolted it. Maybe his strange visitor hadn't expected him back so soon, or had supposed that Thurland wouldn't return to his desk. Whatever the case, Thurland discovered something that could logically have been left until the morrow.

Turning on the desk lamp, Thurland reached for the telephone and started to dial Harthorne's number.

He halted when he saw what lay upon the desk, with the telephone serving as a weight. Thurland was viewing a sheaf of papers which were quite different from ordinary documents. These papers had the slight curl and the thickness which marked them as photostatic reproductions of originals.

The telephone laid aside, Thurland was thumbing through these exhibits with a startled manner.

Here indeed were records that pointed straight to crime but planted the evidence in quite the wrong

place.

First were duplicates of Thurland's own penciled notations, made the time of Dundee's first visit, complete even to Thurland favorite doodles. Those were copies of the papers which some shrouded prowler had taken from Thurland's wastebasket.

Highly incriminating, the originals of these, since they covered Thurland's data on costs and possible profits to new investors, along with notes regarding persons in the cast of Merry Mrs. Macbeth, including Vera Scharn in particular.

Safe in his secluded office, Thurland had literally put his thoughts on paper, and what thoughts they were!

Taking over Harthorne's show was bad enough, but Thurland had added ways to do it, including a few jottings on the "Louie" subject. In view of all that had happened since that first night, this evidence marked Thurland as a master mind of a very wrong sort. In fact he could have rated as the one and only brain involved in such trifles as kidnapping and murder.

There were other exhibits amplifying Thurland's own, all duplicates of actual documents. One photostat was that of a note from Alan to Joy, suggesting a rendezvous outside the Club Fiesta at ten o'clock, with Connecticut and marriage as the double goal.

Today's note, the one that Alan had left for Joy but which Vera had received, was not included, since the original was in the hands of the police. But the batch did contain a copy that was even more vital, namely a reproduction of the note that Margo heard Vera say she had written to send to Thurland.

This alone as dynamite.

In no uncertain terms, Vera had accepted Thurland's offer to sabotage Merry Mrs. Macbeth until it reached the salvage point. Her reward was to be the part of Lady Macbeth at a stipulated salary.

Alan's name was mentioned, as was Harthorne's, with Vera's blunt promise to play one against the other by keeping Joy in the middle.

The note was addressed to Meigs Thurland and it was signed by Vera Scharn.

Savagely flinging these papers aside, Thurland stepped from the dais and strode to the corner curtain. Whipping a gun from his pocket, he whisked the curtain aside, only to find a blank door beyond. Throwing the bolt, Thurland returned to the desk and stood there with clenched fists, glaring all about the room, his gun lying in immediate readiness. It was like a challenge to some invisible foe to come and fight bare-handed unless weapons were preferred.

Then, in a fierce, contemptuous tone, Thurland's lips phrased the name:

"The Shadow!"

All Dundee's talk of crime's Nemesis was flooding Thurland's mind. Terry was just fool enough to have led The Shadow here and Thurland was fool enough to let him.

Except that Meigs Thurland was no fool.

That thought was gratifying enough to bring a bitter smile to Thurland's lips. That smile curled downward at the corners, but that only increased its humor. It had been bad business, trusting Dundee, when the fellow had bad connections of which the Louie mob was the upper crust.

Yes, bad business, but Thurland's forte was turning bad business into good--good according to his own peculiar lights.

At least Dundee had warned against The Shadow, otherwise Thurland would have misunderstood this stuff. It was The Shadow's way to warn men of criminal proclivities that he had enough on them to produce absolute ruin. But these papers, gauged in other terms, could be interpreted as something quite apart from justice.

They had all the elements of blackmail.

If somebody wanted Meigs Thurland to cough over a million dollars or sizeable fraction thereof, he couldn't have chosen a better way. Maybe The Shadow knew it but didn't think it made a difference. If so, he didn't know that Thurland made a specialty of dodging boomerangs and letting them ride right back to their dispatchers.

Thurland's dry laugh insinuated that in sending such a warning The Shadow should have addressed it to himself.

Most men would have wondered how to render the originals of these papers null and void. Not so with Meigs Thurland. He was a master at an art called frame. All it needed was a touch. Far from forgetting his plans regarding Harthorne, Thurland was all the more determined to put them into practice.

Reaching for the telephone, Thurland slackened his hand as he heard the bell ring.

A secretary was on the wire, announcing a late visitor named Lamont Cranston. Meigs Thurland said to usher him through to the inner office.

Arriving, Cranston found Thurland at his private bar, offering a genial hand-shake and nodding toward a row of bottles. Declining a drink, Cranston came promptly to business.

"I'm thinking of buying into the Harthorne show," stated Cranston. "I talked with him about it yesterday, but that was before all the trouble."

"Too much trouble," nodded Thurland. "A kidnapping and a death, one right after the other. Those spell hoodoo."

"Then you wouldn't advise the investment?"

"On your part?" Thurland shook his head. "No, it wouldn't be wise--for you."

"You mean it might for someone?"

"Yes. Anyone who has a record for defeating jinxes. There are such people, Mr. Cranston."

"For instance?"

"Myself." Thurland raised his glass in a one-man toast. "I'm going to make a deal with Harthorne. Confidentially, I think I have something that would make him listen."

"Money, of course."

"No, something more than money. Certain facts, dating back before this trouble, all in documentary form. Mind you"--Thurland was studying his glass--"I mean earlier data which may explain a lot of things. I don't have the papers yet, but I expect them tomorrow."

Finishing his drink, Thurland planked his glass on the bar, and gestured out through the big office.

"You'll hear from me tomorrow," he promised, "provided I've acquired what I'm after. Frankly, I may need a partner to meet Harthorne's price, so if you're interested I'll give you first refusal."

Bowing Cranston out, Thurland extended a parting handshake and noted with satisfaction that Cranston's gaze had rested on the large but old-fashioned safe behind the huge desk. With his visitor gone, Thurland sat down at the desk and reached for the telephone to call Harthorne.

While he dialed, Meigs Thurland gave his driest chuckle. He'd met with many bluffs in his time, but none so palpable as Cranston's.

Curiosity was a handicap when it couldn't wait and The Shadow had made a bad mistake in sending Cranston around so soon after delivery of a silent threat.

If The Shadow had sent Cranston.

It might be quite the other way about, or to put it more succinctly, Thurland's two visitors could have been one and the same. The Shadow couldn't always be his mysterious cloaked self. He would need another personality at times.

Maybe it was luck as much as insight, but Meigs Thurland had scored a hit regarding the dual identity of The Shadow. Thurland's next reception wasn't going to be so pleasant the next time Cranston came here.

That went for The Shadow, too!

XIV.

AT five thirty the next afternoon, Meigs Thurland received two late callers: Terry Dundee and Zachary Verne.

This brought a smile from Thurland for it was obvious that Dundee was using Verne as a passport. Good business on Dundee's part, since Verne was the one member of the Merry Mrs. company who had a clean bill where murder was concerned.

Of course Dundee had a reason for bringing Verne. The veteran character actor was worried about whether the show would close before it opened and was humbly hoping to find another job in case of the worst. Thurland obligingly offered him one and made a private appointment with Verne for the next day.

They couldn't stay long, Dundee and Verne, so Thurland supplied a slight head-shake when Terry gave a questioning gaze to know if there was anything important.

"We're going to dine with Mr. Harthorne and Miss Trevoise," announced Verne, rather proudly, as Thurland showed him to the ordinary door. "They've invited us to the Club Fiesta."

"The safest place in town right now." added Dundee. "Nobody dares raise a glass more than shoulder high for fear the cops will think a fight is starting."

Giving a chuckle, Thurland asked:

"Has the old trade all fallen off?"

"No, it's the same," replied Dundee. "what's left of it, as is. Only everybody's keeping quiet, particularly

around the club itself."

That was all Thurland wanted to know. As soon as his visitors were gone, he called the Club Fiesta and asked for Louie. When a gruff voice came to the phone, Thurland promptly answered to the name of Joe and began to talk terms that Louie understood.

Cranston and Margo arrived at the Fiesta shortly after six o'clock and joined Harthorne's party. Soon Cranston remembered a phone call. His call was to Thurland's office and it brought as eager a response as Thurland was even wont to give.

"Look, Cranston," explained Thurland. over the wire. "I have everything that's needed. But I want to sound out Harthorne first and talk to you afterward. You'll be at Harthorne's of course."

"Of course."

"That's good." Thurland's tone sounded relieved. Then, a bit strained, he added: "If anything should detain you, come here afterward. We'll have to come here anyway for our own conference. The office will be open."

When Cranston returned to the table he found Harthorne discussing this evening's plans. Harthorne thrived on self-importance and now that he was working with the police, he had become more unbearable than ever. In fact Harthorne was making tools of everyone, playing them like pieces on a chess board.

Harthorne's present companions were merely the pawns in a larger game and he didn't hesitate at saying so.

"Fenway--Bodelle--Guylan--Dundee"--Harthorne tabulated them on his fingers. "They'll all be at my place at seven thirty for a half hour's conference. And one of them"--Harthorne chuckled deeply as he wagged his fingers--"is a murderer."

Joy Trevoise gave a shudder which she didn't define. Maybe mention of Alan's name had jarred her, or possibly it was just the general idea of meeting a group that contained an unknown killer. There was another point though that did not elude the keen intuition of Lamont Cranston.

Maybe Harthorne was prejudiced in Joy's favor, but the police weren't. Harthorne's unnamed thumb could well have stood for Joy Trevoise.

Apparently Harthorne wanted to show his full trust in Joy as a means of winning the girl's favor further. So he began to outline details of the coming half hour. This was safe enough since Harthorne's other companions were above suspicion and they gave him due attention.

Lamont Cranston with his calm, imperturbable face; Margo eager and almost breathless; Zachary Verne with his grandiose air and distinguished pose, formed an ideal group of listeners.

"No police will be at the apartment," explained Harthorne. "That fact alone will throw the murderer off guard. Maybe he'll be wondering what the conference is all about, but that will be settled when Meigs Thurland arrives."

Cranston's eyebrows lifted as he questioned:

"Meigs Thurland?"

"That's right," acknowledged Harthorne. "I heard from Thurland, saying that he'd like to produce the

show if I had any intention of giving it up. Sort of a one man vote of confidence--and coming from Thurland, it counts."

A stolid hand-shake came from Verne.

"Beware Thurland," ordained Verne in the sepulchral tone he used when playing the ghost. "He is as the Greeks, when they bear gifts."

"Thurland spoke highly of you," remarked Harthorne. "He said a show was bound to be good if you were in it, Zach."

"The truth can be spoken even by a lying tongue," quoted Verne from some unstated source. "In me time, I have played many noble parts"--proudly, Zach thrust his right hand into the bosom of his ruffled shirtfront--"and of me talent I have given much to the fame and fortune of one Meigs Thurland.

"Always, Thurland's door is wide, his arms spread in a welcome, as though he, the kindly son were awaiting the prodigal father, meself. Aye, the son is the father to the man! In me youth I trod the histrionic boards whilst Thurland munched peanuts in the gallery so appropriately named for that particular delicacy."

Harthorne gave an indulgent laugh and even Joy smiled at Verne's dramatic air. It was difficult to tell when Zachary was acting or just fooling, but obviously there was whimsy in his present air. It was Cranston who caught a deeper significance and remarked:

"You can't be much older than Thurland, Verne."

"Actually, I'm younger." On the instant, Verne dropped his Shakespearean manner. "But I've been in the theatrical business twice as long.

"I was at the peak of my career when Thurland gave up driving a garbage truck, which I understand was his zenith too, so far as honest occupation was concerned.

"Here's my advice, Harthorne," Verne raised his hand and wagged his forefinger. "Be nice to Thurland as I have, because it is good policy. But don't let him hire, bribe or cajole you and above all never let him buy you out. If you do, you'll be his vassal or dupe as long as you both live, and men of his type don't know how to die."

Harthorne gave one of his lippy smiles which Cranston readily interpreted. As a master of cajolery and whatever went with it, Harthorne rated high himself and knew it. But Verne's hands were spreading in a plea, as to a last and only friend.

"I'll be on guard against Thurland," promised Harthorne. "Apparently, Verne, you want me to keep the show."

"I do, most ardently."

"You may count on it then," assured Harthorne. He turned to Joy: "You see we owe it to those who have stood by us. And now"--Harthorne was pulling a pencil from his pocket--"let me explain about tonight."

Harthorne's haste, the flourish that he gave the pencil, were by-products of his domineering method. When he didn't want to press a point he changed it and in this case it was obvious that he didn't mean to keep his promise to Verne. Obvious at least to Margo, who therefore knew that it must be the same to Cranston.

Probably Joy was tired of the show and was pouting about it; hence Harthorne had given her a brisk object lesson to prevent an argument in Verne's presence. Now that hurdle was past, for Harthorne was drawing diagrams on the tablecloth, insisting upon full attention.

Verne stretched forward to eye what Harthorne drew. It was always easy to interest Verne, for it was his habit to keep himself young and therefore enthusiastic.

"Here's the floor plan of my apartment," explained Harthorne. "You've been there, Verne, so you'll recognize it."

A nod from Verne.

"Since it's on the ground floor, the windows are barred" continued Harthorne. "The back door opens into the yard, the way with most apartments that have been made over from old mansions. But I keep the back door bolted."

"A wise idea," agreed Verne. "But what about the front door?"

"It has an automatic latch. Once it's closed, no one can return without a key. It opens into the hallway that goes right through the building."

Harthorne indicated those facts in his diagram; then added:

"So you see I'm safe enough, provided I don't let the wrong visitor remain alone with me. I'll see that the right person stays until last. You might be my choice, Verne."

Profoundly, Verne bowed his acknowledgment.

"Of course, Cranston might stay too--"

As he voiced that afterthought, Harthorne turned to see Cranston rising and Margo with him. Cranston gave a nod that was also a bow-out.

"I'll be a trifle late, Harthorne," he said, "so I may stay longer than the rest, particularly as I won't have to attend a rehearsal if you decide on one. Margo will drop by at your place shortly."

During the brief cab ride in which Cranston dropped Margo at her apartment, he explained that he intended to visit Thurland before coming to Harthorne's.

"If I'm really late," added Cranston. "I'll count on you to keep an eye on everyone."

"Along with Verne," nodded Margo. "Like Caesar's wife, he is above suspicion."

"Three flights above," reminded Cranston. "I wish a few others had been up in top tier dressing rooms, or somewhere far enough away to be clear of blame."

"It would be easier," conceded Margo. "There's just no way to clip that list to less than four."

"You mean five," corrected Cranston. "We're not dropping Joy just on Harthorne's say-so."

That ended the discussion, for the call had reached Margo's. Expecting to see Lamont at Harthorne's, Margo waved a casual good-bye. At least all would be well until that meeting.

Margo Lane was wrong again.

XV.

DARKNESS shrouded the Broadway doorway where the stairs led up to Thurland's elaborate offices. A man who liked space, as well as a Broadway address, Thurland had purposely located away from the better lighted areas; nevertheless, the street wasn't too gloomy here.

From across the street, Clyde Burke had been watching constantly; he had seen Meigs Thurland leave a short while before, but no one had entered earlier. The way was clear as Clyde knew The Shadow wanted.

Hence when Shrevvy's cab hauled up in front of Thurland's, Clyde supplied the right signals with a failure-proof cigarette lighter. Those flickers produced results. The cab moved away after a brief halt. Beyond it, Clyde observed an illusion like the fading of the cab's own shadow.

In a sense it was, for The Shadow owned that cab. Blending with the darkness of the doorway, the cloaked investigator was on his way up to Thurland's.

This wasn't the doorway that Terry Dundee had used on his secret visits. That was around the corner and it was much more obscure than this. Almost any stealthy person wearing anything dark could have trailed Dundee by that back route. Here on Broadway it took The Shadow's masterful technique which had just been effectively demonstrated.

Thurland had told Cranston that he would leave the place open and by that, Thurland meant the offices that the public knew about. He hadn't specified if any of the hired help would be around, but it didn't matter.

It wasn't Cranston who was calling, but The Shadow, and the way he picked his route through the various offices leading into Thurland's was something quite uncanny. The desks were deserted, but The Shadow gave them a wide berth, keeping to the gloomy walls of the oversized offices where the lights were insufficient to show an entire room.

Confident that even a hidden watcher couldn't have spied him, The Shadow reached the realm of red plush that was exclusively Thurland's. Crossing the dim expanse, he not only approached the desk but went beyond. The Shadow's objective was that big safe at the very rear of the immense office.

The glow of a tiny flashlight licked the combination. A low laugh sounded from the shapeless gloom that was The Shadow. A deft hand set to work upon the combination, The Shadow's preliminary step to see how early and how much Meigs Thurland had learned about the troubles surrounding the show called Merry Mrs. Macbeth.

Too little and too late were terms that didn't belong in the vocabulary of Meigs Thurland when he began to go after something he wanted.

The Shadow knew that fact, and it was demonstrated for him in very sharp terms.

As the safe door came open, lights flared suddenly from all about the room. When The Shadow spun around into the glare, his gloved fist whipping an automatic from beneath his cloak, he was confronted by a vengeful semicircle of revolvers. Every maroon curtain had been flung aside to reveal men who wore tuxedos with black masks above.

These were the rest of the de luxe crew that answered to the name of Louie. They had been holding themselves in strict abeyance, but hadn't been able to resist Thurland's call when he had stipulated its purpose. These unworthies knew quite well that it was The Shadow who had routed their comrades in

the hinterlands of Central Park.

They were here to gain revenge of the sweetest sort. Trapped with Thurland's open safe behind him, The Shadow was truly framed. His would be the status of a lawbreaker if the police found him here. Thurland could later laugh off those photostats or anything else The Shadow might provide. A ticklish thing to prove blackmail ordinarily, but very easy if other crimes could be pinned upon the perpetrator.

But The Shadow didn't intend to be trapped in any fashion. His own deadly gun was wangling, moving around the semicircle in promise of a quick return shot for the man who fired first. The masked men waited, but gradually their circle was closing.

Less gradual was The Shadow's own move forward in the direction of Thurland's big desk. There The Shadow rested his free hand on the desk itself and eased neatly forward. Another step and that resting hand would whip out a second gun; then, under shelter of the desk itself, he'd show these tux boys that they'd be better off in Central Park where there was more space to scatter.

The click came with The Shadow's final forward step. It was from the dais and it proved why Thurland had constructed that special platform above the floor. Before The Shadow could wheel away, the desk was hinging upward and the platform halving backward.

His hand grip lost, The Shadow could only make a whirling dive for the floor that had whipped from beneath his feat. Below, he saw the yawning pit of an old elevator shaft, clear to the basement, three floors down. Catching the sliding floor, The Shadow was still hanging there as it slithered shut, his other hand making a mad grasp for the descending desk. Then, just as his enemies converged upon him, ready to let rip with their guns, The Shadow lost his hold and disappeared in what seemed a fatal plunge, just as the desk settled soundly on the thick-carpeted platform that slicked in to receive it.

Things were much more peaceful over at Harthorne's apartment.

Meigs Thurland was being introduced to a group of people quite as sinister as the band that he had hired to ensnare The Shadow. In this circle, however, the threat was veiled, confined to a single individual as yet unidentified. Thurland was meeting a murderer--but the problem was to pick him out.

Along with Howard Harthorne, the near victim, Thurland eliminated Zachary Verne, the one man with a perfect alibi at the time when Vera Scharn was slain. Nor did Thurland glance askance at Terry Dundee, his own tool in the game.

Alan Fenway, Oswald Bodelle, and Fred Guylan were the three who bothered Thurland on the chance that one might turn his murderous intentions toward anyone who took over the show. A nervous young actor, a bluff-faced promoter, a rabbitly playwright--none looked formidable.

But Thurland didn't go on appearances. What he feared was fanaticism, and he had met plenty in his time.

As for Joy Trevoise, Thurland didn't give her a second thought. Joy was chatting in an isolated corner with Margo Lane, and the pair merely helped decorate the apartment. Their conversation, however, had bearing on the present situation.

"This place is really a trap," Joy was confiding to Margo. "Howie told me all about it."

"A trap?"

"Yes. The police are ready in case of any trouble."

"What police?" queried Margo. "I didn't see any."

"Of course not, silly. You don't think they'd show themselves do you?"

"They usually do. What's more, they simply love to blow sirens to tell crooks that they're coming."

"But they're already here. Inspector Cardona is in the apartment right over this. There are two detectives down in the basement."

"Right on call, aren't they?"

"Absolutely. There are some across the street, but they're keeping well out of sight. Of course there are others out in the back alley, behind the fence."

Margo glanced at the front windows when Joy mentioned the street, but the shades were drawn. However, remembering how dark the street was, Margo wasn't surprised that she hadn't spotted the lurking officers. In their turn, they couldn't hope to recognize anyone leaving the apartment house, but that wouldn't matter.

The man they wanted--if he intended to attempt another murder--would be the man who remained last!

This was news for Lamont, if only he would get here. Unless he already had heard of the police measures from his friend Commissioner Weston. Margo simply relaxed and waited.

They were playing cagey, Thurland and Harthorne. Very polite, but somewhat at odds. Thurland didn't want to buy the show and Harthorne didn't want to sell it; yet from the way they spoke, their remarks could be interpreted as veiled hints that their minds could be changed under proper persuasion.

At length Thurland offered a proposal.

"Suppose I see a rehearsal, just a few scenes involving the principals. The evening is young, couldn't we go over to the theater shortly?"

Harthorne gestured to the group and smilingly said:

"Take them."

"I'll meet them there later," suggested Thurland, glancing at his watch. "I'm expecting a call from my office, so I ought to wait a while. That will give them time to get ready."

Harthorne's smile showed that he had been ready to broach the same idea. As a "last man" Thurland was the perfect choice. Joy recognized that and gave Margo a wise nod, but Margo didn't notice it. She was wondering about that call from the office on the chance that it might concern Lamont.

It did concern Cranston, or more specifically The Shadow, in a far more desperate fashion than Margo could suppose. If she'd realized what had already happened in Thurland's luxurious office, Margo would have rushed upstairs to shriek the news of disaster to the watchful Joe Cardona.

Yet serious though The Shadow's plight might have been, it was matched by the situation here at Harthorne's. Within the next few minutes, murderous moves would be under way, so slowly and insidiously that only that absent master, The Shadow, could have detected them!

XVI.

TALK of rehearsal calling for another drink, Joy went out to the kitchen to fill the glasses, and Margo

went with her. There, while they prepared the final round, Margo took a look at the back door which Harthorne had mentioned. It was a perfectly normal door, bolted on the inside, the sort that could be smashed down, but not in a hurry.

Like the barred windows the door was certainly strong enough to repel any invasion before the police could arrive, so Margo dismissed the door as a mere detail. Noting Margo's glance, Joy gave a light laugh.

"Don't worry about anything," declared Joy. "The police searched the place and inspected it before we arrived here. No lurkers, no prowlers--that's their motto."

Carrying three glasses, Joy started out to the living room and Margo brought another pair. As the girls arrived in the living room, Zachary Verne courteously helped them serve and offered to bring in the remaining drinks. By the time Verne came from the kitchen with the rest of the glasses, Margo learned that the special rehearsal was scheduled to take place in half an hour.

Nobody had any objections except Verne, who was fishing in his pocket for one of his favorite cigars and finding that he had none.

"I may be a trifle late," declared Verne, "I was going to my hotel, but it's quite a way up town. Can't rehearse, you know, without a few smokes in between, and I can only buy my specials at the tobacco stand in my hotel."

"If you start now," suggested Harthorne. "you won't be late."

As he spoke, Harthorne gave Verne a knowing look, accompanied by a side-nudge toward Thurland. The look told Verne that Harthorne was using Thurland for the scapegoat, if he could be called such. A bit of pleasantries, but another proof of Harthorne's subtle ways. He was intimating that he was keeping Thurland here, just to make it useless for a murderer to stay around, easing Verne's mind of any notion that Harthorne might be selling out to the pinch-penny producer.

Margo wasn't quite sure that the bluff convinced Verne; however, the character actor bowed out in his usual dramatic style.

Several minutes passed before Bodelle finished his drink and gestured to Guylan.

"Come on, Fred," said Bodelle. "You'll have to stop off for your script and I'll pick up the figure sheets just in case Mr. Thurland wants to see them."

As soon as those two were gone, Terry Dundee became uneasy. Looking back and forth from Thurland to Harthorne, he was wondering with which he ought to side in the case of any transaction, provided of course that Dundee hadn't something more insidious on his mind. His gaze finally drifting to Joy, Dundee had a bright idea.

"Come along, Miss Trevoise," he said, "and I'll take you to the theater. I guess nobody will mind."

Dundee meant Alan and Harthorne, those arch-rivals for Joy's affections. It was a neat notion, because neither of those two could object without an argument from the other. Joy asked Margo if she wanted to accompany them, but Margo reminded her that Cranston was still expected.

Joy left with Dundee.

A few minutes later, Thurland's call came through.

From the moment Thurland answered the phone, Margo disliked his smug look. His conversation, too, was annoying.

"He is?" queried Thurland. "Well, he can wait... Why not? The longer the better... You say he may feel hurt about it?... All right, it's his own fault... be there when I get around to it..."

Alan Fenway wasn't paying much attention to the phone call. His eyes were watching Harthorne and getting a cold look in return. As Thurland finished his call, Alan came abruptly to his feet.

"I'll let you two settle your business, whatever it is," decided Alan. "Cranston can be the referee when he gets here. Come along, Margo. We're not needed."

Alan's heated words brought a doubtful look from Thurland. Rather than add fuel to the argument, he decided to postpone any business.

"I'd better see the rehearsal first," Thurland told Harthorne, "and talk business afterward."

Since Alan was leaving, too, Harthorne decided to agree. Alan ushered Margo out into the hall and toward the front door, but paused half way and strode back again. From the front door, Margo saw Thurland make his exit and pause to let Alan catch Thurland's door as it was swinging shut.

"And one thing, Harthorne!" Margo could hear Alan bawl this back. "If you're selling out the show, don't think I'm sorry. I'd like to be around though, when you break the news to Joy."

On a sudden impulse, Margo turned and reached the stairs that led up to the second floor. She heard Harthorne's door slam shut and caught the sound of separate footfalls going out the front way. Margo took the heavier for Thurland's, the quicker for Alan's. Then, around the top of the stairway, she was knocking lightly at the door of the second floor apartment.

Inspector Cardona answered in shirt sleeves and gave Margo a very stolid look.

"Who told you I was up here?"

"Joy did," replied Margo. "I thought you ought to know that they've all left downstairs."

"Nice of you," gruffed Joe. "So what?"

"Well, Lamont didn't get here," explained Margo, "so there's no sense in my waiting. It might confuse you if anybody else came in."

"Thanks, but if they do, they'll have to ring. Harthorne won't answer if he's alone. What's more, he's making sure his door is latched. Why did everybody go so soon?"

"They're holding a rehearsal," informed Margo, "so they won't be back. I didn't want you to waste a lot of time and besides--"

"Never mind, I won't." Cardona reached for his coat. "Come on down and we'll chat with Harthorne until Cranston gets here."

Margo decided to spring her "besides" later. She was going to tell Cardona about that phone call that came to Thurland, along with her growing suspicion that it might involve Lamont in some serious way. Somehow, though, the notion was becoming very foolish now that Margo had let it cool a while.

Reaching for his coat, Cardona paused and tilted his head.

"Hear that?"

Margo hadn't.

"Sounded like Harthorne's door." remarked Cardona, "but I guess I'm wrong. Unless he's coming up here himself."

A brief pause, then Cardona led the way along to the stairs, around the top and down. He glared at the outer door at the front of the lower hallway; then shrugged, as though deciding he hadn't seen it close, an illusion which struck Margo, too. At the bottom, Cardona turned toward the rear, reached Harthorne's door and gave a series of raps that sounded like a set signal.

Harthorne didn't answer, even after Joe's second repeat. Fishing in his pocket, the inspector drew out a duplicate key and unlocked the door.

For the first time, Margo noted worry on Cardona's swarthy face. He was a smart hand at hunches, this stocky police inspector, and maybe he was playing one right now.

Cardona was.

As he strode across Harthorne's threshold and into the living room, Cardona stopped so short that Margo took a side-step past him before he could throw out a hand to ward her back.

It wasn't nice to look at, the figure in the center of the floor.

The figure was Harthorne's, sprawled face down, and his bulky form was motionless.

Projecting from the middle of Harthorne's back was a dagger handle belonging to a long-bladed, sharp-pointed weapon. The handle itself revealed that fact because it was a replica of the dirk that had murdered Vera Scharn, the dagger that police had not yet defined as Vera's or the one that had been stolen from Joy Trevoise.

The dagger in Harthorne's back was the missing duplicate. Like its twin, it had lived up to its reputation of delivering death, in a style befitting the murderer name of Macbeth!

XVII.

WHEN Meigs Thurland opened the secret door of his office and pressed aside the curtain, a group of waiting men relaxed. No longer were they wearing masks, these members of the tuxedo tribe, but they still clutched their guns.

It was policy for Thurland to appear surprised. One man promptly spoke for the rest.

"Lucky we dropped around," the fellow said. "Somebody was robbing your safe, Mr. Thurland."

Thurland faked an amazed stare; then frowned slightly at sight of the guns. The leader gestured for his pals to put them away. Then:

"Guess you won't need them," the chief Louie continued. "That trick floor of yours dropped the guy right through. Maybe you'd better look him over."

Thurland went to the big desk and reached for it from the floor beside the platform. He gave the desk an upward tilt which required practically no effort and the platform slithered apart. None of the grinning witnesses thought anything of the fact that Thurland leaned forward to look down into the pit.

What puzzled them was why Thurland leaned so long. It was partly explained when he gave a gargled cry.

Flaying wildly with his hands Thurland reeled back from the gap. Coming with him was a figure half-cloaked in black, a thin, elongated shape that looked like The Shadow's ghost!

It wasn't until The Shadow flung Thurland half across the floor that the onlookers realized that the apparition was solid. From the wrench that The Shadow gave his cloak, they understood why the bottom of the shaft hadn't finished him.

The Shadow hadn't completed what should have been his death plunge.

In slapping shut, the halves of the platform had clipped The Shadow's cloak when he made his heroic effort to stay his fall. The cloak had ripped up the middle, but only as far as the collar. Hanging by a double length, The Shadow had worked himself up to the sliding trap and gained a hold on the braces underneath.

From then on it had been a case of retaining that perch until Thurland returned to have a look at a victim who had chosen his own fate. Thurland had gained his look and the victim, too, but things were operating in reverse.

In the dimmed lights of the maroon room, The Shadow was a composite of himself and Cranston, but quite as formidable as ever. He'd lost one gun, but still had the one he hadn't drawn, and it was more than enough.

Indiscriminate blasts from that husky automatic sent Thurland's tuxedoed hirelings dodging for exits in a typically cowardly style. They'd put away their own guns, and each man knew The Shadow would devote his chief attention to the first man who tried to draw.

It was a long way out from Thurland's by whichever route the fleeing men preferred, but they didn't stop their flight. Perhaps they didn't realize that the sound of The Shadow's fusillade carried ahead of them and that in this part of Manhattan, such a prolonged gunfire would bring police in no time.

Just to make sure that the banished opposition would be properly intercepted, The Shadow picked up Thurland's telephone and phoned Burbank, his contact man, to relay the facts to police headquarters.

What The Shadow learned from Burbank made the recent episode turn tame.

Striding to where Thurland lay moaning, with his hands clutching his half-throttled throat, The Shadow yanked the biggest coward to his feet and spoke demands in a sharp whisper that increased Thurland's quakes.

What The Shadow wanted were facts pertaining to the recent murder of Howard Harthorne.

Eyes bulging, mouth agape, Thurland could only shake his head. Numbering Harthorne among the dead was almost as incredible as finding The Shadow among the living.

"I--I was the last to leave," gulped Thurland. "I didn't kill Harthorne--because----why should I?"

The Shadow's laugh was taunting, a reminder that Thurland hadn't hesitated at attempting murder on his own home grounds. Thurland caught the idea.

"It was different here," Thurland whined. "You walked into something which made it your own fault. Besides, the thing it was all about--Well, I blamed you for it--not Harthorne. He wasn't trying

blackmail."

With one weak hand, Thurland made a gesture toward the open safe, with its contents still to be inspected by The Shadow. Flinging Thurland back on the floor, The Shadow sidestepped the trick platform, dug into the safe and soon found the photostats to which Thurland referred.

They were all the documents that Thurland had. His talk of prior data was entirely a bluff. He was admitting so, in a wheezy sort of way, that ended in a whimper when The Shadow laughed again.

Thurland didn't get the significance of that whispered mirth. It covered something The Shadow knew and Thurland didn't.

His cloak draped about him, The Shadow approached Thurland again, and the deflated conspirator shrank away. Thurland had become a very small peanut rattling in its shell and only hoped that he could dwindle to even less size in importance.

"I wasn't exactly the last to leave," recalled Thurland, plaintively. "Young Fenway stopped to say something to Harthorne. Maybe he--"

"The details, Thurland," interposed The Shadow, "and make them accurate."

"Well, first Verne left, to buy cigars at his hotel," said Thurland. "Then Bodelle and Guylan went out together. Dundee took Joy with him, and finally there was Alan and myself."

"No others?"

"The Lane girl was there," replied Thurland, "but Cranston hadn't arrived. I guess maybe he's there by now."

Nice business on Thurland's part, disassociating The Shadow and Lamont Cranston. It won him something of a respite that he didn't deserve, that and the fact that Thurland rated as a material witness in a new case of murder. Instead of commending Thurland, however, The Shadow dragged him to his feet, backed him toward the platform and braced him there.

Covering Thurland with an empty automatic, The Shadow ordered:

"Go to the Half Moon Theatre. Be there for the coming rehearsal. Answer all questions truthfully. If you prefer not to go there, you have another choice--"

The Shadow completed the statement with a slight lift of the desk. Already sagging back from the gun muzzle, Thurland knew what the alternative would be. He had no cloak to catch in his own trick floor. Thurland panted:

"I'll go!"

Calmly, The Shadow ushered Thurland to the secret exit which some of the fleeing crooks had used. There, Thurland voiced a final plea.

"If you hadn't trailed Dundee through here," he argued, "I wouldn't have been mixed in all this. Not that I'm blaming you"--Thurland was quick with his apologetic whine--"I'm just telling you that I thought I was framed and I wanted a way out."

The Shadow pointed the way out, with a gun muzzle which brooked no further argument, loaded or un-loaded. With a nod that promised full co-operation, Thurland turned and moved shakily along his

route.

There was a strange tone in the laugh that urged Thurland on his way, only to be clipped short when The Shadow closed the curtained door.

Meigs Thurland didn't understand that mirth. It meant that there were things The Shadow hadn't known which he now knew.

XVIII.

COMMISSIONER WESTON was quite baffled.

That wasn't unusual, but at present Weston's mood was justified. Even Cranston looked that way as he stood in Harthorne's living room.

"If you'd only been here, Cranston--"

"Sorry I wasn't, Commissioner," interposed Cranston calmly. "This wouldn't have happened if I had been. But I was detained by something very pressing."

A good description of the halves of Thurland's platform trap and the life grip they had held upon The Shadow's cloak!

"This doesn't make sense," put in Cardona, grimly, as though arguing that he had a right to be baffled even if Weston hadn't. "Nobody was hidden in the place; we're sure of that. The back door is still bolted and nobody tampered with the front door latch. Only you can't tell me that Harthorne stabbed himself in the back!"

"Some suicides are singular," began Weston. "Now if--"

"There's no 'if' in this case," interrupted Cranston. "Harthorne was murdered."

"But by whom?"

"By whoever murdered Vera Scharn."

"Alan Fenway, then. He was the last person here."

"Only Margo heard him close the door," reminded Cranston, "and we can be quite sure that Harthorne wouldn't have let him in again. Of course it could have been Alan--"

"But you just said it couldn't."

"A misquotation, Commissioner. When I say it could have been Alan, I mean in another way."

This was too much for Weston.

"What other way is there?" he demanded. "If Harthorne didn't let the murderer in, who did?"

"The murderer," returned Cranston, calmly. "Suppose we go over to the Half Moon Theatre and check a few alibis. I hope enough people have them."

"Enough people?"

"Of course. So we can cut down the list of suspects, preferably to one. I have a theory, Commissioner, which may fit the facts."

Ready to take a chance on anything, Weston ordered a prompt trip to the Half Moon. All during the ride, Margo Lane kept wondering why Cranston had been delayed. Even if he'd been at Thurland's office, he should have arrived sooner. Just as they neared the theater, Margo broached that question.

"What kept you, Lamont?"

"I had to stop off to see someone," replied Cranston. "At the Maywood Hotel. Ever hear of it. Margo?"

"Why, yes. A long way uptown isn't it?"

Cranston nodded as though that settled it.

In the theater, they found rehearsal feebly under way with Meigs Thurland sitting in a box, saying nothing and looking very worried. Halting the rehearsal, such as it was, Weston bluntly explained the facts of Harthorne's death. He received aghast stares from people who didn't even know that the man who backed the show was dead.

The link with Vera's murder drove home fast.

"You can't blame me for this!" exclaimed Alan, suddenly. "I wasn't the last person to leave Harthorne's apartment. Thurland was!"

Pointing accusingly to the theater box, Alan received a headshake and a spread of hands.

"You talked to Harthorne after I did." Thurland reminded plaintively. "Mind you"--this was added hastily--"I'm not saying you could have done it--"

"Because you know I couldn't have!" interrupted Alan. "Harthorne was in the living room when I shouted at him. I couldn't have hit him with a dagger if I'd thrown one. Anyway, you'd have seen me."

Thurland gave a nod.

"And we took the same cab," added Alan. "Right here to the theater, because it was on your way. They saw me arrive."

Alan gestured to Bodelle and Guylan, who nodded in unison.

"We stuck together all along," declared Bodelle, referring to himself and Guylan. "Didn't we, Fred?"

"We did," returned Guylan, hastily. "Neither of us could have gone back to Harthorne's."

"Same with me," put in Dundee, who was standing by. "I couldn't have done it, even if Harthorne had invited me in and asked me to stab him. Why? Because I came straight here. Ask her"--he gestured to Joy--"because she knows."

"We did arrive together," agreed Joy. "Of course I stopped off at my place, but not more than ten minutes."

"And it would have taken longer than that to get back to Harthorne's," reminded Dundee. "To say nothing of getting back again. All I did was sit in the cab and chat with the driver while the meter ran up the fare."

More baffled than ever, Weston turned appealingly to Cranston, putting the question:

"What about your theory?"

"It still stands, Commissioner."

"But you base it on the idea that somebody returned to Harthorne's."

Cranston nodded.

"Then there is collusion," argued Weston. "Two of these people must be working together."

"Let's have an impartial verdict on that point." Cranston turned to Zachary Verne. "What would you say? Have you noted any plotting going on back stage, Verne?"

"There could have been," Verne replied, "but I can't say I saw it."

"What about tonight? Did any pair of people behave suspiciously when they arrived here?"

"I couldn't say that either. I was about the last to get here because I went uptown to my hotel on the way."

Remembering his special cigars, Verne drew some from his pocket and offered them around, finding only Cranston as a taker.

"I suppose," remarked Verne, "that in looking for Harthorne's murderer, you're still trying to find the person who killed Vera Scharn."

"That's really the whole idea," agreed Cranston. "It's a helpful thought, Verne." He turned to Weston. "Let's reconstruct the scene of Vera's death, Commissioner. We'll have it set when I give my theory on Harthorne and you can see how the two tally."

Weston couldn't do much but agree.

"Here's where Harthorne's chair was." Cranston planted another chair on a square of new flooring, then looked upward. "And I see they've arranged a new rigging for the cauldron set."

Striding back to the rear wing, Cranston worked it aside and revealed the witches den beyond. As before, the rope was attached to the floor cleat awaiting a future test. Looking up along the line of the rope, Cranston followed it over the pair of pulleys to a heavy sand-bag hanging above the chair that he had just placed.

"Just as it was," remarked Cranston. "Only we'll leave the wing out of the way so we can see back here. Now suppose you all place yourselves exactly where you were."

Alan and Joy went to their dressing rooms. Guylan headed for the ramparts of the castle that was still set in the center of the stage. Bodelle halted doubtfully near one of the front wings, as though trying to recollect just where he had been. Dundee walked past the switchboard, over to an obscure corner where the back stage telephone was located.

To complete the picture, Zachary Verne turned to the stairs that led to the upper dressing rooms. Cranston called him back, deciding that the climb wasn't necessary.

"You were completely out of it, Verne," stated Cranston, "so we'll let you play the part of Harthorne since he is no longer able to fill it. Sit there in the director's chair."

Verne nodded and obliged.

"Now we need someone for Vera Scharn," decided Cranston. "You'll do, Margo. Step over by the

cauldron."

Although the witches lair was now in open view, Margo shuddered as she reached it. The place had given her the creeps before Vera's death and subsequent events had increased Margo's dread of the surroundings. Under shelter of the immense cauldron, she felt as though anything might come creeping out of it, maybe a lurking killer!

Still, that couldn't happen. The police had searched the cauldron the night of Vera's death and now every possible suspect was in full view under close watch by Commissioner Weston, Inspector Cardona and detectives who had come here with them.

To say nothing of Lamont Cranston.

He was superb in his present character, this man who had so recently shed the garb of The Shadow. Cranston's nonchalance created a suspense that made nerves as taut as the rope that reared beside him. Drawn tight by the quarter-ton weight beyond the forward pulley, the rope was almost as rigid as a pole. Leaning casually against that support, Cranston lighted the cigar that Verne had given him. Then:

"Suppose I give my theory regarding Harthorne's death," suggested Cranston. "It's better to crack the more obvious case first; then get back to Vera's death."

Breathlessly the group waited, each person as tense as though he or she expected the accusation. Of the two riddles which Cranston promised to solve in turn, there seemed no choice, for both had the elements of perfect crimes. But lest his listeners forget, Cranston reminded them of a third.

"About Clabb," remarked Cranston. "We have reasoned how he was murdered in a sealed phone booth and we know that the motive was simply to cover future crime. We still have the question: Who killed Clabb?"

"That question will answer itself after I analyze the ingenious measures used in murdering Vera Scharn and Howard Harthorne. You will recognize that only the same twisted mind could have planned the prelude to those later crimes."

Cranston's statement, though heard by all, was actually addressed to the master criminal who had thrice pitted his wits against the brain of The Shadow!

XIX.

TURNING first to Inspector Cardona, Cranston began with a partial commendation of the plan which had been used for Harthorne's protection.

"It was an excellent idea to be on call at Harthorne's," stated Cranston. "Apparently you tallied on the number of people who came there. The trouble was"--Cranston studied a puff of cigar smoke before adding this criticism--"you didn't count how many went out."

That puzzled Cardona all the more until he remembered his impression of Harthorne's closing door some minutes after the last man's departure. Whether Alan or Thurland rated as the "last man" didn't matter if somebody else had left the apartment later.

But who--and how?

Cranston took a long draw on the cigar, then answered the technical phases of Cardona's mental questions.

"Harthorne's apartment was foolproof when the visitors arrived," conceded Cranston, "but any one of his guests could have nullified certain precautions from the inside. Take the back door for instance--"

Lowering his cigar, Cranston waited for Cardona to take it from there and Joe did.

"The back door was bolted," affirmed Cardona. "I checked it when I left Harthorne alive, and I did the same after I found him dead."

"But not during the interval between."

"How could I? I wasn't there."

"Other people were, Inspector."

That shot rang home to Cardona.

"Now I get it!" Joe flashed a look around the group. "Somebody unbolted that door before leaving the apartment, so as to come back again!"

"Which the murderer did," supplied Cranston, "after the others had left. All the others, Inspector."

"Wait now." Cardona was stroking his chin. "It wasn't that easy, Mr. Cranston. My men out front couldn't tell who was who, but they did keep count."

"Of the total that left?"

Cardona nodded. Then:

"And if somebody had gone around the block to double in the back," Joe added, "he'd have been spotted by the men in the back alley, behind the fence."

"It wasn't necessary to go around," reminded Cranston. He paused to raise his cigar and give it three strong puffs so that its end glowed like a crimson eye. "The lower hallway runs right through the building, doesn't it?"

"It does," gruffed Cardona, "and I was too dumb to think about it. Whoever killed Harthorne only had to sneak through that hall and in by the back door."

"Which he bolted again," added Cranston, letting his hand drop with the cigar. "The murderer was then set to stab Harthorne with the duplicate knife and go out by the front door, latching it behind him."

Something was burning, and Margo noticed it. She could smell smoke, and she suddenly realized that it must come from Cranston's cigar. Apparently there was a proportion of hemp in the special brand that Verne preferred.

"Eight people entered Harthorne's apartment," Cranston was making a mental tally. "But nine came out. You should have had an electric eye to clock them, Inspector. Of course when I say nine, I'm counting one twice. Our question is which one."

Lifting the cigar, Cranston took another draw and his impassive face masked the wince that would have belied his next statement.

"An excellent cigar, Verne," commended Cranston. "A Maywood Special, I see from the band."

Shifting uneasily in his chair, Verne nodded.

"They only sell them at my hotel," he explained. "The Maywood. I buy them at the tobacco counter there."

"When did you buy this one?"

"After I left Harthorne's. I was out of cigars so I went to the hotel--"

"And found the counter closed," interposed Cranston, "like I did when I went there later. It closes early certain evenings, or didn't you remember?"

Verne's own cigar dropped from his hand unfinished. He stooped for it, then stamped it angrily with his foot and reared back in his chair, his arms folded in the style of the true tragedian.

"Would that me good friend Harthorne still lived," declaimed Verne, "or that his ghost, like the apparition which I myself portray, could rise from yon castle walls and strike down me foul accusers!"

Glaring about the group as though he regarded them as conspirators, Verne raised one hand and flung dramatic gestures at each in turn.

"The real culprit stands before you!" stormed Verne, eliminating himself by the fact that he was still sitting down. "Granting merit to your absurd theory, it would apply to any others rather than meself!"

"Not quite," corrected Cranston. "Tonight they all have alibis covering the time they left Harthorne's. In framing your own, the alibi that missed, you had to take chances on the others."

Folding his arms again, Verne faced Cranston and delivered his best Shakespearean sneer.

"What alibis do they have?" demanded Verne. "The word of suspected murderers, delivered each unto each. Bodelle says he was with Guylan; Joy claims she came here with Dundee; Alan and Thurland were together--"

"Which covers all cases." inserted Cranston. "All were suspects but there was only one culprit. Each had one supreme desire, to expose the murderer in order to clear his own name. Every alibi is mutual and will stand. Yours is the lone exception, Verne."

Staring haughtily, Verne tried another tack.

"Why should I have killed Harthorne?" he queried. "Why should I be marked for history as a criminal without a motive?"

"You had a motive, Verne," accused Cranston. "It was blackmail. Not against Harthorne, but Thurland. From the time you first followed Dundee to Thurland's office, you worked on that plan."

From the theater box, Thurland stared amazed. He was gaining a new light on the secret visitor who had trailed Dundee and later planted those photostatic records on the desk. This hadn't been a warning from The Shadow with a loophole allowing its interpretation as a blackmail threat.

It had been the actual article, the blackmail itself. It was Verne's rattle before he struck. He'd wanted Thurland to stay out of Harthorne's business and pay for the privilege.

Mistaking the threat, Thurland had moved into matters, forcing Verne to involve him further.

To murder Harthorne before he could sell out, was the shrewdest stroke that Verne could play. He had expected the blame to fall on one or more of those who were already blamed for Vera's death, if not on Thurland himself. In any event, Thurland would have paid--and plenty--for the original documents that

linked him to the game.

Yet Zachary Verne sat unperturbed, confident that his schemes would remain unproven. Cranston's crack-down of the Harthorne murder was based on circumstantial evidence only. The same applied to Vera's death. Unless the two were linked, the case against Verne stood incomplete.

And Zachary Verne was the last person who could be blamed for the murder of Vera Scharn--if at all!

That was the thought in all minds except Cranston's. His insight, The Shadow's own, told him that Verne must have disposed of Vera because she knew too much and wouldn't play along. She'd have preferred to ruin Merry Mrs. Macbeth and be rewarded for helping Thurland buy it cheap, rather than aid Verne's grander but more hazardous enterprise of blackmail.

It was easy to picture Verne switching the note that Alan had left for Joy so Vera would receive it and walk into a trap. Simple too, for Verne to have stolen Vera's own note to Thurland which she had promised to leave on her dressing table after the conversation with Verne that Margo had overheard. Taking the extra dagger that belonged to Joy was also within Verne's province.

Everything fitted Verne to perfection except the perfect crime itself.

Granted that Verne wanted to kill both Harthorne and Vera, how could he have stabbed the girl and slashed the rope releasing the deadly sandbag at the very time when he was making up to play the ghost in a dressing room three floors above the stage?

Only The Shadow could supply the answer, now that he had indelibly identified Verne with crime.

XX.

TURNING from beside the upright rope, Cranston gave Margo a glare that horrified her until she realized the parts they each were playing.

Already Margo had been slated to represent Vera Scharn, now Cranston was impersonating Zachary Verne. Words weren't needed to proclaim the latter fact; Cranston's dramatic hand-thrust to his shirt-front was a perfect imitation of Verne's pet gesture.

"The scene is set," declared Cranston. "In my hand I have the dagger which belongs to Lady Macbeth. And this version of Lady Macbeth--Vera Scharn--has come without her own, because I, Zachary Verne have stolen it along with the other that belongs to Joy Trevoise!"

Out came Cranston's hand and upward, while Margo, playing Vera's part, raised her hands in warding horror, only to receive a pantomimed downsweep of Cranston's imaginary blade. Lowering his hand, relaxing it, Cranston watched Margo coil to the floor beside the cauldron.

Then, stooping forward, he pretended to wrench a knife from the body of the girl who was imitating Vera's death.

Turning to the rooted persons who represented a dumbstruck audience, Cranston pretended to weigh the death knife that he didn't hold. Then, with a gesture toward the chair where Verne was seated, Cranston added:

"Out there sits Howard Harthorne, hidden by the wing that has concealed this crime. His death would suit my schemes and there is a way to consummate it. One slash of this knife"--up came Cranston's hand--"against this rope and a quarter ton of murder will be released!"

His right side toward Verne, Cranston paused and stared across his shoulder, keeping his eyes fixed on Verne.

"Why should I slay Harthorne?" he questioned. "How will it further my present plans? Remember, I still may have some use for Harthorne"--Cranston's shoulder gave a careless shrug--"but no, he is not of great importance. His death will neither help nor hinder the scenes of Zachary Verne--not yet."

A cunning glare expressed itself upon Cranston's usually impassive features. Silent watchers were witnessing a facial portrayal of the thoughts within a murderer's mind, rendered by a master actor whose style could rouse even Verne's envy. Forgetting that he was supposed to be playing Harthorne, Verne leaned forward in his chair, returning Cranston's glare as though resenting this representation of himself.

"What is even more important"--Cranston's sneer carried Verne's own note--"is that I should alibi myself for a murder just done. I should be up there in my own dressing room, not here below, beside my victim."

Cranston's use of "me" instead of "my" was the final touch of satire. Nevertheless, Verne managed to pull himself into control, by turning half about in his chair. Verne's right hand was digging deep into his coat, for more than a dramatic reason.

"Out there is Harthorne." Using his own tone again, Cranston pointed to Verne. "Above him"--a finger pointed upward--"is the sandbag. Along there, the rope"--Cranston ran his hand backward, then down--"which comes right down to here. Should I cut this rope, the sandbag would drop and the loose end would whip upward."

Cranston's eyes took a slow, calculating gaze straight up the rope, but stopped short of the pulley. They fixed on the balcony rail, that of the third tier outside of Verne's dressing room. A strangely conniving smile wrote itself upon Cranston's features.

"So I grip the rope with one hand"--Cranston made a gesture with his left--"and with the other, I, Zachary Verne, use this knife to slash--"

Cranston's right hand was swinging at a downward angle, empty of course, but demonstrating exactly how Verne could have cut the rope. Only now Verne knew the purpose of this pantomime, the thing that Cranston intended to explain before the other witnesses could even guess.

The murderer's mind could no longer stand the strain. Rather than have his alibi exposed by Cranston, Verne preferred to proclaim his status by another kill. Before anyone could halt him, Verne was up from his chair, whipping out a revolver to aim point blank at Cranston.

There was a snap from the rope that Cranston ripped, with it his quick-voiced warning:

"Look out! The sandbag!"

Instinctively, Verne ducked. Above him, releasing itself like a missile from a bomb-bay, the mammoth sandbag began its lazy drop. Singular, that motion: no quiver, no sideward shim; just poundage, letting fall. Verne saw it and sidestepped wildly, then cackled a pleased laugh, realizing he was clear of the target area before the bag had dropped a dozen feet.

All this within a single second, the time it would have taken Cranston to draw a gun and match Verne's weapon. Remembering Cranston, Verne gave him no further shift. Finishing a surprisingly agile whirl, the murderer blazed revolver shots straight toward the heavy floor cleat where Cranston had severed the rigid rope.

Bullets whizzed through space and flattened against the brick back wall of the theater. In the moments it had taken Verne to regain his aim, Cranston was gone.

Others saw why.

In duplication of the very stunt by which Verne had built himself an ironclad alibi for Vera's death, Cranston was clinging to the rope end and slithering upward with it. Five hundred pounds of descending weight were enough to carry him clear to the pulley beam if he'd wanted to travel that far.

He was above Verne's path of fire before it began. Too late did Verne connect the falling of the sandbag with Cranston's action, for in illustrating the rope cut, Cranston had no knife. How he had turned his mimicry into fact was evidenced only by a trifle that Verne didn't see, a smoldering, smoking rope end dangling from cleat to floor.

Verne's gift cigar had done it.

Margo had been close enough to smell the smoke when Cranston repeatedly, but unnoticeably, pressed the lighted cigar end against the rope. Strands of burning hemp had reached the yielding point when Cranston had pantomimed the slashing of the rope only to grip it, just before its upward whiz.

Tossed from Cranston's hand, an object struck the stage beyond the wing and showered sparks as evidence of its arrival there. It was the cigar. Its landing represented Verne's own action with a death dagger the night he had taken this same living trip.

Before Verne could train his gun toward the figure that scaled upward, Cranston did a side-fall from the rope and let his hands clamp the rail of the third tier balcony. Thanks to his own momentum, he vaulted that obstacle in what seemed a flying leap, so lightly did his hands touch.

Again, Cranston was illustrating how Verne could have done it and with embellishments. His long fling carried him right through the open doorway of Verne's own dressing room.

This was the only part of the stunt that hadn't been hidden by the wing, the night of Vera's murder. Why no one had witnessed Verne's trapeze act was explained mere moments later when the sandbag crumpled the chair with a splintering crash and withered the new patch of flooring with it.

Those present on that other occasion had been too glued by Harthorne's narrow escape from death to think of a rope end and what might be riding upward with it. No eye could possibly have lifted soon enough to view Verne's quick passage across that third tier rail.

How swiftly it all had happened was proved by a surprising aftermath. The instant Cranston disappeared from sight, Verne thought of Margo and turned to deliver venom in the form of bullets upon the other actor in this drama of revelation.

Rising on hands and knees, Margo was trying to scramble to safety, when it came her way instead. Finishing a slow topple, the mighty cauldron settled with a brazen clangor, boxing Margo beneath it. In beginning his momentous ride, Cranston had kicked the cauldron's rim with his flying feet, overturning it in Margo's direction. Cranston's third tier landing came before the cauldron's turnover on stage, but the latter was soon enough.

Verne's fresh bullets glanced off the metal half-dome that now formed Margo's shelter, denying the murderer the new victim that he sought. And now, still brandishing his smoking gun, Zachary Verne was racing across the stage to his favorite haunt, the ramparts of Castle Elsinore. Dodging beyond the buttresses, he found a stairway leading upward and rushed for a higher vantage spot.

Verne wasn't wearing the ghostly costume in which he usually paraded those bulwarks. It was in his dressing room, along with the broad hat and dark theatrical cape that had given him a slight similarity to The Shadow, those times he had trailed Thurland's man, Terry Dundee. Verne was now wearing a black suit that blended into the dark of the stage, but his ruffled shirt front loomed white.

When he reached the turret that he wanted and turned to aim toward the third tier level, a strange laugh greeted him. Only Verne heard that laugh; its cross-carry reached him, but the mirth was lost to those below. The cavernous stage depths absorbed it.

Verne, too, was the only person who saw the aiming automatic. Cranston was the man who gripped the hungry .45. Against the dim light of the dressing room his figure took on a sinister aspect.

Frenzied imagination gave Verne the illusion of a shrouded shape that he knew must be The Shadow's. An actor to the finish, Verne displayed an agility which he had publicly laid aside during his brief career as a master of well-timed crime. His dash to the castle top had given away his last shred of pretense; it was known now that Verne could easily have performed the rope trick that The Shadow had duplicated as Cranston.

Verne was his old self now, the swift-footed performer who had played a good Mercurio in his day, but he was too smart to stage a duel scene with guns instead of swords, against an adversary so famous as The Shadow.

Spinning around the turret, Verne lunged across the nearer parapet, shouting a warning to all who stood below, promising sure death to anyone who tried to block his flight down. Seeing one challenger, Verne aimed.

The challenger was Joe Cardona. His police positive pointing upward, Cardona began to pump as Verne fired his one and only shot. It was odd, the way Verne jolted and jerked his aim at the moment of his trigger pull, which came a split second ahead of Cardona's barrage.

Only Verne could have realized why, if he lived long enough. The murderer had rounded the turret a trifle too far. The Shadow's gun, aiming ahead, was the first to start the fray. Its report was lost among the blasts that followed, but its bullet, skimming the turret's surface, clipped Verne and jarred his last aim.

Taking Cardona's bullets, Verne twisted and toppled from the parapet. Headlong he plunged beyond the painted ramparts and sprawled lifeless on the stage. His revolver slipped from his hand and slid glittering to the footlights as though taking a final bow.

From the railing, Lamont Cranston watched the witnesses come numbly to themselves. Joy Trevoise turned a scared, sick face to Alan Fenway, who solemnly placed a protecting arm about her shoulders. Oscar Bodelle and Terry Dundee raised the inverted cauldron so that Fred Guylan could help Margo Lane to her feet.

Side by side, Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona were studying the body of Zachary Verne, convincing themselves that this master of murder was dead. But the man who interested Cranston most was Meigs Thurland.

Alone in the theater box, the famous producer sadly shook his head and gave his hands a hopeless spread. When Meigs Thurland made those gestures, it meant a show was no good for his money or anybody else's.

It was the final curtain for Merry Mrs. Macbeth.

The Shadow knew. He had dropped it.

THE END.