



ALIBI TRAIL

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I. THE M.S.A.

Six o'clock was a quiet hour in the cafe lounge of the Hotel Metrolite. Most of the afternoon customers had gone by that time, while those who came for dinner considered it fashionable to arrive later than six. Hence, Lamont Cranston and Margo Lane had the cafe lounge almost to themselves, as they sat at a table near the front window watching the cars that stopped in front of the hotel.

The drizzly day had brought an early dusk. Traffic was jammed along the avenue, in keeping with New York tradition. Every now and then, a cab would pull out from the jumble, stop at the lighted front of the Hotel Metrolite and drop a passenger. Such were the people that Cranston and Margo were watching.

Cranston had recognized the last four. All were drab-faced businessmen, of somewhat portly bearing: members of the Manufacturers Security Association, which was to hold a six-o'clock meeting at the Metrolite.

Glancing at Cranston, Margo smiled. She was contrasting his firm, hawkish features with the flabby, heavy-fowled faces of the men from the cabs. She was considering, too, how Cranston's lithe, athletic build differed from the heavy, lumbering figures of the others.

"Your playmates have arrived," bantered Margo. "Why don't you go up to the meeting, Lamont? The sooner it starts, the sooner it will be over, and we can go somewhere to dinner."

"It won't start yet," returned Cranston. "Hubert Purnell hasn't arrived."

The statement awoke Margo's interest. She stared from the window, anxious to see Purnell. She'd heard much about the man, for he'd been in the news a great deal. Frequently dubbed the Wall Street Wizard, Purnell was a man who thrived on high finance; but, with all his reputed wealth, he lived in Spartan simplicity.

Even in Manhattan, Purnell drove his own car, instead of depending on taxicabs or keeping a chauffeured limousine, both of which he regarded as too expensive. He didn't like the subways because he was too often recognized. Very probably, Purnell was having trouble, at present, getting through traffic to the Hotel Metrolite. If so, he would be doing a lot of grumbling, for Purnell was noted for his habit of punctuality; and on this occasion, he would be late.

There was a doorman out front, who would certainly take charge of the car when Purnell appeared; nevertheless, the financier would be in glowery mood, which was something else that Margo wanted to see.

"I didn't know that Purnell belonged to the association," remarked Margo to Cranston. "How important is he?"

"He runs it," Cranston responded. "It's fortunate he does, or the association might degenerate into a racket."

Margo paused on lookout duty to give Cranston a puzzled gaze. His statement was doubly surprising. She didn't expect him to toss bouquets to Purnell; nor could Margo picture Cranston, himself, connected with anything that resembled a racket. For Margo Lane was quite convinced that Lamont Cranston was none other than The Shadow, master foe to crime. His business was cracking rackets, not establishing them.

Which made the situation more intriguing, as Margo considered it. Cranston's membership in the association could mean that he was handling the case from the inside. She hoped that her sudden expression of interest would cause Cranston to tell her more. He did.

"QUITE a title, the Manufacturers Security Association," spoke Cranston in his calm, even-toned style. "It was formed by independent manufacturers, to insure themselves against unusual conditions arising from the demands of national defense projects."

Margo put a query:

"You mean these manufacturers are engaged in supplying defense materials?"

"Just the opposite," corrected Cranston. "These men represent ordinary everyday industries, and want to preserve their status. Let me give you an example, Margo. Suppose the government should demand all the aluminum in the country, what would happen to a manufacturer who makes aluminum kitchenware?"

"He would go out of business, of course."

"Not if he belonged to the M.S.A.," stated Cranston, using the abbreviated term for the Manufacturers Security Association. "The other manufacturers would take care of him."

"But - how?"

"That seems to be a problem." Cranston smiled, reflectively. "Some say that orders should be assigned, pro rata, by other members of the association. Others think the individual members should be insured,

with the rest paying the cost. Whatever the solution, whoever controls the M.S.A. will have charge of huge fund, along with power to distribute them. Which is why the organization needs a canny financier like Hubert Purnell as its head."

Mention of Purnell caused Margo to glance at her wrist watch. It showed seven minutes after six, and the Wall Street Wizard still hadn't arrived.

"Purnell is eligible," remarked Cranston, "because he controls certain industrial plants. So, for that matter, do two other men, either of whom could turn the M.S.A. into a racket. Fortunately, those two are at odds."

Margo asked who they were. Cranston named them. One was Ralph Lambron, a man whose past had never quite caught up with him. Rumor had it that he was found among beer runners during Prohibition days.

With repeal saving him from Federal indictments, Lambron had bought up independent theaters throughout Pennsylvania, welded them into a chain, and sold stock in it, that dwindled down to nothing after he dropped the enterprise. Lambron had put the profits, amounting to several millions, into various factories, which he still owned.

The other man was Andrew Brenz. His name, too, spelled swindle. Operating from the Midwest, Brenz had established gambling houses all over the country, but always by proxy. It was just coincidence that Brenz owned factories in those cities where the gambling houses operated. A coincidence, too, that Brenz loved race horses and owned a very respectable stable that freed his name from any connection with racetrack scandals and betting manipulations.

Margo was listening, eyes very wide, when Cranston gestured toward the window and said:

"There he comes now."

Margo's watch registered just ten minutes after six, as she looked, expecting to see the wizened face that she connected with Hubert Purnell. Instead, she observed a powerful man, with strong, square-jawed face and sharp but deep-set eyes. He was stepping out of an expensive limousine which had a convertible top. He was followed by a square-set chauffeur, in dark-brown uniform. Margo expressed surprise.

"Why, that can't be Hubert Purnell."

"I didn't say he was Purnell," reminded Cranston, rising. "I was speaking of Andrew Brenz. He's ten minutes late for the six-o'clock meeting, and he seems quite put out about something. I'm going up to the meeting, Margo. You can watch for Purnell."

BRENZ and his chauffeur were one elevator ahead of Cranston; hence, Brenz had made his entry into the meeting room when Cranston arrived there. Pushing aside the stocky chauffeur, who partially blocked the door, Cranston strolled in and sat down.

Brenz was standing in the center of the room, waving a folded newspaper at half a dozen manufacturers who eyed him with mixed doubt and surprise.

"Don't tell me you haven't heard about the scandal!" stormed Brenz. "You seem to regard Ralph Lambron as an important member of this organization. You certainly ought to know that he's threatened with indictment, down in Philadelphia, over that theater stock swindle! The newspapers are full of it!"

A cold-eyed man named Fitzcroft picked up a newspaper that was lying on the table. Glancing over the

front page, he thumbed through the next few, and then demanded bluntly:

"What newspapers?"

"The Philadelphia newspapers, of course" retorted Benz. "Here - take a look at this one."

It was a Philadelphia newspaper that Brenz spread on the table, and it carried a broad streamer, saying:

LAMBRON THREATENED WITH INDICTMENT

Underneath was Lambron's picture, with column after column telling of his connections, past, present, and future. Such little things as war news must have been consigned to the comic section, for each page that Brenz turned told more about Lambron and his questionable activities. The way Fitzcroft and the others gobbled up the news brought a scoff from Brenz.

"That's the way with you New Yorkers," he giped. "You seem to think that Philadelphia is in another world."

Fitzcroft looked up, cold-eyed as before, and inquired:

"Isn't it?"

The sally brought laughs from the rest. They were of the opinion that the Philadelphia news was a lot of empty talk. Purchasers of Lambron's theater chain had simply let it go to pieces, and were blaming him for the debacle. Philadelphia investors had that habit, these New Yorkers claimed. They thought that if you planted money, it would sprout like potatoes; but that sort of thing didn't happen any more, not even in Philadelphia.

"Empty talk?" demanded Brenz. "Then why isn't Donald Kerring here? He comes from Philadelphia. He probably decided that we wouldn't even hold a meeting, after this Lambron scandal. Why don't you phone him and get his opinion?"

Fitzcroft decided to call Kerring. He tried, but couldn't get an answer from Kerring's Philadelphia home. He was trying again, without luck, when Brenz scoffed:

"Maybe you ought to call Lambron. He's easy enough to reach. Try the district attorney's office, in Philadelphia."

Fitzcroft promptly took up the suggestion. In a few minutes he had Lambron on the wire, and was repeating what the latter told him. Quite relieved, Fitzcroft turned to the men about him.

"It is empty talk," assured Fitzcroft. "Lambron says so. He claims that the Philadelphia newspapers tried to make news before it happened. Lambron and his secretary are going over everything with the district attorney, and will be busy the rest of the evening. By tomorrow, the newspapers will be printing apologies."

Impetuously, Brenz snatched the telephone from Fitzcroft's hands and roared into the mouthpiece.

"So you think you can get away with it!" shouted Brenz. "Well, we'll know by tomorrow if you do. This is Brenz talking, and whatever I do, I keep my hands clean. I'd like to see you do the same."

Brenz paused abruptly and suddenly flung the telephone on the table. It was Fitzcroft who asked, wisely:

"What did Lambron say?"

"He hung up," snapped Brenz. "So that's the end of it! The end of this meeting, too, because if you're waiting for Hubert Purnell, he won't be here. I phoned him around three o'clock, and when he heard about the Lambron mess, he said you could hold it but he wouldn't attend, because we couldn't settle anything with this cloud hanging over us. Purnell decided to drive down to Washington and attend to some of the pressing matters there."

Turning on his heel, Brenz spoke to his chauffeur: "Come along, Richtle." Together, the two left the meeting room, and in a little while the others decided to do the same. As Fitzcroft put it, they might do without either Brenz or Lambron, but certainly not without Purnell.

Down in the cafe lounge, Cranston found Margo still looking from the window, expecting to see Purnell, though it was nearly quarter of seven. Remarking that Purnell wasn't coming, Cranston next suggested that they dine in the cafe lounge. Margo agreeing, they didn't even bother to change tables.

It wasn't long before Margo noticed that Cranston was still watching from the window. She asked him why, since Purnell wouldn't be along.

"I'm watching for Donald Kerring," stated Cranston. "He rates high in the association, and it's odd he didn't come over to the meeting. You know the chap I mean - Kerring, the one they tried to reach in Philadelphia before they called Lambron."

"But didn't they decide that Kerring would think the trip useless, with Lambron in such a mess?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure that Kerring would have seen it that way. He's one of the capable members of the association. Kerring, Fitzcroft, and a third man, Dryne, are the ones who have been keeping check on Lambron and Brenz. I think that Kerring should have felt it his duty to attend this meeting."

Half past eight. Cranston and Margo had finished dinner, with no sign of Kerring. As they started from the hotel, Cranston stopped in the lobby and put in a call to Kerring's Philadelphia residence, with no answer forthcoming. Outside the door, he paused, noticed that the weather had cleared. Then:

"A good evening for a drive," said Cranston. "Suppose we take one, Margo. To Philadelphia, to drop in on Donald Kerring and get some facts regarding Lambron that none of the New Yorkers seem to know, or care, about."

Margo nodded. She liked the idea. It reminded her of other times when she had set out on trails with The Shadow. But this trail was to prove different than most of those that Cranston took. It was a trail back into the past.

The real goal upon which all depended was six o'clock, the hour of doom that The Shadow had missed while he and Margo had been staring so idly from the window of the cafe lounge!

CHAPTER II. MURDER DISCOVERED

IT was eleven o'clock, a very late hour in the fashionable Philadelphia suburb where Donald Kerring lived. Mist, rising from the Wissahickon Valley, was creeping out from the fringe of expansive Fairmount Park, to encroach upon the lawned preserves where Kerring's graystone home bulked somber in the night.

The house was dark, and hedges atop the surrounding wall had the look of absolute barriers. Only from the gateway straight in front could one obtain a complete view of the house, itself. At that spot, under a parade of sheltering maples, two men sat in a large sedan that was parked with its lights off. They were looking through the gate, toward the white block that marked the front door of Kerring's house.

A flashlight swept back and forth along the sidewalk, roving from maples to wall. It was swinging jerkily, indicating that its owner was bulky and walked with waddling stride. The beam splashed the sedan once, and swung away; then, coming back, it stopped. The man flicked off his flashlight and reached for a handy nightstick, as he gruffed:

"Hey, you -"

"Hello, Wilkins," spoke a smooth voice from the car. "We were expecting you along. We thought maybe you would know why Mr. Kerring hasn't come home."

The bulky watchman shoved himself toward the car, raising the flashlight instead of the club. A man in the car obliged him by pressing the switch to the dome light. Wilkins promptly recognized the sallow, smiling man who leaned half across the steering wheel to look at him.

"Oh, hello. Mr. Lambron!"

Wilkins also recognized Lambron's companion, a thin-faced man who wore large-rimmed glasses. He was Lambron's secretary, Mordan. The two had visited Kerring rather frequently, usually in the evening, which was why Wilkins had met them. It was his business to look over all strangers in this neighborhood.

Beefy-faced and brawny, Wilkins was a survival of an old Philadelphia custom, the private watchman. He was hired by some forty residents of the section, at a few dollars a month apiece, to make regular rounds at night and see that doors and windows were securely locked. He even checked on such small matters as cellar lights that residents forgot to turn out. He was helpful, too, when it came to starting stalled cars.

He looked like a London bobby, and had something of the same temperament. His slow round, by many devious bypaths, took him close to an hour and a half, and when he had finished it, he went over the same terrain again. All night, Wilkins made those plodding rounds, and residents felt secure.

Not that the neighborhood lacked police protection. At various intervals, a police car coursed through the curving, mazelike streets of this suburban area. But it didn't cover the ground the way that Wilkins did.

It was easy for prowlers to dodge out of sight behind walls or shrubbery when the police car came along; but with Wilkins on the Job, they might dodge right into his lap. Such, at least, was the theory held by those who hired Wilkins.

Right now, Wilkins was scratching his head over the matter of Kerring's absence. He knew that Kerring's servants had gone off today and wouldn't be back until midnight, which could mean that Kerring had gone out to dinner, and possibly to a movie afterward.

But Kerring was rather elderly and didn't like late hours. He was always home by ten-thirty, though he often kept the light burning in his library, where he loved to delve among his books.

Wilkins threw a look toward the car, said: "You've been here long, Mr. Lambron?"

"About half an hour," calculated Lambron. "It was ten o'clock when we left the district attorney's office. We've been with him since three this afternoon."

Wilkins nodded and gave a sympathetic mutter. He'd read about Lambron's troubles and didn't agree with the newspapers. Any friend of Mr. Kerring's would have to be all right with Wilkins. Since it was just about a half-hour trip from the Philadelphia city hall to Kerring's home, it was quite obvious that Lambron must have had a half-hour to spend. But Wilkins had another question.

"Why didn't you pull up in the driveway?" he queried, with a sweeping gesture of his heavy hand. "Most people do."

"We did," returned Lambron, "but when we saw the house was dark, we were afraid we'd block Kerring's way, so we came out here to wait for him."

The car gave a sag as Wilkins planted his bulk on the running board.

"Drive in there again," suggested the watchman, "and we'll take a look at things."

WITH Wilkins on the side of the car, Lambron drove around the corner, swung in through a driveway that passed the side of the house, and finished in a gravel circle, a survival of the old horse-and-carriage days. Only by bearing hard on the steering wheel was Lambron able to make the turn; even then, his car grazed the flowerbeds around the circle.

Dropping off, Wilkins tried a little door that led into the house; it was the side entrance that people usually used when they came by car. The door was locked, so Wilkins took a look along the wall at windows above.

He had just come to the corner of the house, when he remembered that Kerring might have gone out of town. Nevertheless, Wilkins took a cursory glance along the wall past the corner.

In that glance, he thought he saw a ghost.

It loomed out from a window, a whitish phantom that matched the best description of spooks on parade. As suddenly as it came, the white thing vanished, giving Wilkins the impression that it had sailed upward, outward, to be swallowed in the night.

Shifting his hand from nightstick to revolver, the watchman dropped back behind the corner. Lambron saw him from the car, and called in hoarse, worried whisper:

"What's the trouble, Wilkins?"

The watchman gave a beckon.

Lambron and Mordan came from their car to join him. By then, Wilkins had regained his nerve. He wasn't a man to be frightened by odd things at night. He'd stood the test every Halloween, when boys rigged up sheets and balloon faces to scare wayfarers. Wilkins was an ace at exposing such hoaxes, and he'd handle this one, too, even though it was out of season.

"Take a look," said Wilkins. "See if you see what I saw."

Lambron and Mordan looked. Again, the ghost made its shivery appearance, in a way that really startled them; but this time, Wilkins caught its flutter as it vanished. He felt the breeze that wafted past the stone house, noted that the fog had receded.

"A window curtain from the library," identified Wilkins. "The wind caught it. But the window shouldn't be open. Let's take a closer look."

They reached the window and stared at the thin white curtains that bellied again, just above their heads. Wilkins glanced at his companions. Both were tall and rangy, but Mordan was lighter than Lambron. So the watchman suggested helping the secretary through the window, at which Mordan recoiled. Smiling at his secretary's fright, Lambron softened the matter.

"It's really your job to enter," Lambron told Wilkins. "You're the watchman, you know. Here - we'll help you in."

With a combined lift, Lambron and Mordan sent Wilkins over the high sill, a powerful hoist, considering the watchman's bulk. As he went, Wilkins was speaking back to them:

"Get around to the door. I'll unlock it for you."

Then Wilkins was over and his companions retracing their steps, when a stumble and a thud came from the darkened library. Apparently, Wilkins had tripped over the window curtains; if so, it was no excuse for him to rig himself in one and play ghost for spite. It certainly looked as though Wilkins had, when he unlocked the door where Lambron and Mordan waited.

It took the two a few seconds to realize that they were looking at the watchman's own face, not at a whitened curtain worn like a veil. For Wilkins had gone very, very pale, a remarkable thing, considering the man's normally ruddy complexion.

He couldn't even speak; he simply beckoned, as a ghost would. Lambron and Mordan followed Wilkins, saw the shake of his hand as he found the switch for the library lights.

Then, when the lights came on, the visitors stared, as riveted as the watchman. They saw the thing that accounted for the stumble Wilkins had made. It was lying in the very center of the library floor, the lifeless form of a frail, peak-faced man whose scrawny features had drawn themselves into the grinning, lipless semblance of a skull.

THE dead man was Donald Kerring. His shirt front, crimson with blood, showed that he had been shot through the heart. He was lying across one of the half dozen scatter rugs that carpeted the library, and purplish blotches on the blue of the Oriental floor-piece were further evidence of Kerring's lifeblood. The peculiar sideward hunch of the body; the twisted upturn of the dead face were rather horrible to view.

"He's been dead a long while," spoke Wilkins in a hollow voice. "I... I'd better call the police at the district station."

He was reaching for the telephone, when Lambron took it first. Lambron's tone was steadier, but forced.

"We'll call headquarters," declared Lambron. "They can notify the district station. I'll tell them to talk to the director of public safety. He was with me off and on during the evening, while I was in the D.A.'s office."

Wilkins gave an astonished stare.

"You mean - they might accuse you Mr. Lambron?"

"Why not?" queried Lambron bitterly. "they've accused me of everything short of murder! Poor Kerring! He'd never have wanted this to happen tonight, of all times. He believed that I could disprove the charges against me. It looks as though someone else believed it, too, and decided to frame me for murder!"

Ten minutes later, cars were pulling up around the Kerring mansion.

They were the police advance guard, from the nearest district station, bringing a police surgeon, along with uniformed officers and district detectives.

Ralph Lambron was on the spot. He could account for his actions up to ten o'clock that evening. How

well his alibi would protect him in the case of murder discovered at eleven, the immediate future was to prove!

CHAPTER III. FIND THE MURDERER

HALF past eleven.

At the wheel of his coupe, Lamont Cranston gave a satisfied chuckle as he recognized a street sign; which pleased Margo Lane. They'd made the trip to Philadelphia in a little less than three hours, only to get lost in the worst tangle of suburban streets that Margo had ever seen.

Most of the signs called the streets by such names as "road," "avenue," or "lane," and Cranston had recognized quite a few of them. The trouble was, they had a habit of stopping one place and beginning somewhere else, which meant being on the right street and the wrong one at the same time.

They had all been named on the theory that some day they would be cut through, which they hadn't. With the way they curved, sometimes changing names from one block to another, it was impossible to pick up a continuation without a great deal of hit-or-miss hunting.

Cranston had remembered, however, that Kerring's house was near Fairmount Park, which was far too big a target to miss. Skirting around, he had reached the park and was cutting back into Kerring's neighborhood.

"This is bringing us the wrong way," he remarked. "In at the back of Kerring's. But if the right streets can be the wrong ones, the wrong way may be the right way."

It was the right way.

Stopping the car suddenly, in a block that had no houses, Cranston pointed through the windshield. They were on the fringe of the park, and ahead was the residential section. Cranston was indicating a stone house, where lights were flicking on and off at many windows, while the glare from porch lights showed police cars parked in a circled driveway.

"Kerring's house," declared Cranston calmly. "Something has happened there. Wait here, Margo, while I see what it's about."

Leaving the coupe, Cranston opened the rear compartment without Margo hearing it. From beneath the slightly raised edge he took a black cloak, a slouch hat, and a brace of automatics. Putting on the black garments, Cranston became The Shadow. From then on, he was a gliding shape, unseen in the night.

Reaching Kerring's house was quite simple. Lines of trees along the sidewalk, the sheltering hedges, banks of shrubs and flowers, provided cover that would have hidden Cranston, even without the black garb that transformed him into The Shadow. The house, itself, was a collection of darkened patches, with porches convenient to upstairs windows, where lights had gone on, only to be turned off.

The crux came when The Shadow was inside the house itself, on the second floor. The police were investigating the back stairs, so he had to use the front staircase, which was well lighted from the lower hall. But no one suspected that a prowler would be using those stairs, so The Shadow had a straight course down, even though he might have been spied instantly, had anyone come along.

Finding a rear door into the library, The Shadow blended with its heavy curtains and peered into the room. A rug of the runner type ran through the doorway, but The Shadow stepped from its soft tuft, to gain better concealment from the dark-hued curtain at his left.

He was in an extension of the hall, a sort of alcove, with a corner that cut off the brighter light. Motionless, his black-cloaked figure could scarcely be distinguished from the deep blue of the curtain, but by slightly spreading the drape, The Shadow obtained a complete view of the library.

The Shadow saw the floor with its crowded scatter rugs, and the dead form which occupied the center. He recognized Kerring's face, as a police surgeon arose from beside the body. Among the people in the room, The Shadow saw Lambron and his secretary, Mordan, both with strained faces.

"THIS man has been dead at least five hours," declared the surgeon. "I would establish the time of death as approximately six o'clock."

Relief registered on Lambron and Mordan. Wilkins gave them a knowing nod. The beefy watchman was quite sure that neither of these men would have murdered Kerring. The only objection came from a newcomer, who was entering the room by the doorway from the main hall. He was tall, gray-haired, and officious; The Shadow recognized him as the director of public safety, the Philadelphia equivalent of police commissioner.

"Six o'clock?" quizzed the director sharply. "You're sure of that, doctor?"

"Approximately six," the surgeon repeated, emphatically. "There could be a variation, perhaps ten minutes, one way or the other. The time of death can be well established in a case like this."

The director gave a disgruntled grunt.

"Sorry, director?" queried Lambron coolly. "Is it because the circumstances clear me?"

The director answered both questions in one breath.

"I am," he snapped, "and it is! You're lucky, Lambron, because you have an absolute alibi from three o'clock to ten."

"To ten-thirty," corrected Lambron. "I couldn't have gotten here any sooner, director, after leaving your office. Whether you like it or not, you'll have to concede that neither Mordan or I could have killed Kerring."

"I concede it," retorted the director. "I know you're innocent in this case, just as I know you're guilty of a lot of crooked work that couldn't be proven against you this afternoon! You handled the D.A., Lambron, but some day my department will catch up with you!"

Abruptly, the safety director dropped his challenging tone and began to inquire into what was known regarding Kerring's death. Lambron and Mordan told their story, and Wilkins corroborated his share of the details. Like the director, The Shadow made mental note of them. In the pause that followed, a district detective asked the director if he wanted the body taken to the morgue.

"Not yet," the director declared. "When it does go, you can pick it up in that rug where it's lying. We'll want the rug as an exhibit."

He looked over the rest of the room, even eyeing the rug that ran out through the rear doorway, but he decided that none of the other rugs would be needed. None of them had bloodstains, though they needed examination to make sure, because the remaining Orientals trended to red backgrounds, whereas the one on which the body lay was largely blue.

While the director was making his survey, Wilkins asked if he could leave to resume his rounds through the neighborhood. The director gave him a nod.

The Shadow remained. He was watching the police inspect the death room, and he anticipated a new discussion between the safety director and Ralph Lambron. This time, it was Lambron who began it, by first speaking to the police surgeon.

"Ten minutes one way or the other," said Lambron. "You couldn't stretch that to a couple of hours, could you? To make it, say, that Kerring died somewhere between four and nine"

"I couldn't," returned the surgeon. "Kerring's death was instantaneous at approximately six o'clock."

The Shadow knew what was in Lambron's mind, though the safety director didn't. The period between four and nine still covered Lambron comfortably; therefore, it had another significance. Wheeling, the director demanded:

"What are you driving at, Lambron?"

"I was thinking of Andrew Brenz," replied Lambron. "If you think I'm crooked, you'd better look into his record. Only, you'll have to excavate to get to the bottom of it."

"Why would Brenz have wanted to kill Kerring?"

"For the same reason that I might. Or, for the matter that anybody might, if they wanted to control the Manufacturers Security Association. Kerring was one of the stalwart members; the kind who said he'd never allow anyone to use the association as a means toward power and graft."

"He was, eh? Let's think about Brenz -"

THE director paused, realizing that Lambron had already thought about Brenz. So, for that matter, had The Shadow. Kerring's six-o'clock death in Philadelphia let Brenz out, as well as Lambron, because Brenz had gone to the six-o'clock M.S.A. meeting in New York.

The Shadow knew that Brenz had been only ten minutes late, but both Lambron and the safety director were thinking in terms of six thirty, when Brenz had poked himself into the long-distance call that Fitzcroft made to Lambron.

In simple terms, Lambron was calculating that Brenz would have had to leave Philadelphia soon after four o'clock in order to be in New York at six thirty. Similarly, if Brenz had left the New York meeting soon after that six thirty call, he couldn't have reached this Philadelphia residence much before nine.

"Take a crook to pick a crook," giped the safety director. "You would want to blame it on Brenz, Lambron. It happens that his alibi is just as good as yours. Suppose we discuss the other members of that association. Maybe we'll find one who can provide us with a starting point -"

One member of the M.S.A. did provide a starting point, very swiftly. That member was Lamont Cranston, at present The Shadow. Hearing footsteps behind him, The Shadow twisted deeper in the curtain to let a heavy man walk by. The arrival was Wilkins. Shoving between the curtains, the watchman stopped short just inside the library.

"I've found something, director!" exclaimed Wilkins excitedly. "Right out back, there's a car parked over toward the dead end. Its lights are out, but I didn't look into it because -"

Wilkins didn't finish. The Shadow couldn't let him. The car in question was The Shadow's own, with Margo in it. Chances were that if the director shouted from the window, police around the grounds could get to the coupe quicker than The Shadow. The only thing was to smother the matter of the car with something more immediate.

Shifting out from behind the curtain, deeper into the alcoved hall, The Shadow grabbed the end of the runner rug and yanked it.

Greased by the waxed flour, the runner came away in a sweep that sent Wilkins headlong, almost to Kerring's body. The sudden departure of the rug told that someone had tugged it; moreover, witnesses caught a view of a vague form beyond.

Yanking a revolver, the director shouted for others to follow him, which they did; not only the detectives who were in the library, but police from the main section of the hallway.

The scatter rugs served The Shadow well. They skidded under heavy-tramping feet, causing pursuers to flounder in each other's path. The director and his men were doing an imitation of Eliza, crossing the ice when The Shadow took a last glance at them. The first man to reach the rear doorway tangled with the curtains, bringing them down as an added obstacle.

Hearing the crash of the curtain rod, knowing the delay it would produce, The Shadow adopted a daring course.

Instead of going out the rear door, he dashed through the front hall, grabbing at light switches as he passed them. His way was clear, for the men from the front hall had all barged through the living room, to become the tail end of the ring-around game.

There were yells and revolver shots as The Shadow flicked the last light switch and yanked the front door open. None of the shots were accurate, for the pursuers caught only a glimpse of the dodging figure in black.

They blasted for the front door as it went slamming shut, indicating The Shadow's egress. Some of those shots might have clipped the cloaked fugitive, had he been going through the doorway.

But The Shadow hadn't chosen that route; he'd dropped away from the door, kicking it shut as he rolled. In his blacked-out corner, he was actually behind the door when the director yanked it open.

The mad rush went through, disgorging pursuers all over the front lawn, where they fired at everything that looked black, which gave them plenty to do. Other police came dashing up from various quarters, some from in back of the house. The front lawn echoed with the cannonade, while inside, all was deserted. Even Lambron and Mordan had gone along with the throng.

As The Shadow arose and started a quick trip back through the darkened hall, the only thing human in sight was Kerring's body, vague on the square block that represented that blue-toned scatter rug.

THROUGH the rear door, The Shadow was making for the back hedge, when he heard the shooting end. The director was calling to the others, and amid the bellows, The Shadow could hear the shouts of Wilkins. The watchman was reminding the director that there still was a car out back. By this time, however, The Shadow had all the start he needed.

He whipped off hat and cloak, tumbling them over the back of the seat as he scrambled in beside Margo, who had wisely started the motor when she heard the shooting begin.

Cranston again, The Shadow grabbed the wheel and shoved the car into gear. He was whizzing away in high-speed second when the police saw the lights that he turned on.

From then on, it was a strange mad chase that held Margo breathless. Cranston took the quickest route away from Kerring's, and was soon speeding in and out among the curved lanes and roads, seeking only to shake off the police cars that followed him.

Margo had heard of doubling a trail to throw off pursuers. This was a trail that actually doubled itself. It reminded her of the fun ride in the dark at Coney Island, but on a vaster scale.

Somewhere among these hilly tree-shaded byways, several cars were after one, hoping to cross its path - which they did, but only when Cranston was quick enough to sense them and halt the coupe, with head lights extinguished.

Sirens were wailing everywhere, although pursuers were signaling among themselves; but finally, when Cranston sped the coupe across an old bridge and down a sharp slope, Margo heard the shrieks die off in the distance, behind.

Then the coupe was rolling along at thirty-five, with other cars in sight, while officers, clad in blue-gray uniforms, watched the traffic only to see that it kept within the proper speed limit.

"Fairmount Park," identified Cranston. "Those are the park guards, the special force that patrol it. We'll ease out of here shortly, and wind up where no one will be looking for us."

They rolled from the park into a much-more-settled area than the suburb where Kerring lived. They followed an avenue that had double houses on both sides and car tracks in the middle. Reaching a point well north of Broad Street, Cranston swung away from a railroad bridge that crossed the main avenue, and drove up beside a rather elaborate station.

"North Philadelphia," he told Margo. "In five minutes, you can take a through train from Washington. It will land you in New York in about an hour and a half."

"You're staying over in Philadelphia?"

"Certainly. Maybe Kerring didn't find it healthy here, but I shall. I'm going to look into his case more thoroughly, tomorrow."

Leaving the coupe, Margo watched it swing from the station drive. As Cranston turned, and the taillight faded past the corner, the girl fancied that she heard the grim laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER IV. LINKS TO CRIME

IT was late afternoon when Lamont Cranston strolled into the office of the Philadelphia director of public safety and introduced himself, to receive an immediate welcome. He was ushered into the director's private office, and received a hearty handshake from the grizzled man who had been so eager to wing him with bullets the night before.

"Glad you came over from New York, Mr. Cranston," declared the director. "You're the only one of your friends who thought it worthwhile. They seemed to think that by proving their attendance at last night's Manufacturer Security Association meeting, they had ended their connection with the Kerring murder."

Coolly, Cranston inquired:

"Didn't they!"

"In a sense, yes," assured the director, hastily. "As far as any guilt is concerned, you understand. That applies in your case, Mr. Cranston, because we have learned that you were at the meeting, too. But we certainly hoped that some of you would co-operate in helping us trace the real murderer. So I appreciate your coming over today."

Cranston didn't remark that he had come over the night before, and that since early morning he had been in a Philadelphia hotel, listening to local broadcasts and studying successive editions of the afternoon newspapers, to learn more about the Kerring case.

He was more interested in the director's reference to the "real murderer," which seemed somewhat paradoxical, because Ralph Lambron and his secretary, Mordan, were seated, big as life, in the director's office. However, Lambron's smile at seeing Cranston was sufficient proof that the sallow man's alibi stood.

Shaking hands with Cranston, Lambron introduced Mordan and sat down. Since the director was busy with some papers, Lambron put in a few words.

"I guess you know how I stand, Cranston," said Lambron. "Aside from the sorrow I feel regarding Kerring's death, I'm glad that both Mordan and I have an alibi."

"And that Brenz has one, too?"

"No," rejoined Lambron. "I'm not glad that Brenz is in the clear. I'll make no bones about it. I detest Brenz! After his alibi was proven, I hoped we could pin something on that dead-pan chauffeur of his, but I've learned that Richtle was with Brenz at the association meeting."

Studying Lambron, The Shadow compared him with Brenz. It was logical that the two should be at odds, for it was usually so when men with scheming minds had the same ambition. The similarity between Lambron and Brenz was accentuated by the fact that each had a side-kick who seemed as slippery as himself, though less shrewd.

In Lambron's case, the toady was his secretary, Mordan; whereas Brenz depended on his chauffeur, Richtle. Judging from appearances, they carried those helpers along as body guards, for they hadn't appeared recently without them. That was logical, too, for Lambron and Brenz were the sort who made dangerous enemies and therefore needed protection.

Last night, however, Mordan and Richtle were the ones who benefited, for each had gained an ironclad alibi along with his master.

Returning to his desk, the director of public safety outlined the story of Kerring's death, hoping that the details might stir some suggestions from Cranston. The case appeared quite open and shut.

Alone in his home, Kerring had received a visitor at six o'clock; possibly earlier, but the caller had certainly been in the house at six. Darkness had settled at that hour due to the dreary day. Apparently, the unknown visitor had been waiting for it, because that was when he deliberately shot Kerring, in a house so tightly shut and isolated that the gun had not been heard.

Though Kerring's keys were on his body, the killer had probably preferred the window as an exit, because it was on the side of the house where he could easily sneak away.

There was a trifling detail about Wilkins, the watchman, not noticing the open window on his first trip round; but, Wilkins had himself admitted that it could be an oversight. That covered, the director came back to the main theme.

"As I understand it, Mr. Cranston," he said, "Kerring was a retarding factor in the Manufacturers Security Association. He didn't want to see the organization controlled by the wrong people, or too much in the hands of an individual. Were there others who felt the same as Kerring?"

"I can think of two," was Cranston's reply. "One is Fitzcroft; the other, Dryne."

"Just what I told you, director," put in Lambron, "but you wouldn't take my opinion."

"Naturally, I wouldn't," the director retorted. "You talked as though you and Kerring were great friends, Lambron, whereas I'm sure that he knew too much about you, to be so inclined. He might have favored Brenz, but certainly not you. Therefore, I doubted your opinion regarding others."

DROPPING Lambron, the director turned anew to Cranston, and said abruptly:

"Both Lambron and Brenz had alibis last night. So, for that matter, did you and the other members of the M.S.A., with one exception. I refer to the present head of the association, Hubert Purnell. I expect him here any minute, because I called him in Washington, asking him to stop off on his way back to New York."

Lambron gave a laugh.

"You certainly won't accuse Purnell of murder," he told the director. "Don't forget: he's the Wall Street Wizard. He picks up ruined companies for a song and makes them pay dividends, which puts him in the class of public benefactor. Why, to accuse Purnell of trying to grab the Manufacturers Security Association would be the next thing to treason!"

"It hasn't gone broke yet, and besides, Purnell practically controls it already. Unless" - Lambron turned suddenly to Cranston - "unless fellows like Kerring and Fitzcroft have been keeping an eye on Purnell, too."

Before Cranston could furnish an opinion, a knock at the door announced Purnell in person. A few moments later, a withery, dyspeptic man was ushered into the office. In his usual crisp fashion, Purnell shook hands all around and sat down beside the desk.

Steely gray eyes predominated Purnell's crabapple features, but they gave the same glance to all. They showed no mistrust of Lambron; no approval toward Cranston. Purnell's gaze dismissed Mordan as unimportant, and finally settled coldly on the director of public safety, as though he considered the official to be a necessary nuisance.

"Very well, director," said Purnell in a harsh tone. "I am here. You have questions, so ask them."

The director put the first one. He wanted to know if Purnell linked Kerring's death with the victim's membership in the Manufacturers Security Association.

"Of course not," rapped Purnell, in reply. "Who would want to kill Kerring?" He turned his steely eyes. "I don't think you'd go that far, Lambron; and the same applies to Brenz. You two are the only doubtful members in the organization; however, you both have alibis. Let's get along to something else."

He put the final words to the director, who stubbornly stayed to his subject, beginning with the question:

"When did you last see Kerring, Mr. Purnell?"

"About ten days ago," returned Purnell. "At the last meeting of the association."

"You didn't, by any chance, think of stopping off to see Kerring when you drove through Philadelphia, yesterday?"

"Of course I did. I knew where his house was, but there wasn't time. It was out of my way. I decided to stop off coming back, to get Kerring's opinion after the Lambron business simmered down somewhat."

"You were driving alone, yesterday?"

"Yes - as I always do."

"What time did you pass through Philadelphia?"

"If you mean, when was I closest to Kerring's house" - Purnell's tone was sharp - "I'd say about half past six."

"Thank you, Mr. Purnell."

The Shadow wasn't surprised that the director ended the quiz so suddenly. He'd obtained about all the information that Purnell would give, even if he happened to be hiding something deeper. So the director delved into the matter of Kerring's death, and the findings - or lack of them - that the police had made. It had been dark for quite a while when Purnell arose to go.

"I'm going to get some dinner," he said, "and then drive on to New York. If any of you would care to join me -"

The director shook his head as a matter of policy, but when Lambron said he would dine with Purnell, The Shadow decided to do the same. As they were leaving, Lambron called back to the director:

"I'm in good company, you see. By the way, I'll bring you those reports on the theater stocks, later. How long will you be here?"

"Until midnight," returned the director sourly, "and probably later. Don't forget to come back, Lambron. I want those reports, to file with the rest."

IT was half past seven when they finished dinner, and Purnell started off on his trip to New York, a drive which he estimated he could make in under three hours.

He didn't invite Cranston to accompany him, because, as he had testified earlier, he preferred to drive alone. Furthermore, Cranston and Lambron had started a conversation that promised to last a long while.

It lasted for more than an hour, on subjects pertaining to the problems of the manufacturers, which Lambron discussed in very honest style. At length, it was Lambron who suggested that they leave the restaurant.

"You aren't driving to New York, are you, Cranston?" he inquired. "I forgot to ask you before."

"No. I'm going by train."

The Shadow was specific upon that point, because he didn't care to cloud the issue with the question of the mysterious intruder who had crept into Kerring's and bolted out again after eleven o'clock, the night before. The safety director had mentioned it, but classed the intruder as a mere prowler. However, it was better for The Shadow to intimate that he had come to Philadelphia by train, instead of car; today, rather than yesterday.

"We'll drive up to my office," said Lambron. "I'll take you to the station later. You can catch the ten-o'clock express."

Lambron's office was a dozen blocks north, just off Broad Street. It was connected with a metal-awning factory, a small plant which was one of Lambron's legitimate enterprises.

The place was closed for the night, so Lambron unlocked a door leading in from an alley and turned on the office lights. Mordan had been with them all evening, so Lambron told him to hunt up the reports that the safety director wanted.

Meanwhile, Lambron took a swivel chair behind a large mahogany desk and motioned Cranston to another seat. The Shadow saw half a dozen chairs arranged in a semicircle; all were deep-cushioned and comfortable, but covered with rather grimy slip covers. Lambron smiled as Cranston looked for a clean chair.

"I held a conference with the employees today," mentioned Lambron. "They came in from the shop, and didn't bother to wash up. Every few weeks I have to change those slip covers, because they get dirty. Make a note that we need fresh ones, Mordan."

Lambron began to show Cranston the reports that Mordan was gathering. All the while, Lambron argued that the theater stock had been a good investment and that the collapse of the chain had been the fault of the purchasers, not of Lambron himself. The reports bore Lambron out, and he was still waxing to his theme when he remembered Cranston's train.

"Five minutes of ten!" exclaimed Lambron. "I'll run you up to North Philly, Cranston, and you can catch it there. It doesn't reach there until twelve minutes after the hour."

Leaving Mordan to finish his sorting of the reports, Lambron drove The Shadow to the station. On the same platform where Margo had taken a late train the night before, Cranston shook hands with Lambron and boarded the New York express. The Shadow was thinking of Margo as the train pulled out. He'd have to call her as soon as he reached New York.

Several minutes out of North Philadelphia the express passed another, coming the opposite way. It was the nine-o'clock train from New York, due in North Philadelphia at about ten thirty. It reminded The Shadow that he'd have to send someone over to Philadelphia to get his car from the garage where he had left it.

The day's stay in Philadelphia had done little toward cracking the Kerring murder. Oddly, the only possible link to crime seemed to be Hubert Purnell, the man who didn't have an alibi but who was regarded as too important to need one. Even The Shadow found it difficult to consider Purnell as a man connected with murder.

The Shadow should have looked to the future, rather than the past. One unsolved crime could prove a pattern for another. New murder was already in the making: a case that would prove as startling as the death of Donald Kerring!

CHAPTER V. CRIME'S INTERLUDE

IT was midnight and Margo Lane was just starting out for the evening. Starting out eagerly, too, for she was to meet Lamont Cranston at the Spotlight, Manhattan's newest and most attractive night club. Cranston had called Margo from the station, saying he was back from Philadelphia and that if she hurried, they'd have time to catch the midnight floor show.

The Spotlight was crowded when Margo arrived there, but Cranston was already present and had managed to obtain a choice table for two. They watched the floor show for the next forty minutes, and during the lulls, Cranston found time to answer some of Margo's questions regarding his stay in Philadelphia.

There wasn't much of interest in the theme. Margo was disappointed when she learned that the

Philadelphia police had dismissed the matter of The Shadow's visit to Kerring's.

She'd hoped there would be a lot of talk about a living whirlwind cloaked in black, so she could give Cranston the wise look that she always used when he intimated that he wasn't The Shadow. But it developed that the police around Kerring's hadn't really gotten a look at the mysterious prowler who led them on a wild chase.

The floor show was over, when Cranston remarked:

"At least, I had a long visit with Lambron. The fellow did his best to impress me, and oddly, his talk carried the ring of sincerity. I'd class Lambron as a man who can comfortably forget things."

"What sort of things?" queried Margo.

"His own enterprises," Cranston replied. "Swindles, as some people term them. He has a way of smoothing over all his crooked business deals, to a point where he, himself, seems to believe that they were honest."

"But do others believe him?"

"Gradually, yes. Lambron's idea of covering up is to be outspoken, but he never tells the whole story. He states just enough to be convincing. I ought to know, because I was with him until quarter past ten. He was going back to see Director of Public Safety Thurling at midnight.

"I'd like to have seen the director when he looked over those stock reports. They made the proposition sound so fine, that the director might feel like buying some shares, himself, if they were still on the market."

Pausing, Cranston let his eyes take a reflective gaze, as though picturing Ralph Lambron. Then:

"Lambron is quite the opposite of Brenz," he said. "He is smooth and persuasive, whereas Brenz is bluff and blunt. Lambron concedes he could be crooked, and then argues otherwise; while Brenz becomes indignant if anyone suggests that he is even slightly connected with the gambling racket that he has so thoroughly hidden within the thick shell of legitimate business.

"Also, Lambron is unobtrusive; he goes about things quietly, never making an outward show. He meets the right people and the wrong people, in turn, to suit immediate needs. In contrast, Brenz likes to show himself publicly with the right people, and disclaim all acquaintance with the wrong. It's just like Brenz to bring a party of big businessmen to the Spotlight and make a show of entertaining them."

MARGO turned and followed the direction of Cranston's gaze. He was looking at a table on the other side of the night club, and there, Margo saw Andrew Brenz with a party of half a dozen friends. Among them, Margo recognized two members of the Manufacturers Security Association who had been at the Hotel Metrolite the previous evening. She mentioned the fact.

"He invited me to the party, too," observed Cranston, with a slight smile. "That's one reason why we came here, Margo."

Margo wasn't piqued. Contrarily, she admired Cranston's method. It was just like Lamont, to spend half the evening with Lambron in Philadelphia; then check up on the man's reputed rival, Brenz. In fact, Cranston added a point that proved the merit of his plan.

"You'll notice Noyes Fitzcroft isn't in the party," Cranston told Margo. "I didn't expect he would be. You remember, I told you that Lambron talked of Kerring as a real friend, though its quite obvious that

Kerring, living in Philadelphia, would have been checking up on Lambron?"

Margo nodded.

"Brenz's case is similar," continued Cranston. "He claims that he and Fitzcroft see eye to eye. But I happen to know that Fitzcroft makes it his job to keep tally on Brenz, just as Kerring did with Lambron."

"Then why isn't Fitzcroft here?"

"Because it's business with Fitzcroft, not a social matter. He knows he won't learn anything while Brenz is throwing a party. Fitzcroft seeks facts on Brenz through other sources."

Margo gave a very bright smile.

"Couldn't Kerring have learned things about Lambron from Brenz?" she queried. "And wouldn't Fitzcroft naturally check on Brenz through Lambron?"

Cranston's calm return gaze told that he had already struck upon that one. Quite prettily, Margo subsided. She'd tried before to think ahead of Cranston. It didn't work.

"I'm going over to see Brenz," remarked Cranston. "I won't be long, Margo."

Nearing Brenz's table, The Shadow received a half salute of greeting from a man who was seated at an obscure corner of the bar, yet within sight of Brenz's group. The fellow was Brenz's chauffeur, Richtle, in uniform, as usual. With a nod, The Shadow passed him and reached Brenz's table. The square-jawed man turned and gave a smile, as his deep-set eyes flashed welcome.

"At last, Cranston!" he exclaimed warmly. "Why, we expected you at seven thirty, and here it is one o'clock! Maybe you haven't even had dinner. Sit down and order some."

"I had dinner in Philadelphia," returned The Shadow quietly, "with Hubert Purnell and Ralph Lambron."

Mention of the names brought a hush to the party. They stopped drinking, to listen. Brenz asked questions bluntly, and The Shadow answered them in Cranston's casual style. Questions and answers covered everything, from the conference with Director Thurling, through Cranston's trip to Lambron's office, and his final departure on the ten-o'clock train.

Brenz was particularly interested in the stock reports.

"You say Lambron was taking them to Director Thurling?"

"Yes," The Shadow replied. "Thurling expected them by midnight. They covered Lambron's stock transactions to the last detail."

" 'Transactions' is putting it mildly," sneered Brenz. "You should have said 'swindle,' Cranston."

"I'm only going by the reports themselves -"

Brenz wasn't listening. Murmurs were passing around the table, hushed whispers concerning Hubert Purnell. Cranston's mention of the quiz in Philadelphia was the cause of the gossip.

"You fools!" stormed Brenz. "You can't connect a man of integrity, like Purnell, with murder! A swindler like Lambron would need an alibi, but not Purnell. I'm going to call Purnell" - Brenz arose - "and tell him he has one friend, at least."

BRENZ was gone for ten minutes, and meanwhile, The Shadow lulled the rumor. In Cranston's quiet but persuasive style, he stated that if the Philadelphia police regarded Purnell a suspect in the Kerring case, they would have held him. Brenz returned to find the situation soothed.

"Purnell was as crabby as ever," informed Brenz. "Maybe I woke him up. He mentioned you, Cranston, and didn't relish your being in Philadelphia. He considered it odd that you should have taken such a sudden interest in the affairs of the association."

Going back to his own table, The Shadow related events to Margo. He concluded with the whimsical statement:

"Perhaps I did crowd myself into the picture. Poor policy, if I did, because I've tried to keep in the background at those M.S.A. meetings. I don't want to be regarded as a crusader, like Kerring or Fitzcroft. I'll remember that in the future."

Still watching Brenz's table, The Shadow noted the rugged man turning stony glances toward persons arriving for the last show. They were a racy crowd, all trying to be affable toward Brenz, who preferred to ignore them. The Shadow indicated it to Margo.

"There's Brenz for you," he said. "Lambron would be pleasant to those chaps, just as a matter of course. Brenz gives them the cold eye because he doesn't want to even admit acquaintance with a gambling crowd. Poor policy, because it makes it all the more apparent that he knows who they actually are."

Soon afterward, Cranston and Margo left the Spotlight, rather than watch a repetition of the floor show. When a cab stopped for them, the doorman gave the driver a scrutinizing look.

"We've had a bit of trouble, Mr. Cranston," said the doorman. "Patrons claiming they've been followed by stick-up men, even though none have actually attacked them. We're checking on the cabbies, just to make sure they look reliable."

The Shadow's cabby was reliable enough. He happened to be Moe Shrevnitz, one of The Shadow's own secret agents. The Shadow had called Moe, telling him to be at the Spotlight after one o'clock to take Margo home. Since Margo was still in a talkative mood, The Shadow decided to go along.

They were wheeling through Central Park when the trouble came - trouble bigger than any the doormen had suggested.

A car was following Moe's cab. It made a sudden spurt to pass the cab just before a curve. At the same moment, another car came bobbing out from a side drive, right across Moe's path. Nudged one way, blocked the other, the cab would have crashed if Moe hadn't done miracles with the wheel.

Instead of getting bashed between the other cars, Moe twisted the cab right off the drive, skirted an embankment on two wheels, and jammed on the brakes beside a pair of rugged trees towering up from the gully itself.

Careening over, the cab found the trees as supports, instead of rolling into the rocky depths. Moe had gauged the wheelbase nicely. One tree was right on line with the front wheels, the other with the rear.

Margo had grabbed for the high side, and had her head and shoulders through the open window of the door. She could hear Cranston's quiet voice below her, saying:

"Take it easy, Margo. Moe will help you out."

Moe heard, too, and worked his door open. He was climbing out to aid Margo, while Cranston was

busy about something else. He was drawing a drawer open beneath the tilted rear seat, bringing out garments of black. As Margo climbed out through the upper door, she looked back for Cranston.

The lower door was open, dangling! For some reason, Cranston had slid through it, to the slope beneath the canted cab! Margo was still wondering why, when the answer came. It was given in a raspy voice. She turned to see two masked men, with leveled guns in their hands covering herself and Moe.

"All right, dame," the voice said. "Shove aside! And you, too, hackie, while we take a look in this junk pile."

He poked his head into the cab, to stare at the dangling door below, while the other stick-up man kept Margo and Moe covered. It was then that the avalanche descended. Out of blackness, The Shadow!

NO longer Cranston, The Shadow had come up and around the cab. He swooped for one thug who was covering Margo and Moe, hoisted the fellow with a lunge that slid him up the side of the tilted cab. The thug's gun fired wide as he went over the top; then he was grabbing madly, uselessly, at the slanted top itself.

Like a ski jumper on a take-off, the crook sailed for the gully below, and his scramble only gave him an unenviable position for the hurtle ahead.

Even before the first thug crashed among the saplings, The Shadow was handling the other stick-up expert. Clutching him as he swung around from the cab door, The Shadow whirled him toward the back end of the cab.

This crook lost his gun under The Shadow's twisting grip, and it was well for him he did. Weaponless, he managed to use his hands as he went sprawling down behind the rear of the cab. He grabbed the trunk rack to save himself from a plunge into the gully.

Others were coming up from the cars on the driveway. Before they could start shooting, The Shadow was among them, slugging from darkness. They scattered, some getting to their cars, others running along the drive.

There were wild shot, which The Shadow promptly answered with his automatics. He was trying to stop the flight of the cars, but they managed to make a lucky escape around the curve. Halted cars on the driveway acted as a barrier to The Shadow's aim.

There were shrills of police whistles from below; the whine of a patrol siren coming from at distant drive. Crooks were gone, and the police were after them. Down in the gully, a few spasmodic shots were drowned by a barrage, telling that police from a lower drive had settled the thug who survived the plunge.

Leaving the chase to the law, The Shadow swung back to the cab.

The gunless thug had fled with the rest, so The Shadow moved down to the gully and found his first opponent. The fall had crippled the masked thug, so that he couldn't get away; and his insistence on shooting at the police had been sheer folly. The return fire had delivered mortal wounds, and the thug was gasping in final agony when The Shadow reached him.

Pulling away the mask that was twisted across the dying man's eyes, The Shadow flashed a light, to view a catlike face. He let the glow shine upward so that it showed himself, as well, and the gasping crook winced at sight of burning eyes that he knew must be The Shadow's.

"We... wasn't after you!" the thug coughed. "Honest, Shadow... we wasn't. We was lookin' for... another

guy... named Cranston -"

Whom "we" represented, The Shadow did not learn, for the thug's gulps ended before he could name his scattered companions. As the thug's eyes closed, The Shadow gave a low, quizzical laugh, as though probing the future that would bear the answer to this surprise attack by unknown crooks.

That laugh of the future was a link to the past, as though The Shadow recognized this thwarted thrust as a follow-up to the murder of Donald Kerring. Death was on the move anew, though, this time, its result had been reversed, with a would-be killer as a victim.

Death on the move!

It was on the move more definitely than The Shadow realized. Not until tomorrow would he recognize that this thrust against himself, as Cranston, was but an interlude in a stronger chain of crime!

CHAPTER VI. THE SECOND VICTIM

AT noon the next day, Lamont Cranston called at the office of the Industrial Paper Box Corp., which happened to be one of the companies controlled by Hubert Purnell. As was usual with Purnell-operated offices, the place was a crowded beehive.

When Cranston gave his name, he was promptly admitted to Purnell's private office, where the wizened financier greeted him quite affably.

"Well, Cranston," spoke Purnell, in his sharp tone, "I understand you're quite a public hero. It isn't every man who could beat off an attack by masked bandits in Central Park."

"Give the credit to the cab driver," returned The Shadow. "He pulled us away from what looked like a bad crash. The bandits hadn't really found us before the police arrived and drove them off."

Purnell gave his visitor a slightly tilted glance, but offered no criticism of his story. In fact, The Shadow had simply repeated what he told the police, when they found him back at the cab as Cranston. He'd remembered grabbing a thug with a gun and shoving him aside, but he wasn't sure whether the assailant had been the man who fell into the gully.

As for Margo and Moe, they'd remembered practically nothing. They'd let Cranston do most of the talking, while the police had been getting the cab back onto the road. Scratched, but not badly damaged, the cab had carried its passengers the rest of their journey.

"Nice of you to drop in, Cranston," said Purnell, in a crackle that he regarded as a friendly tone. "Since you talked with both Lambron and Brenz last night, I decided to ask you along with me today. You see" - his steely eyes were sharp as a ferret's - "We're going to have lunch with Noyes Fitzcroft."

Cranston expressed surprise at the invitation, even remarking that Fitzcroft might consider it an intrusion, should another person appear with Purnell.

"Nonsense!" snapped Purnell. "I know you're not active in our organization, Cranston. You couldn't be, the way you travel, and pay so little attention to the businesses in which you happen to have a controlling interest. But that won't matter with Fitzcroft. He'll want the opinions of someone like yourself."

"You see, Cranston" - again, Purnell's eyes were sharp - "I rather expected to find Fitzcroft in Philadelphia, yesterday, instead of you. He was quite interested in getting Lambron's view on Brenz. But I suppose he left the matter to me. I called him after I reached New York, but he wasn't home."

"Where is Fitzcroft at present?"

"At his apartment, I suppose," Purnell replied. "It's not far from his office, so he always stops back there at noon. So there's no use wasting time in calling him. We'll go there."

When they walked out through Purnell's own office, the financier called attention to the busy clerks, but remarked that the place was too crowded. Industrial Paper Box was expanding, as all of Purnell's enterprises did. He'd soon remove this staff to larger quarters, and use the offices for some other purpose.

"They'd do for the Manufacturers Security Association." The thought seemed to strike Purnell suddenly. "I shall mention it at the next meeting, Cranston."

Purnell was running true to form. It was like him, to unload a suite of offices on someone who would pay the freight - in this case, the M.S.A. Probably Purnell would take what he considered a legitimate profit on the deal. However, no objection came from Cranston. After all, the M.S.A. would be needing offices, and there wasn't any reason why Purnell's should not be considered.

Fitzcroft's apartment was located on the East Side. It occupied the second floor in a house that had once been a private residence. The visitors didn't have to ring the bell when they arrived, because the downstairs door was unlatched. They walked up a flight of stairs and knocked at Fitzcroft's door. While they waited, Purnell remarked:

"Rather old-fashioned, this place. Out of the way, too, because Fitzcroft likes it quiet. He pays too much rent, though. Far too much. Very poor service here. The janitor never is around."

Fitzcroft didn't answer the knock, So Purnell hammered anew, without result. At last, he decided that Fitzcroft might have stepped out on some errand, for the simple reason that he couldn't have sent the janitor who was never around. So Purnell tried the door, and it opened. He was smiling triumphantly across his shoulder when he entered.

"You see, Cranston? I was right about -"

Purnell's voice halted as he noted Cranston's eyes, looking steadily beyond him. He must have been quick to understand their glance, for he turned promptly in the same direction. With his gaze, Purnell froze. The tone that came from his dryish lips was a cross between a rattle and a harsh gasp.

Like Cranston, Purnell was looking straight at Noyes Fitzcroft, who was seated in an easy-chair. Fitzcroft's face was normally pale, but never so white as it showed at present. His eyes, which always gave a cold impression, now had the actual appearance of ice, for they had a glassy glisten.

His hands, clutching the blue plush of the chair arms, were digging deep with their fingernails in a grip that spelled all the agony of sudden death. For Noyes Fitzcroft was indeed dead, without a doubt as to the cause of his demise.

His shirt front was the replica of Kerring's as The Shadow had viewed it two nights ago. Stained with an ugly blur of deepened crimson, the shirt announced that Fitzcroft, too, had received a bullet through the heart.

TAKING a few slow steps forward, Purnell turned suddenly and clutched Cranston's arm. He inquired hoarsely:

"Cranston! What shall we do?"

"I'd suggest calling the police commissioner," replied The Shadow calmly. "I think we'll find him as understanding as the safety director in Philadelphia."

When the commissioner arrived, he did prove understanding. Commissioner Ralph Weston happened to be a close friend of Lamont Cranston, something which caused Hubert Purnell to express surprise.

Weston brought along some men with him, including a stocky, swarthy-faced inspector named Joe Cardona. There was a police surgeon, too, who showed the same precision in examining Fitzcroft's body as that displayed by the Philadelphia doctor who had given an opinion on the Kerring tragedy.

"Thirteen to fourteen hours," announced the surgeon. "That would place the time of death between ten and eleven o'clock last night. I may be able to set it more accurately later, but it was certainly somewhere within that hour."

"Approximately ten thirty," defined the commissioner, splitting the difference. "I'm wondering if certain persons have an alibi in this case, as they had in that Philadelphia murder. I'm referring to Ralph Lambron and Andrew Brenz."

"I'm sorry, commissioner," put in The Shadow, "but you won't have any luck. They'll both refer you back to me."

"You mean that you were with them, Cranston, at ten thirty last night?"

"I was with Lambron, in Philadelphia, shortly after ten. I ran into Brenz just after midnight at the Spotlight, here in New York."

The commissioner remarked that the midnight meeting didn't account for where Brenz might have been at half past ten, but when The Shadow mentioned that Brenz had been flinging a party since eight o'clock, with half a dozen reputable friends on hand, Weston's face went glum.

It seemed that Commissioner Weston had a disregard for Brenz that quite resembled Director Thurling's dislike toward Lambron. He dispatched Inspector Cardona to Brenz's apartment, saying that he'd like to quiz Brenz, anyway.

Then, to even matters, the New York commissioner put in a long-distance phone call and talked with the Philadelphia safety director. In the course of the conversation, Weston turned to The Shadow.

"Tell me, Cranston," said the commissioner. "Was Lambron's secretary, Mordan, with you all evening? The director wants to know."

"He was until ten o'clock."

Weston relayed the news. Terminating the call, he remarked that Director Thurling was sending Lambron over to New York, on the chance he might help solve the Fitzcroft riddle.

"They both showed up in the director's office around midnight," informed Weston. "Lambron and his secretary, Mordan. You've accounted for them up to ten o'clock, Cranston, and Thurling saw them before midnight. They couldn't have made it between Philadelphia and New York in less than an hour each way, not even by plane, because of time required to get in from the airports."

The Shadow nodded. He had looked into that very matter. A ninety-minute train ride represented very fast time between the two cities.

"Brenz has a chauffeur," recalled Weston. "A man named Richtle -"

"Who was sitting in a corner of the Spotlight watching the party, last night," inserted The Shadow. "Richle has an alibi, like Mordan. However much they criticize each other, Lambron and Brenz both seem thoughtful of their hired help."

ALL the while, Hubert Purnell had been listening intently. His steel-blue eyes showed a pleased flash. He liked it because the commissioner was stubbornly trying to crack the Fitzcroft murder in terms of Lambron or Brenz, and he appreciated Cranston's similar attitude.

However, Purnell's own test was due. It came when Weston suddenly confronted him.

"Director Thurling said that you were driving through Philadelphia," said Weston. "I mean night before last, Purnell. Around six o'clock, the time when Kerring was slain."

"I was near Kerring's at six thirty, commissioner."

"I see." Weston nodded. "What about last night, Purnell? You started from Philadelphia around seven thirty, didn't you? What time did you reach New York?"

"Not before half past ten," returned Purnell hastily. "That is, I didn't get home until then. I live well uptown, you know. Traffic was very heavy, both in Philadelphia and here."

Weston gave a brief nod. He dropped the quiz even more rapidly than Thurling had the day before. He decided to concentrate on Fitzcroft's death, which wasn't difficult, considering that he was right on the scene of crime.

The chair in which the body lay was similar to others in the overfurnished room. It was probably Fitzcroft's favorite, because its blue plush was a trifle darker than the others. The chair looked comfortable, even though it contained a dead man, and it was facing another, which indicated that Fitzcroft had been entertaining a visitor at the time the murder occurred.

Taking the opposite chair, Weston rose suddenly and lunged toward the body. He gave a nod to support his theory. A quick forward shove, and Fitzcroft's unknown visitor could easily have planted a gun against the victim's heart and fired.

By the time Weston completed that simple test, detectives were returning to report what little they had learned.

They had found the janitor, sound asleep, in the basement. He'd been out until three o'clock the night before and was sleeping off a hangover. He didn't know when Fitzcroft had come in last night; for that matter, he couldn't account for anything on the morning of the present day.

The detectives had investigated the other apartments. The one on the first floor was unoccupied; its tenants were away. There was no one home on the third floor; the janitor said that its occupants, a married couple, both had jobs in the daytime and usually went out at night.

Commissioner Weston started downstairs to talk to the janitor, whose so-called apartment was located at the end of a passage leading out to the rear street. When he looked around, he saw that Cranston and Purnell were following him. Weston turned abruptly.

"You two were going out to lunch," he said in an annoyed tone. "So why don't you go along - if you still feel like eating?"

They went along: Lamont Cranston, who was actually the chief investigator in the murder of Kerring and Fitzcroft, and Hubert Purnell, who was really the chief suspect. So far, the police, both in Philadelphia

and New York, had refused to concede them the individual importance that was really theirs.

It should have seemed odd to The Shadow, lunching with a man whom he might later reveal as a double murderer; but it didn't. The Shadow had done such things before.

CHAPTER VII. DARK BRINGS ITS TRAIL

THE SHADOW was in his sanctum. A hidden room somewhere in the heart of Manhattan; a black chamber surrounded by curtained walls wherein the sun never shone. Such was the secret habitat where the master of all crime investigators worked over the details of cases that baffled the law.

This was, indeed, a doubly baffling case.

Beneath a bluish light which shone on a polished table surface, The Shadow's hands were at work, sorting every shred of evidence that might provide him with a clue. Newspaper clippings were in plenty, but they represented only a fraction of The Shadow's data.

He had confidential reports on Lambron's stocks; inside accounts of Brenz's gambling activities. Even larger was the stack of papers that covered Purnell's Wall Street transactions. Even in such proportions, the evidence always came out the same.

Lambron and Brenz, on their past records, were men quite capable of individual crime, which might, under forced conditions, rise to the size of murder. Purnell, on the contrary, was a great hand at truly legitimate schemes. The only thing which could have turned him into a killer was the strength of his position.

That, in itself, was significant to The Shadow. He'd known men of Purnell's class to go the extreme limit. But this situation provided a remarkable paradox.

Just as the alibis of Lambron and Brenz were absolute, so were those of Purnell weak to the extreme. As The Shadow wrote the three names in bluish ink, Purnell's came last, and held him to such a point that he finally ignored it and went back to those of Lambron and Brenz.

There, The Shadow pondered. How amazingly the two names nullified each other!

Lambron couldn't have killed Kerring. Though both were in Philadelphia, Lambron had a perfect alibi, covering a stretch of hours before and after Kerring's death. As for Brenz, he had definitely been in New York at the time when Kerring died.

In his turn, Lambron had been in Philadelphia at the time when Fitzcroft was murdered. In this case, Brenz was the man in the same city as the victim, but Brenz could show a period of many hours in the company of friends, which let him out entirely.

As for Mordan and Richtle, they had tailed along with their respective employers during all the storm and stress. What went for Lambron and Brenz, went for their understudies, too.

A strange laugh began as The Shadow clicked off the blue light. Caught by the darkness, that sinister mirth was echoed from the curtained walls. It persisted even when The Shadow had departed, to reappear in the outdoor daylight as Lamont Cranston.

It was still the same day, but the day was waning, when a cab stopped near the building where Purnell's offices were located. It was half past five, and the only light from Purnell's floor came from the financier's own office.

Entering the building, The Shadow found a stairway leading up to Purnell's floor. The stairs wound around the shaft of a freight elevator, and formed an excellent rear route to The Shadow's goal. Naturally, The Shadow was carrying a black hat and cloak. He was wearing the garments when he stepped through the gloomy outer office, to peer into Purnell's private premises.

ELBOWS on his desk, Purnell was talking to two rather wise-looking men, who could have passed for twins. They didn't need badges to identify themselves for what they were: private detectives.

"One swallow doesn't make a summer," Purnell was telling them. "Therefore, I wasn't willing to concede that Kerring's death had to do with the Manufacturers Security Association. But it is also true that lightning never strikes twice in the same place. When Fitzcroft was murdered, I knew that the M.S.A. was involved."

The dicks nodded.

"Want us to fix an alibi for you?" queried one. "We can do it, Mr. Purnell."

"Our specialty," added the other. "We've got lots of friends. The right kind - professionals that can talk like amateurs."

Purnell pounded the desk angrily.

"My integrity is my alibi!" he snapped. "What I want you to do is find real evidence in these cases!"

The dicks stared, as if they wondered where they could begin. Purnell understood. He gave them a suggestion.

"There's a man named Lamont Cranston," he said, "who has taken a very unusual interest in these matters. His attitude is too unusual, considering that he is a wealthy clubman who doesn't ordinarily bother with anything requiring work. I want you to watch him."

"Cranston!" exclaimed one dick. "Say - he's the bird who chased off a stick-up mob in Central Park!"

"Yeah," put in the other. "The cops got one of the crew. They haven't traced any of the rest, though. Looks like they were a bunch of outsiders."

"We've got to be careful," said the first to his companion. "This Cranston duck is poison!"

"You bet he is," chimed the twin. "He might mistake us for a couple of sticker-uppers."

Purnell gave a snort; then spoke testily.

"You are merely to trail Cranston," he told them. "No rough tactics will be necessary. If you find out anything, notify me promptly. I can act upon your information."

The dicks exchanged wise looks. They were taking it that Purnell could supply the men to handle any necessary rough stuff, though, naturally, he was too canny to convey it in such terms. Satisfied with the arrangement, they asked what Cranston looked like and Purnell gave them a precise description. Next, they wanted to know where he could be found. Purnell had an answer for that one, too.

"Andrew Brenz is giving a party at his hotel, the Park Gardens," said Purnell. "He invited all the members of the association, but I felt it good policy to decline. However, Ralph Lambron will be there, because he has come over from Philadelphia.

"Much though they dislike each other, Lambron and Brenz never ignore a chance to meet. Considering

the meddling proclivities that Cranston has displayed, I assume that he will be there, also."

The Shadow was gone before the private dicks left Purnell's office. He was bound for the Park Gardens, because Brenz had made the invitation for six o'clock. Arriving as Cranston, The Shadow was shown up to Brenz's suite, where he received a warm greeting from the men who had already assembled.

BRENZ'S suite was something to look at. He had furnished it himself, in very garish style. Portraits of race horses adorned the walls, along with those of art models, all wearing about the same amount of harness. Chairs were very fancy, all gilded, and rugs, small and large, were thick along the floor.

Drinks were being served, mixed by Richtle. The chauffeur had spent so many waiting hours watching barkeepers, that he had practically learned the trade. Wearing an apron and handling a cocktail shaker, the blocky chauffeur was watching the guests from a little pantry that adjoined the living room. When it came to technique, Richtle had it, except on one point.

Whenever Richtle came out of the pantry, he crossed a stretch of open floor and his heels clicked hard on the woodwork. Richtle didn't know what it was to be soft-footed. In that respect, he couldn't compare to Mordan, the silent secretary who sat next to his employer, Ralph Lambron. The Shadow had seen Mordan move around, and knew that he could do it very quietly, rug or no rug.

Shaking hands all around, The Shadow sat down and adopted his Cranston pose, while he watched the entertainment that Brenz had provided. The diversion was quite informal; it consisted in the exchange of subtle insults between Brenz and Lambron, a type of banter that would have become a sudden flare if the two contestants had not been cool in such circumstances.

Brenz was remarking how seldom Philadelphians came to New York, unless they had good reason. His implication was that Lambron wasn't very well liked in the city that he had so recently left. In return, Lambron said that at least he was going back to Philadelphia, and he wondered how soon Brenz intended to return to Chicago, or wherever else he had originally come from.

Brenz countered by saying that every city was his home, and when Lambron asked, "For how long?" the guests couldn't restrain their smile. With that, Brenz suggested that Lambron could use another drink, so the sallow man called for one, telling Richtle to "go double on the Mickey Finn." The sally turned the smiles into laughter, in which Brenz joined.

"You're the life of the party," he told Lambron. "I'm glad you'll be with us the rest of the evening."

"Sorry, but I won't," rejoined Lambron. "You've talked of Philly as a dead town, so I'll take the life back there."

"At least, you'll stay for dinner," insisted Brenz. "You eat, don't you, Lambron?"

"In dining cars," returned Lambron. "There's one on the train I'm taking. It's the next train, by the way."

Brenz turned to Richtle.

"Pour that drink," said Brenz, "and then get the car. I want you to drive Mr. Lambron to the station. There's just about time to make the next train comfortably."

"More than that, Mr. Brenz," insisted the chauffeur. "I won't have to get the car for ten minutes. It's right here in the hotel garage."

"Of course," acknowledged Brenz. "I'd forgotten. Pour the drink, Richtle, and take your time about it."

In just about ten minutes, Richtle left; whereupon, Lambron arose and his secretary followed suit. Brenz shook hands with Lambron and gave a nod to Mordan, as the two left. Since Richtle was gone, Brenz decided to mix the next drink himself.

A few other guests decided they would have to go. Perhaps they didn't trust Brenz's skill as a drink mixer; possibly, they felt that Lambron's departure had finished all the fun. However, they gave neither of those excuses; nor did Cranston, as he also rose to leave. They simply remembered other engagements and bowed themselves out quite politely.

THE SHADOW, for one, did have another engagement.

When he reached the glittering lobby of the Park Gardens, he paused at a tobacco stand to buy some cigars. Strolling about, he looked at magazines displayed on a rack. He even sat down a while in a chair near the side door. Then, in his most leisurely style, he strolled out through the door and stood gazing at the street.

A couple of cabs paused, only to receive headshakes and go on, until at length the idling Mr. Cranston stopped one with a lazy wave of his arm. It looked like any other cab, but it happened to be the very one The Shadow wanted. It was Moe Shrevnitz's cab.

Stepping in, The Shadow gave an order to the driver. The cab pulled slowly away, halting at the avenue before gingerly poking into traffic. As the cab turned the corner, Cranston's face appeared at the rear window. A whispered laugh voiced itself on his motionless lips. The mirth was The Shadow's.

Slow motion, while posing as Cranston, had brought results. Two men were getting into another cab back at the hotel, in order to follow Moe's. They were the private detectives who had been told to trail Cranston.

Purnell's bloodhounds were taking the bait exactly as The Shadow wanted!

CHAPTER VIII. ROUNDABOUT TRAIL

From the Park Gardens, The Shadow had Moe drive him directly south to the Metrolite, the hotel where the manufacturers' group usually held its meetings. The ride was more than a dozen blocks, and terminated after a short jog along the cross street where the Metrolite was located.

Alighting as Cranston, The Shadow held a discussion with his driver, which resulted in Moe agreeing to wait until he returned. By then, the private dicks had arrived in their cab. Not sure that Cranston would return, they trailed him into the Metrolite, where he looked around the lobby as though expecting someone, and then went out again, with the two dicks practically in tow.

The Shadow was still Cranston, a guise which he intended to preserve. He wasn't even carrying his automatics, nor other accessories. They were stowed away in the special drawer underneath the rear seat in Moe's cab, along with The Shadow's cloak and hat.

Back in the cab, however, Cranston's actions became rather odd; or, rather, those of the cab itself were odd, though they were at Cranston's order.

The cab began a return trip to the Park Gardens, but instead of taking the straight route, it followed a zigzag course. A few blocks east, one north, some four blocks west, another north, and finally four blocks east again. Riding in the cab behind, the two detectives couldn't understand it.

Their driver was grinning at their dilemma, suggesting that their quarry was giving them the run-around;

but they still stuck to their original order of, "Follow that cab." So the driver did, while the meter continued to clock up a sizable bill that would be eventually charged to Hubert Purnell.

Most curious was the fact that Cranston's cab, though moving rather rapidly at first, reduced itself to a snail's pace as it continued the Manhattan zigzag.

Block by block, it appeared that the astute Mr. Cranston was looking for something that he couldn't quite find. His trip was something of a slumming excursion, too, because it was only on the dingy side streets that Moe's cab lingered; never along the lighted avenues at the end of each crosstack.

On the avenue, the cab would whip off as though really going somewhere, only to loaf back into its slow cross-town habit. As for what Cranston was seeking, it might be here, there, or anywhere.

Mostly, Moe's cab paused at alleys, or passages between buildings; sometimes at wider spaces that had the look of parking lots. There were occasional garages in this vicinity, mostly large, well-lighted ones that offered passage through to the next street.

Cranston had a way of spotting such places that worried the human bloodhounds who trailed him. They were afraid that Cranston would suddenly order his cab to spurt through an inside route to another street; that an obliging garage man would promptly slide a door in front of the trailing cab. In that case, Cranston would easily give his followers the slip.

So the dicks had their cab close in every time the thing threatened; but it never did happen. After a survey that totaled a few dollars in terms of taxi fare, Cranston's cab moved more briskly along a side street, and suddenly pulled up at its initial starting place, the Park Gardens.

This time, Cranston paid the driver off. It was actually like putting money from one pocket into another, though the private dicks didn't know it. Cranston owned Moe's cab, and his roundabout excursion had cost him little more than the price of gasoline. While he was paying Moe, Cranston gave him quiet-toned instructions.

"Two blocks south and two east," he undertoned. "About a hundred feet beyond the corner, on the south side of the street. Cruise through in about twenty minutes. If you don't see me, try the next street below."

Moe gave a backward nudge with his thumb, meant for the two dicks who were crouched in the other cab farther back beside the curb.

"And those lugs?"

"Don't let them stop you." Cranston's tone carried a faint trace of The Shadow's whisper. "They might want to hire your cab. We'll let them walk back and save money."

"I get it," said Moe, with a nod. "I'll cruise the street where they aren't. One place or the other, I'll find you."

"It will probably be the other street," was Cranston's quiet observation. "I'd prefer to let them stay around; so I'll keep out of their sight, too. It may take them a half-hour to get a glimmer of what I hope to learn in one brief look."

INSTEAD of going into the Park Gardens, Cranston turned and strolled back past the cab that contained the private dicks, who crowded still lower, hoping he wouldn't see them.

He was acting in accordance with what he had told Moe, but not having overheard the conversation, Cranston's trailers couldn't figure what he was about. Since their orders were to follow him, they paid off

their driver and took up the task.

Rather rapidly, despite his leisurely stride, Cranston was going back into the area that he had so recently toured by cab. Two blocks south and two blocks east would mark his goal, but he was zigzagging to the destination, just to keep his trailers interested. He was quite sure they didn't know what he was about, and might not fully guess, even after it was all over.

Whether Purnell would understand, after getting a report, was another question. One which might provide an interesting answer.

It happened that Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow, was playing a growing hunch, which, if it came up to expectations, would strengthen a few points that he had observed in connection with the deaths of Kerring and Fitzcroft. His present hope was that it would stand the test.

Dangerous, perhaps, for The Shadow to venture thus without his guise of black. But he had reasons for preferring that Purnell's hired sleuths should follow along. Since they had been told to trail Cranston, they wouldn't shift to The Shadow unless the transformation of one to the other took place in open view. That would have meant a give-away of something that The Shadow didn't care to disclose: the matter of his dual identity.

So Cranston he remained, and with it, retained his gunless status. If trouble loomed, the sudden production of two automatics would mark him as The Shadow, more or less.

It would be better to handle worrisome matters in typically Cranston style, should they occur. Fistwork or jujitsu throws were quite in keeping with the present personality, and the weight of guns would only hamper such activities.

Rather jolly, this business of putting Cranston into danger. It was to prove a bit jollier than the present Mr. Cranston expected. Soon, The Shadow was to learn something that he had more or less ignored: namely, that playing one's own hunch was a sufficient task in itself, without extending the favor to others.

Reaching the corner that he had mentioned to Moe, Cranston suddenly lengthened his stride. Quite moderately, almost accidentally, it seemed, he applied The Shadow's tactics of merging with helpful darkness. It was very simple, along this gloomy street - mere side shifts toward the shelter of darkened doorways, short pauses, then quick forward glides, were enough to confuse the trailers.

Squinting, the dicks wondered where Cranston had gone. One suddenly saw him strolling past the broad and grimy front of a garage door that stretched between two brick houses. The spot was about a hundred feet from the corner where the dicks stood, so they hurried forward, hoping to close the gap.

They closed it better than they supposed. Cranston had tried that door before shoving himself past it. Opened slightly, the end of the door provided a block of blackness that the dicks mistook for the wall of the house beyond it.

They didn't guess that the artful Mr. Cranston was stepping into a convenient opening, as they dashed forward. They were too intent on spying him farther ahead to notice that the door was sliding shut as they passed it.

From inside the narrow garage, Cranston was peering through the door crack as Purnell's hirelings hustled by. Putting pressure behind his lithe shoulder, he urged the door the remaining inches, sliding it fully shut. Turning, he used a pencil flashlight to flip a thin beam into the darkness of the garage.

THE place was small and narrow, though fairly long, with a dim door at the far end, indicating an exit into

a rear alley. It contained cars, mostly old ones; some with flat tires, others propped up on jacks.

Too cramped to compete with the busy garages that Cranston had observed along other side streets, this place had no attendant. It was evidently operating on a dead-storage basis, housing old cars at a minimum rate.

There was just one exception: a truck that occupied a choice space. It was turned about, its nose toward the front door. It was a truck of medium size, and it bore three or four license plates, indicating that it was used for haulage outside of New York. Though old, the truck appeared to be in good running order. After studying it carefully, Cranston approached it.

In so doing, he passed a sedan that also was pointed toward the door. Its spot would have served for a car in constant use, but the sedan happened to be raised on jacks, so Cranston gave it little attention.

He was beyond it, his flashlight turned the other way, when his ears caught sounds from the shelter of the jacked-up car.

Instantly, Cranston's light went off. Wheeling speedily in total darkness, he met the men who surged in his direction. His jabbing fist scored a straight hit on the first one; catching the next, Cranston ended the fellow's effort at a grapple by sending him across the floor with a flying mare.

There was a third man coming up, and Cranston wheeled to flank him. The right trick was a long side-step, to be followed by an inward drive, but this time it didn't work. The noise of the fray had drowned the approach of other contestants. They, too, were coming in from the flank, and they found Cranston in the darkness.

Before he could even twist away, the lone fighter was buried beneath a pile of slugging foemen who sprawled him on the cement floor!

CHAPTER IX. HUMAN CARGO

EVEN against such unexpected odds, Cranston put up an excellent fight. He could have settled those odds, had he brought along a single automatic, for there were times he had one hand free as he twisted along the floor. Even without a gun, he'd have had a chance, if his assailants had not been using revolvers themselves, as a threat.

Not only was the persistent Mr. Cranston warding off slugs from blackjacks and short chunks of lead pipe; he was actually taking those weapons from the hands that used them. Had he grabbed a revolver among the assorted bludgeons he could have fingered the trigger with sure success.

Blackjacks and lead pipes were useless, however. Hands tried to get them back as soon as they lost them, and Cranston's only course was to send the things thudding or clanging away. If he could reduce the fray to a bare-fisted fight, he'd have a real chance - and he was getting there.

When on his feet, Cranston flung foemen with quick handgrips. With every tumble, he used his legs to clip and sprawl assailants who lunged for him. They were hitting the floor harder than he was, and if there had been less than six of them, they would soon have found themselves dazedly wondering where their lone antagonist had gone.

Six happened to be too many.

As Cranston found his feet for the fourth time, something swiped wide through the air and met the side of his head. There was a big burst of light, followed by another blaze of fireworks, as Cranston's head

cracked an automobile hood, this time taking the blow on the other side. With those two impressions of shooting stars, Cranston was out to stay.

One man supplied a flashlight, to reveal Cranston lying in front of the jacked-up sedan. Beside the lone fighter stood a thug who was dangling a short stocking. Inverting the sock, as though expecting a present from Santa Claus, the slugger let a cake of soap slide from it.

"Glad I brought this along," he chuckled. "It's better than them things" - he waved disdainfully toward the blackjacks and lengths of pipe that lay about the floor - "because it gives you long range. All I had to do was swing wide and let the guy get in the way of it."

Thus handled, the sock and its cake of soap had indeed combined to score a knockout. The man with the flashlight granted an approval that was echoed by others rising from the floor. The flashlight approached closer to Cranston. Suddenly, its owner gruffed:

"Say, this is the guy we went after in Central Park! It's Cranston, the bird we would have gotten if The Shadow hadn't come along!"

Other thugs stooped to make sure. Once they identified their unconscious prisoner, Cranston's life span should have been very brief, considering that this same crew had definitely intended to kill him, two nights before.

For some reason, however, they hesitated. It wasn't through fear that The Shadow might arrive, to effect another rescue of the hapless Mr. Cranston. These crooks had other things in mind.

"No use to croak him now," said one. "That deal was off, after the other night."

"Yeah," put in another. "It's off, even though it ain't our reason to know why."

"That don't mean we oughtn't to croak him anyway."

"One guy could tell us - the guy that sent us the dough twice. Once to go after Cranston, the other night; and then paid us to come and fix things in this dump."

"Sure, he could tell us. Only, where is he?"

"And who is he?"

IT was unfortunate that The Shadow couldn't be listening to those comments. He would have learned that this improvised mob of independent hoodlums was working blind. Someone had either phoned them separately, or called one and told him to pick the others and have them ready, when needed.

They were still taking orders when such were backed with money, but they didn't know who was hiring them, and evidently didn't care.

"Maybe we ought to stow this Cranston dude somewhere," suggested one. "Then we could ask what to do with him when we hear from the boss again."

"Stow him where?" queried another. "Why go to a lot of trouble we ain't getting any dough for?"

"No more trouble than if we croak him. I don't like dumping him somewhere. This ain't like the park job. There's too much chance of a trace-back."

"Say... I got an idea!"

The thug who had the thought didn't express it immediately. Someone gave a sharp hiss for silence; another man sneaked toward the garage door. The fellow was just in time to close a clamp before hands on the other side could slide the door open.

As it was, the men outside managed to pull the door open an inch. By then, the flashlight was extinguished and the garage quite silent.

A little later, whispers resumed within.

"Who were them guys? Friends of Cranston?"

"Naw. They'd have stuck around longer, if they were. They're jest a couple of clucks who may have heard some noise in here."

"Maybe they've gone around back."

The suggested possibility worried the listeners. They turned to the crook who had mentioned a plan regarding Cranston. He gave the details briefly, and the others liked it.

Working rapidly, they bound Cranston hand and foot, gagged him, and stowed him in the rear of the truck that stood in the corner. It was a very satisfactory place to hide the prisoner, for the truck was loaded with crates containing cans of varnish, as well as some empty packing boxes.

Buried beneath the crates, with packing boxes piled over top, Cranston was totally hidden from sight.

Meanwhile, Moe's cab had come along the front street. He saw something that the crooks in the garage hadn't. The two private dicks were holding a consultation near the corner. They were the persons who had tried the garage door, and they wondered if Cranston had gone in, bolting it behind him.

Of course, Moe didn't know what the two were talking about, so he decided to drive around the block and look for Cranston on the next street.

Moe happened to take the long way, and the detectives, about that time, agreed to try the next street, too. Naturally, they chose the shorter route. Like the cruising cab, the prowling dicks were gone when a wary thug poked his head out from the front of the garage and reported to the others that all was clear.

Crooks dropped the jacks that were propping the usable sedan. With four men on board, the car coasted out of the garage; its motor came to life suddenly, and it started away, while two men remained to slide the garage door shut. That pair then sneaked across the street, to watch the garage from darkness.

PARKED in the next street, Moe Shrevnitz saw Purnell's operatives come stalking from the corner. The two halted beside a narrow passage that led through to a courtyard, from which they could probably enter the rear of the garage.

Apparently, each was suggesting that the other go through and take a look. They spent three or four minutes in such persuasion, and finally both gave it up. They went through the passage together.

Moe waited, expecting Cranston to appear, but he didn't. Remembering The Shadow's instructions, Moe decided that his chief must have spotted the arguing dicks and gone around to the other street, to meet the cab there.

Calculating that he'd have time while the detectives were nosing around the old garage, Moe made another trip around the block. His guess as to time proved wrong.

The dicks had finished looking through the garage. The only thing that really impressed them was that the front door wasn't locked, after all. Their gestures told what they were discussing, which was fortunate for them.

Across the street, two guns were trained upon the second-rate sleuths. The watchful crooks hadn't been told to grant special privileges to any snoopers. They'd have blasted away, had the detectives shown signs of knowing anything important.

Moe was in luck, too. Instead of stopping his cab, he rolled right through and went around the block again. So the gunners opposite the garage simply classed the cab as one that happened to be going by.

When he reached that other street, Moe decided to remain there, on the theory that the dicks would have no reason to return and that, therefore, Cranston would.

Closing the garage door, the dicks went their way, shrugging their shoulders. They could only report to Purnell that Cranston, after a half-hour of very peculiar behavior, had slipped his tracers somewhere near an old and practically deserted garage.

During the next six or seven minutes, lurkers across the way still kept watching that almost-forgotten garage. They couldn't have been expecting Cranston to appear, for they'd done a good job at binding him, and he'd be weak when he regained consciousness, if ever. They were watching for someone else, who came at the end of that short waiting period.

He came along the street, a burly man who wore khaki trousers and a gray flannel shirt under his sleeveless blue jersey. He was wearing an old cap drawn down over one eye, and he finished a cigarette, flicking it carefully away as he reached the garage.

Pulling the door wide, the tardy man strode right into darkness as though he knew the way. Half a minute later, the interior was illuminated by big headlights, which started moving. The truck was coming out.

The burly man stopped in the middle of the street, left his truck and went back to close the garage door. Hopping into the truck again, he drove away in very carefree style.

The gunners who watched the garage slipped away from their doorways. They turned a corner, away from the other street where Moe was waiting, and after a few blocks, the ratty pair found the car containing their equally rodentlike companions.

They reported the two prowlers who had come through the garage, and assured their pals that the pair hadn't found Cranston. Next, the informants stated that the trucker had also come and gone.

"Sure he didn't take a look in the back of the truck" queried one of the listeners.

"He couldn't of," came the reply. "He wasn't in the garage long enough."

"Any chance that he spotted the gimmick?"

"Naw. It's too well hid. We couldn't even spot it when the truck went by, and we was lookin' right under the front wheel, from where we was."

There were chuckles from the men in the sedan. One of the murderous crew turned his chortle to words:

"Good-by, Cranston!"

He might as well have said: "Good-by, Shadow!"

CHAPTER X. ALONG THE HIGHWAY

THE boat must have smacked a big wave, because The Shadow could hear the swash of water against its sides. He was all tangled up in the blankets, and when he tried to rise, his head thumped the bunk above. Maybe the bump helped, for with it, he suddenly realized that he wasn't on a boat at all.

The Shadow was in the back of a truck. The splashes he'd heard came from varnish cans in crates that he had mistaken for a ship's wall. The tangling blankets were ropes that bound his hands and feet; the taste of flannel from a strip of cloth that gagged him. The bunk overhead was an empty packing case, placed so it would hide him.

It all went back to the garage where he had taken on six foemen at once, only to be stopped by a cake of soap that had felt more like a rock. All in all, it wasn't surprising that The Shadow should have awakened with the impression that he'd been shanghaied aboard a sailing vessel.

The jolt that really roused him was caused by the sudden stopping of the truck. The driver had used the air brakes rather sharply, and now The Shadow could hear him calling to someone on the road:

"Come on, fella! I'll give you a lift!"

From the tone and the invitation, The Shadow recognized that the trucker didn't belong to the bunch back in the garage. He'd evidently stopped to pick up a hitchhiker, and would probably show friendliness toward an enforced stowaway already on board the truck. So The Shadow gave the packing case a shove with his shoulders, hoping to overturn it and attract the driver's attention.

The empty box went over too late. The truck was starting and its jerk helped to dislodge the object, but the rumble of the motor drowned the noise of the packing box's fall. Head up above the crates, The Shadow saw the truck driver turn momentarily, then concentrate on the wheel again. The driver had heard a slight sound, but thought it was caused by the sudden start he gave the truck.

Still, The Shadow's plight wasn't particularly bad.

The crooks had bound him well, but there was one thing they'd forgotten: the corners of the crates. Such corners were a great help when it came to getting out of ropes that didn't provide enough slack. His back to a crate, The Shadow worked his wrists beneath one of the projections and stretched his shoulders, to throw the full strain on the ropes.

Mobsters had mistaken Cranston simply for a society man who was good with his fists, and - as they'd have termed it - lucky. They'd figured that The Shadow had helped him in one fight, and darkness in another. Had they been on hand at present, to witness Cranston's deftness with the ropes, they might have seen the link between him and The Shadow.

For Cranston was operating in true Shadow style. When the wrist ropes wouldn't give, he hooked his ankles on another crate corner and slid backward, downward, until all his weight was working on the ankle ropes. They yielded better, and finally, when The Shadow pulled one foot upward, the ropes themselves helped peel away his shoe, so that his foot could slide through.

By then, The Shadow could have stumbled forward and attracted the attention of the truck driver. Being partly released, he decided to continue the process and regain some portion of the dignity that belonged to Lamont Cranston. His first move, however, wasn't dignified, for it resembled a contortion act.

With his feet free, he was able to double his body to the point where he could slide his wrists under his feet and up in front of him, a maneuver that almost threw his shoulders out of joint.

Once he accomplished it, The Shadow brought his hands up to his face and removed the troublesome gag. He was then free to work on the wrist knots with his teeth. Loosened knots enabled him to acquire slack, and he soon worked the ropes over his hands.

Picking up his other shoe, The Shadow eased forward from the pile of crates and sat on a packing box just behind the driver and the hitchhiker. While he was putting on his shoe, and rubbing the numbness from his wrists, he listened to the conversation of the two men.

He didn't miss much, because they'd just begun to talk.

It was the hitchhiker who opened proceedings.

"Drive over through Jersey often?"

"Every day," replied the trucker. "Sometimes I get over to New York early, if I've got rush loads. I never come back until evening, though. Always chance of a late pickup, if I stick around the office."

"Working for a company, huh?"

"I'm working for Tim Lanney." The truck driver turned his head, revealing a blunt profile. Then, deciding that the hitchhiker didn't get the inference, he added: "Tim Lanney - that's me!"

"Glad to know you, Tim," gruffed the rider. "My name's Jerry." Dropping the introduction, as though considering a surname unnecessary, he remarked: "You said something about an office."

"An agent runs it," explained Tim. "He gets hauls for independent truckers and takes his rake-off. I'd rather pick 'em myself. I do in Philly, but it's tougher in New York. Anyway, every job I pick up saves me paying a commission."

Jerry gave a knowing grunt.

"Yeah," he said. "Only you gotta collect, don't you?"

"Cash in advance," spoke Tim. "That's my motto. No dough, no haul. I don't mind riding empty, sometimes."

"You're not riding empty this trip."

"No." Tim shoved a big thumb over his shoulder, stopping about six inches short of Cranston's face. "Got a shipment of varnish in back. I'll have to leave the truck in a regular garage, because the place I use isn't safe enough to keep valuable stuff overnight. The money's safe enough, though" - Tim was thwacking his inside pocket - "because I keep it on me."

"You won't be keeping it long!"

The man who called himself Jerry emphasized that point by suddenly pressing a revolver against his ribs, just below the wallet. Tim edged a trifle to the left, acted as though he intended to deliver an elbow punch.

"No funny stuff," growled Jerry, "or I'll let you have it! I know how to handle a truck without wrecking it, so shove over. I'm taking the wheel!"

He nudged the gun harder, and Tim took the hint. He was loath to release the wheel, however, even though his hands did loosen. Jerry told him to "get 'em up, one by one," so Tim did, right hand first.

He was being pressed to the extreme edge of the seat, while Jerry, using his gun left-handed, was taking control of the truck, in an expert fashion that showed him to be well trained at the particular task.

"So you were taking the back road," sneered Jerry, "to keep out of heavy traffic. I like to keep out of traffic, too, and that's why you found me hiking along. I pick up a lot of rides this way, and I look over the guys I meet. Some of them are smart enough to hand their dough over without an argument."

Jerry's face was in the light, a hard face, with very ugly eyes and a jaw as firm as Tim's. The truck driver's mouth was open, for he'd guessed who Jerry might be. There had been some bad smashes lately, trucks found overturned, their drivers dead. The theory was that they'd gone to sleep and let their trucks run off the road.

But Tim was seeing it differently. He visualized this man who used the alias of Jerry as a highwayman who killed to cover up his crimes. Possibly Tim was right, but there was another rider in the truck who was considering the matter from a different angle.

That rider was The Shadow.

He was debating whether or not Jerry belonged to the New York crew, and he decided in the negative. It would have been easier for them to smuggle a few of their tribe on the truck, hidden away as The Shadow himself had been. This fellow, Jerry, was an independent in his own line, crime, just as Tim was in the honest business of trucking.

It was The Shadow's turn to take over. Not only would he frustrate crime, but he would be introducing himself in a way that Tim would appreciate and remember. Afterward, Tim would certainly favor a gentleman named Cranston with certain information that the latter wanted.

THE truck reached a straightaway, with Jerry in control, though he hadn't fully shifted into the driver's seat. He was darting looks ahead, to pick a place where he could pull off the road; but he was meanwhile keeping the gun poked Jerry's way, until a hand suddenly swung down from blackness and clamped the revolver, yanking it upward.

With a snarl, Jerry turned his head, saw Cranston's face just over his shoulder. Another hand grabbed Jerry's right, kept it to the wheel. Tim shifted back, to grab the wheel from the left side. All that Jerry had to work with was the accelerator, and he used it.

Lunging, the truck began a careening ride along the straightaway. Jerry was yanking it one way, Tim the other, with The Shadow holding the balance. He was sure he could get Tim back at the wheel before they reached the next curve; after that, he would subdue Jerry easily.

It would have been simpler if The Shadow had been wearing his habitual garb of black, for sight of such a figure would have quailed the fellow. But Jerry wasn't ready to yield so easily to an aristocratic foe like Cranston, and with the truck cavorting as it was, The Shadow couldn't forget that the main job was to keep on the road, and settle Jerry later. Hence, the struggle continued.

The break came near the curve. Jerry had lost his gun, but it was on the seat beside him. Tim had the wheel with both hands, reaching from the left, so The Shadow yanked Jerry clear over to the right. Getting one hand clear, the crook grabbed for his gun - just what The Shadow wanted.

Lurching over the back of the seat, The Shadow sped two hands for Jerry's shoulders as they stooped, intending to pin the highwayman to the floor.

Actually, The Shadow was in the driver's seat as the truck struck the curve. He wasn't handling the

vehicle, though; Tim was doing that, tugging the wheel from the left.

The direction of the curve helped him, something The Shadow had foreseen. It also discommoded Jerry, for the sudden swing lunged him over to the right, carrying his foot from the accelerator.

It would have been full victory for The Shadow in this strange fray, if something stranger hadn't happened.

An explosion came from the right front wheel of the swaying truck, a sound like a blow-out, only ten times louder. Nor could an ordinary blow-out have produced so startling a result with such a heavy vehicle.

The truck acted as though it was suddenly imbued with human knee action, plus a pair of stilts. Its right front lifted four feet from the road and then thundered downward clear to the axle, as though it had no wheel to halt it. Tim might as well have been playing with the windshield wiper, instead of handling the steering wheel.

Like a monstrous beast tripped by an unseen force, the truck hoisted itself in a long, crazy somersault over the wall of a short concrete bridge, toward a rocky creek bed thirty feet below

CHAPTER XI. FRIENDS OF THE ROAD

NEITHER The Shadow nor Tim Lanney would have had a chance for life, had one of them been behind the wheel of the stricken truck. Only the fact that both were loose was responsible for the result that they attained. It was largely through The Shadow's making, though Tim's part counted heavily.

The first lift of the truck, a leftward cant, sent The Shadow past the wheel on the skiddy leather of the broad front seat. He struck against Tim as the front of the truck was coming down, but The Shadow didn't lose the advantage of his first momentum.

He shoved the steering wheel away from him, first with his hand, next with his foot, and the strength of his effort drove Tim farther to the left.

That was when Tim participated heavily, because his weight was the thing involved. The door of the truck was flimsy, and it yielded under Tim's unintended bash. Tim went straight out to the left step as it came up to meet him, and The Shadow followed along, for he was still shoving hard.

The somersaulting truck actually kicked the two sprawlers into the air, its step acting as the foot that delivered the boot. They were landing on the paving of the bridge as the truck catapulted over the rail. Hard jolts for both of them, but better than the one reserved for Jerry, the man still in the truck.

As the truck crashed below, The Shadow hauled Tim to his feet and dragged him toward the rail, so they could see beyond it. At first, Tim was too groggy to see the man who helped him, but by the time they reached the rail, everything was plain; indeed, too plain.

There was an explosion below and a great roar of flames lit up the gully, carrying its flare across the countryside.

It took more than the contents of the gasoline tank to fuel that mighty blaze. The truck's cargo was responsible - those crates of varnish cans that had helped awaken The Shadow with their splash. Possibly by chance, more probably by design, Tim had happened to be transporting a highly inflammable brand of varnish.

Somewhere in the holocaust was Jerry, the modern highwayman. Tim remembered him and actually tried

to climb the bridge rail to his aid. Strong hands restrained the foolhardy truck driver; looking about, Tim saw the calm face of Cranston.

"No use, Tim. He's gone."

"But there's a fire extinguisher in the truck," expressed Tim, too excited to wonder how this new friend had learned his name. "If we could only get it -"

"That would be a problem."

A real problem. Crackles were sounding as the flames swept higher; they were licking the trees that lined the shallow creek bed. Tim could feel their scorch as he leaned from the bridge. Drawing back, he saw what Cranston pointed out: that the truck had been reduced to a skeleton.

"Jerry was on the wrong side of the truck," remarked The Shadow. "The crash must have killed him instantly. He was in the spot where you would have been, Tim, if matters had turned out the way he wanted them."

Tim hadn't thought of that. It started him nodding, as Cranston walked him away from the bridge. There was a dirt road on the other side, visible by the glow from the fire. Before Tim realized it, his new friend was guiding him along that road.

The flames were lessening behind them, and darkness lay ahead. Tim halted suddenly. Looking back, he saw lights of cars that were stopping at the bridge.

"Say - we ought to go back and -"

"Why?" came Cranston's query. "It would be difficult to explain matters, wouldn't it?"

"But they'll think I'm dead," protested Tim, "after they find what's left of that body in the truck."

"Of course. That would be easier for them to believe than the story you would have to tell them."

The point impressed Tim. He trudged on into the darkness with The Shadow, mulling the whole question.

"I generally pick up hitchhikers," admitted Tim. "With somebody to talk to, you can keep awake. That's kind of important, considering the way other truckers have gone off the road. It's easy to go off the road -"

"Even when you're awake," interposed The Shadow. "If someone forces it with a gun."

"Say, that is an idea!" Tim exclaimed. "That bird was going to wreck me, like he's done with others. I know it would sound like a yarn, if I told the police. They'd think I was trying to dodge a manslaughter charge on account of a guy riding with me. Only, you could tell your end of it, to help me out."

"My story wouldn't help you, Tim."

THEREWITH, The Shadow told his story, enough of it for Tim's consumption. Tim was one man who could believe it, and the details convinced him that it would be just as well to keep on moving for a while.

Introducing himself as Cranston, The Shadow didn't explain precisely why he'd been in the New York garage where Tim parked the truck, but he told about the mob attack, and its consequences.

Having read Cranston's name in the newspapers, Tim immediately linked the garage affair with the Central Park episode.

"Say, those guys were really out to get you, Mr. Cranston!" expressed Tim. "But why didn't they bump you off, instead of putting you in my truck?"

"A ride with you amounted to the same thing, Tim."

"How?" queried Tim. "This Jerry guy couldn't have been working with them. He'd have known you were on board."

"I wasn't thinking of Jerry. I'm considering the explosion that blasted your truck off the road."

"You mean the blow-out?"

"That was no blow-out, Tim. It was some sort of a bomb, intended really to wreck the truck. It was either set with a time device, or geared to go off after you covered a specified mileage."

Tim was thus awakened to the fact that crooks had intended to dispose of him, as well as Cranston, a logical reason why they should have packed their prisoner in the truck as the best way for a trip into oblivion. A lot of things went on in Tim's mind, and he finally summed them up with the heartfelt words:

"I guess I'll be really better off if those birds think I'm dead."

The Shadow assured him that he would be, and then decided that they'd both be better off if they could find out where the dirt road was leading them.

It was Tim's turn to supply information. He said they were about a dozen miles from Trenton, and that if they kept along the dirt road, they would strike a main highway. So they kept along it.

All the while, The Shadow was learning more about Tim, for the trucker was glad to talk about himself to a friendly listener like Cranston.

Tim lived in Philadelphia, close to the swanky residential district where Kerring's house was located. He made a regular trip to New York five days a week, getting off as early as he could pick up loads, that were usually slated in advance.

Once in New York, he made deliveries, then left the truck in the cheap garage where Cranston had discovered it. Of course, if he was lucky enough to get return hauls, he took the truck out and gathered them up.

The truck was invariably back in the cheap garage at five o'clock, because that was when Tim went to see the commission man about late pickups, which, recently, had been few and far between.

Tim's usual rule was to eat at six o'clock, get to the garage before seven, and head back to Philadelphia, generally to the music of a lot of empty crates and boxes. The trip took him about three hours, and he turned in as soon as he put the truck away, because ten o'clock was pretty late for a man who had to get up at six the next morning.

All this seemed to interest Cranston, for he let Tim ramble along uninterrupted. Tim was still giving details when they reached the main highway. There, The Shadow suggested that the rest of the story be postponed, while he gave Tim a lesson in the art of hitchhiking.

THERE was a service station a short way ahead, with two cars filling up on gas. Tim watched Cranston

brush his clothes and stroll toward the service station. Tim hesitated, but his friend calmly beckoned him along.

Approaching the service-station owner, Cranston said he would like to use his phone for a long-distance call - to be paid for, of course. While speaking, he casually produced a roll of bills that made Tim feel that Jerry would have done better if he'd tried to stick up the truck's passenger instead of its driver. Cranston was also mentioning the reason for the call he wanted to make.

He had been looking over a New Jersey estate that he had just bought, and had brought his chief gardener along with him. The real-estate agent had brought them out from Trenton, telling them to call his office when they needed him.

Unfortunately, the telephone in the house wasn't connected, so they had left a note for the realtor, in case he returned. It would be better, Cranston thought, to call his Philadelphia home and have the chauffeur drive out with the limousine.

Of course, Cranston didn't mention his name during this discourse. He talked as though he expected the service-station man to give him some advice, which the fellow couldn't, his mind not being geared to estates and limousines. The advice came, however, from another source, the one for which Cranston artfully intended his remarks.

All was overheard by a very attentive listener at the wheel of a sedan that bore a Pennsylvania license and was getting gasoline.

"You'd lose a lot of time, mister," said the sedan owner, "if you wait for your chauffeur to get here. I'm driving into Philadelphia. Why don't you and your gardener come with me?"

Cranston accepted the invitation, and so did Tim, because it dawned on him that he was the gardener. In the rear seat, Tim listened in admiration while Cranston, in front, chatted with the sedan's driver on subjects, ranging from stock and bonds to the comparative merits of Miami and Havana as winter resorts. They were rolling along the boulevard within Philadelphia city limits, and Cranston hadn't yet gotten around to mentioning his name, when he saw a parked taxicab.

Stopping the sedan, he shook hands with the driver, offered to pay for the ride, which was declined: then Cranston and Tim were riding away in the cab. In the hurried parting, Cranston still had forgotten to mention his name to the man who had given them the lift.

Or had he forgotten?

Tim was quite sure, that Cranston hadn't, because his memory was remarkably good on another point. Turning to Tim, Cranston promptly picked up the conversation from where they had dropped it when they reached the filling station.

Repeating a few of the details to refresh Tim's own memory, The Shadow said:

"Go on."

CHAPTER XII. RETURN FROM OBLIVION

TIM had been talking about the deliveries he made in New York. He carried all sorts of loads, or had, when he still owned a truck that was something more than a fire-scorched chassis. He'd wanted to get into one line of hauling, but never seemed to justify a choice.

"Seems like I get a chunk of everything," said Tim. "That is, except vegetables. I don't want them. Too

many inspectors bothering you about corn borers and Japanese beetles. Funny, now, but hauling junk from one secondhand shop to another might be a good business. I get a lot of that trade -"

"You mentioned it," interrupted Cranston. "It's all in the little book."

Tim stared. "Did I tell you about the little book?"

"You told me about it three times," was the reply. "It's right there" - The Shadow tapped Tim's breast pocket - "and if you'll hand it over, I won't bother the wallet that you carry in your inside pocket."

Tim laughed. He liked Cranston's dry humor, even though it did flash back to the loss of Tim's truck. He drew the book from his pocket.

"There it is," he said. "All the dope on every delivery I've made for the last year. You may as well keep it, Mr. Cranston." Tim's tone was rueful. "I won't be needing it for some time. Maybe never."

"Probably sooner," corrected The Shadow. "Your truck was insured. You can buy a new one and start afresh."

"How will I collect on the truck insurance if I'm supposed to be dead?"

"You won't be dead long, Tim. You're just going on a vacation, with pay. I have a friend" - Cranston's tone was reflective - "who likes to dabble in odd cases like this. He will look out for you, Tim. It may surprise you how swiftly you come back to life."

The cab was threading its way through the fringe of Kerring's suburb. Leaning from the window, The Shadow picked out a stately house that was darkened for the night.

"Here we are," he told the driver. "Stop quietly, please. I don't want to waken the family."

Paying off the cabby, The Shadow insisted, in a Cranston undertone, that he drive away quietly. As soon as the cab was gone, The Shadow turned to Tim.

"This is close to where you live," he said. "Let's walk over there."

After a quarter of a mile they came to an isolated row of houses, relics of a time when an enterprising builder had begun to sneak into an ultraresidential district before the larger property owners had time to clamp down with restrictions. Tim lived in the back room on the second floor of the third house in the row.

"I can't go in the front door," he whispered. "If I do, they'll hear me. What's the next step, Mr. Cranston?"

"I'll get you up to your window," The Shadow replied. "Nobody will hear you, then."

"But if somebody is awake and sees me -"

"They'll take you for a ghost. Just remember that you're dead, and act accordingly."

It was whimsical, having Tim play the ghost, a part which The Shadow had carried off, many times. However, The Shadow did not have his garb of black, so necessary to the role.

He might have done a good job as a ghost, even in the guise of Cranston, had he been in New York; but Philadelphia, particularly this section, was at present Tim's territory.

Boosted in through his window, Tim was gone about ten minutes. He returned without having made too much noise, bringing along two suitcases packed with belongings that no one would miss when they looked through his room upon learning that he was dead.

The Shadow insisted upon carrying one suitcase. They sneaked away together, Tim and his new friend Cranston. A block from the row of houses, The Shadow had another suggestion.

"What about that garage where you used to keep the truck? There ought to be a few things there - tools, perhaps, that you'd like to take along."

TIM thought it a good idea. He showed his friend to the garage, which turned out exactly as Tim had earlier described it.

The "garage" was really an old stable in back of a crumbling mansion that should have been torn down as a public nuisance. Tim rented it for a few dollars a month, because it was the only place in the vicinity large enough to hold his truck.

"You see what I told you, Mr. Cranston," said Tim, as he was using a flashlight to gather the tools he wanted. "Anybody could've sneaked in here and taken anything off the truck. That's why I always leave the truck in the public garage, the one in Tioga, when I've got a shipment to keep overnight.

"It's a good arrangement, because I have my brother-in-law's car there, and they don't charge me for storing the truck when I take the car out, which I have to, so's I can get home."

The Shadow nodded. He was looking around the stable that had once been a garage, observing its poorly boarded, paneless windows. Tim gave a grin.

"They'd think we were a couple of ghosts, if they saw us here," he said. "But nobody ever does come around here. I've often thought it would be a good place for a murder."

Tim received a typical Cranston come-back.

"I know of another good place," said The Shadow. "The garage where you kept the truck in New York. Fortunately, the opportunity was overlooked this evening."

Tim sensed something cryptic in Cranston's statement. He'd noted, right along, that his rescuer put double edges to many comments.

They left the empty stable and walked to the trolley line, which was near the park. Near Kerring's house, too, for Tim gave a nudge in the darkness, and said significantly:

"There was a murder over that way a few nights ago. I guess you heard about the Kerring case, Mr. Cranston."

They reached the end of the trolley line and entered a car that was waiting. A new streamliner type, it carried them rapidly toward the center of Philadelphia. Tim hadn't an idea where they were going next, until The Shadow remarked:

"We'll stop off in Tioga and get your brother-in-law's car."

Tim stared. He thought that Cranston really had picked an impossibility this time. The simplicity of the thing actually dumfounded Tim more. It was Cranston, not Tim, who entered the garage carrying the license cards.

He introduced himself as Tim's brother-in-law, who had moved lately to Maryland. Never having seen the brother-in-law, the garage attendant, impressed by Cranston's appearance, turned over the car on the strength of the license cards.

The Shadow picked Tim up a block away. He told him to take the wheel and gave him back the license cards. Tim dropped Cranston off near a downtown Philadelphia hotel.

As they shook hands, Tim took heed of Cranston's parting words:

"Stay at your sister's in Maryland until you hear from me. It will be very soon; meanwhile, here is some expense money. From the friend I mentioned. He calls himself The Shadow."

There was a difference between the cases of Tim Lanney and Lamont Cranston. Tim had to play dead, whereas Cranston didn't. In fact, though The Shadow hadn't mentioned it to Tim, it was better that Cranston should still be alive.

It conformed with a very important detail: namely, that only one body, that of the man who called himself Jerry, would be reported in the charred ruins of Tim's truck.

Perhaps hired thugs would report to their hidden chief that they had shipped Cranston off to oblivion. If they did, both he and they would be annoyed by Cranston's return to circulation.

Nevertheless, it would be quite explainable, without jeopardizing Tim's status as a ghost. They'd figure that Cranston had regained consciousness, slipped his bonds, and dropped off somewhere before the truck came to grief.

After all, the truck's violent destruction had been arranged for Tim's benefit, with Cranston's inclusion merely as an afterthought. No one would know that Cranston had formed a partnership with Tim Lanney. Nor that Cranston was really The Shadow, and that he had acquired Tim's little book.

Indeed, if certain persons even suspected the existence of Tim's little book, they would believe that it had burned up with him.

INASMUCH as Cranston had made one morning trip from New York to Philadelphia, it wouldn't matter if he made another. So, when the morning dawned - or, more properly, a few hours after dawn - Cranston was again seen lingering about the lobby of a Philadelphia hotel, reading newspapers.

This time, he concentrated largely on New York journals, because they were full of the Fitzcroft murder. The Philadelphia sheets were generous on that subject, for the crime had a definite link with the Kerring case.

At noon, Lamont Cranston dropped in on Director of Public Safety Thurling, who was very glad to see him. In fact, the safety director had called New York, hoping that Cranston would come over. He wanted to talk about Ralph Lambron.

"Lambron's alibi depends on you, Cranston," declared Thurling seriously. "I'm speaking of his alibi, night before last, when Fitzcroft was murdered in New York. I understand that you were with Lambron from eight o'clock until after ten."

The Shadow gave a Cranston nod.

"That clears Lambron, then," grumbled the director, "and Mordan, too, because they were together. You see, Fitzcroft was murdered in New York soon after ten o'clock. Lambron didn't pull into this office until about midnight.

"He could have come back from New York, after killing Fitzcroft first, though it would have meant a very fast trip. The question was: could he have gotten over there? You've assured me that Lambron couldn't have. His alibi is quite as good as Brenz's, and I understand his is perfect."

Cranston's calm gaze didn't reveal that he knew exactly what was coming next.

"Confidentially, Cranston," said Thurling, "I suspect Hubert Purnell. He didn't have a good alibi in the Kerring murder, but I passed it over because of Purnell's importance. Besides, there wasn't any real proof that Kerring was killed because he belonged to the Manufacturers Security Association.

"But Fitzcroft's murder changed it all. Again, Purnell lacks an alibi, and now the connection is proven. Worse luck, Purnell is in New York, where I would have to extradite him. If he killed Kerring, he killed Fitzcroft, too. I'd be a sucker if I went after him for the first crime before the New York authorities accuse him of the second!"

Thurling began to pace his office, with his hands crossed behind his back as if they were tied - which, officially speaking, they were. He was still striding back and forth, when Cranston glanced at his watch and decided that he must leave.

A short while later, Lamont Cranston stopped at the office of the Triplex Awning Co., and found Ralph Lambron there. Mordan and three men from the shop were seated facing the desk, and Cranston took the one vacant chair.

Promptly, Lambron dismissed the shop men, retaining only Mordan. Then both Lambron and his secretary burst loose with thanks. They were glad, very glad, that Cranston had so honestly and definitely accounted for their whereabouts in Philadelphia just prior to the time of Fitzcroft's death in New York.

"It was fine of you, Cranston," concluded Lambron. "I couldn't show my full appreciation in front of Brenz, yesterday. He would have used it to deride me. Come out to lunch with me, so I can further express my gratitude."

"Sorry, Lambron" - Cranston's smile was friendly - "but I have to be getting back to New York."

"Then let me drive you to the station -"

"Not today. I have my own car."

The Shadow did have his own car. He had gotten it from the hotel garage. His second trip to Philadelphia had saved him the trouble of sending someone after it.

But that wasn't the reason why The Shadow whispered a laugh as he swung the car along the Roosevelt Boulevard, to reach the highway that would take him from Philadelphia to New York.

His low-toned laugh went deeper.

It marked The Shadow's return from oblivion. He was coming back from doom that he had missed. With that return, he was planning oblivion for others. Oblivion for men of crime!

CHAPTER XIII. THE SHADOW'S TEST

COMMISSIONER WESTON didn't pace his office the way Director Thurling had. To begin with, Weston wasn't in his office when The Shadow, as Cranston, found him soon after arriving in New York. The commissioner was in the grillroom of the Cobalt Club, demolishing a double-thickness, charcoal-broiled lamb chop.

Food was frequently an index to Weston's mood. When he tackled an oversized lamb chop, it meant that he had no worries. He wasn't at all concerned about the Fitzcroft case.

"Inspector Cardona is investigating it," said the commissioner. "It has some special angles, Cranston, so it's too early to deliver an opinion on it. Time will tell."

The Shadow could divine the basis behind the statement. It simply meant that Weston was still a jump ahead of the newspapers. Otherwise, they would have been hounding him for a solution to the crime. Since they weren't bothering him, Weston was letting the law proceed in the slow fashion that it preferred.

To a degree, the commissioner was showing good judgment. Temporarily relenting toward the lamb chop, he took time out to set his friend, Cranston, right on the present question.

"Two men, Brenz and Lambron," declared Weston. "Either could have murdered both Kerring and Fitzcroft. But neither Brenz nor Lambron did. Each has a double alibi, like their respective hangers-on, Richtle and Mordan. But remember!" Weston wagged a finger. "The motive is definitely established, despite the innocence of Brenz and Lambron."

"You mean, of course, that someone intends to get a strangle hold on the Manufacturers Security Association - a possible procedure, with such crusaders as Kerring and Fitzcroft eliminated."

"Yes!" Weston was emphatic, but he carried the tone through the rest of his statement: "But remember, Cranston, the schemer is not necessarily a member of the association. He might be some outsider, planning a later coup. You understand?"

The Shadow understood. Commissioner Weston preferred to consider the whole world as suspects, rather than place blame on Hubert Purnell. It showed again how New York and Philadelphia were as widely separated as the poles on certain matters of public opinion.

Had the orders of two murders been reversed - Fitzcroft's first, and Kerring's afterward - Hubert Purnell would at this moment be reposing in the Philadelphia clink under the stern wardenship of Director Thurling.

It behooved The Shadow, as Cranston, to press home that subtle difference.

"I was in Philadelphia today," he said. "I saw Director Thurling. When I ran into Purnell. I think I'll tell him to stay away from Philadelphia. Thurling might arrest him."

"He might, eh?" queried Weston. "Then why doesn't he ask us to apprehend Purnell?"

"He said it would be troublesome to extradite him."

Weston's snort proved that it would be troublesome. He, for one, would do everything to block it, if Thurling tried. He was actually glad that the Philadelphia authorities found their hands tied.

"Thurling is letting local opinion sway him," declared Weston. "A very poor policy. He should appreciate that I am really helping him, by keeping matters in abeyance until foolish opinion cools. I can assure you, Cranston, the case itself will remain hot."

What might apply to crime, didn't to the lamb chop. It could cool right under the commissioner's nose. So Weston went back to the business of dining, nodding that Cranston could have the privilege of talking, if he wanted it. Rising leisurely, The Shadow started to go; then paused.

"I suppose the case will stay hot," he remarked, "until the unknown schemer moves in to take over the association. But suppose he decides it is too hot, commissioner, and forgets the M.S.A. entirely. What then?"

"We'll learn his identity whether or not," assured Weston. "I've already told you, Cranston, that Inspector Cardona is conducting a very competent investigation."

The Shadow wondered if Cardona shared that opinion, but he didn't ask. He left the grillroom and opened a note that he had found in his mailbox at the club.

It said that the Manufacturers Security Association would meet that evening, at eight o'clock. It wasn't yet seven, so The Shadow had time for an in-between excursion.

He stopped first, as Cranston, at the Park Gardens for a brief chat with Brenz. Quite pleased to see Cranston, Brenz was the more interested when he learned that the caller had been in Philadelphia, earlier, and had seen Lambron.

"So Lambron thanked you, did he?" Brenz showed traces of a sneer. "No wonder! You helped him out of a bad jam. Fellows as crooked as Lambron are always afraid they'll get caught for something they didn't do. It's the worst hazard that confronts them."

The same hazard applied to Brenz but Cranston didn't voice such an opinion. Instead, he speculated on whether or not Lambron would be at the evening's meeting. Brenz declared that Lambron would be present; that Purnell had wired him that all members were to appear.

Time was growing shorter, so Cranston left. He was particularly intent on his next purpose, because it promised a special opportunity. Outside the Cobalt Club, Cranston had picked up a pair of trailers, the two detectives from the night before. Purnell's hired sleuths were on the job again, hoping for better results this time.

Since they wanted results, Cranston could give them, in a fashion that might strike closer home to Purnell.

Entering Moe's cab, Cranston glanced at Tim's little black book and gave the address of the Excalibur Lacquer Co., on the East Side. He added that Moe was to stop near the rear door of the plant.

The Excalibur company was where Tim Lanney had picked up the varnish shipment, the afternoon before. Tim thought of it purely in terms of a company, but The Shadow personalized it. He happened to know that the lacquer plant was one of the dozen industries controlled by that wizard of finance, Hubert Purnell. Such things were often mentioned at the M.S.A. meetings.

As the cab neared its destination, Lamont Cranston became The Shadow. He felt that he'd trained the private dicks sufficiently; they were ready to stay on a trail through inference, if properly encouraged.

When the cab halted behind the lacquer works, which showed no lights below the third floor, The Shadow dropped into darkness. He was actually in the shelter of the gloomy building, trying picks on an obscure door, when the detectives arrived, to note that Moe's cab was pulling away empty.

Dismissing their own cab, they nosed around suspiciously. By the time they decided that Cranston must have entered the lacquer plant, he was through the door. He heard them try it on the outside, and caught their muttered conversation.

The Shadow had locked the door behind him, but that only reminded them of another door - that of the garage they had visited the night before. It had been locked first, and unlocked later.

This time, the dicks weren't going to bungle around, while Cranston slipped them. They were starting away, for The Shadow heard them go. Their purpose could only be a prompt report to Purnell, from the nearest phone.

With a soft, repressed laugh, The Shadow used his thin-beamed flashlight to find the ground-floor office of the lacquer company. He went through storerooms, stacked high with varnish cans, replicas of the load in Tim's truck.

The office was near the front of the building; it had a few battered desks, and an old filing cabinet, all representative of the economy prevalent with all Purnell-controlled concerns.

In the filing cabinet, The Shadow found what he wanted - a stack of lading bills covering recent shipments. Among them was the very consignment that Tim had taken out. The order was in triplicate, so The Shadow took a copy for himself and put the rest away.

Not only was the order marked "Paid," but underneath was the carbon notation: "Cash." Such sheets would be filed away, and forgotten, since the transaction was completed, but they could be looked up later, should anyone demand it.

Unless eventually destroyed, they would remain as hidden, though very damaging, evidence; hence The Shadow was taking one sheet for permanent reference.

These sheets tallied exactly with Tim's little book. Until this moment, however, there had been a chance that Tim was mistaken. For the order specified delivery of the varnish cans to a Philadelphia contracting company that had been out of business for a year!

THE thing had rather puzzled Tim; he'd told Cranston that he'd intended to look into it, on the chance that the contractor was still operating. But The Shadow had looked into it, himself, and found that the concern way out of business. The order sheets, therefore, proved that the varnish had been bought by proxy for some other purpose than actual delivery.

This was the kind of thing that would support Tim's story of the track accident, when he came to tell it. Unquestionably, the varnish could have been intended to feed the flames that gobbled the wrecked truck.

Having thus backed his supposition with evidence, The Shadow started a silent departure from the office. He closed the door behind him, locked it, with a special skeleton key. He was moving toward the door that led to the rear street, when things began to happen.

Things that The Shadow had more or less foreseen when donning his garb of black; but they came sooner, swifter, and with more concerted effort than even the black-cloaked investigator had anticipated.

A door slashed open on The Shadow's right; with it came the boring glare of a flashlight. Dodging the door's hard sweep, The Shadow was put at immediate disadvantage. He was only half turned as the man with the flashlight spotted him and sprang upon him.

Had he wasted time drawing a gun, The Shadow would have been flattened. Instead, he rolled backward under his opponent's drive and shoved his foot to the attacker's chest, launching him on a headlong fling.

The flashlight went, too, and in the darkness The Shadow saved more time by completing a short back somersault, coming to his knees, with one hand drawing a gun.

Two more men were pouncing out from the doorway; one had a revolver, the other a flashlight. Lunging

straight into the glow, The Shadow used his free hand to clamp the first man's wrist and drive it aside as the revolver sputtered. A cross slash of his own automatic, and The Shadow disposed of the flashlight that the other man held.

Then The Shadow was grappling with both, counting on darkness to give him the advantage that did not come. Timed to the echoes of the revolver shot, another door slashed open on the opposite side of the passage. It was the door of an elevator, and the light from the car illuminated the passage.

Seeing The Shadow grappling with two combatants, another pair of tough fighters sprang his way. One had a gun, the other a metal rod that served as club.

Twisting, The Shadow dodged the revolver's aim and put the other man in between, while warding off the swing of the fellow's club. Then, as men surged from four directions, The Shadow swiped hard with his own gun, forcing heads to duck.

Diving through the doorway, he found stairs leading upward. Not the route he wanted, but he took it. Guns blazed from below, but The Shadow was ahead of the pursuing fire.

At the top of the stairs, The Shadow found a display room, with cans of varnish arranged in high pyramids. He dodged behind one stack as his pursuers started shooting from the door. Revolvers didn't pack sufficient wallop to penetrate the cans completely. They simply punctured them, producing spouts of varnish.

Spreading, The Shadow's opponents tried to flank The Shadow's barrier before he could start shooting between the stacked cans that shielded him.

Spreading tactics were a good idea. The Shadow did the same. He spread the varnish cans.

Shoulder first, he drove into the stack, sweeping his arms wide. Cans by the dozen went bounding, rolling, everywhere except straight ahead, which was The Shadow's direction.

Two men were lunging for him, only to go sprawling as they contacted the rolling cans. The other pair, trying to get back toward the door, found themselves stumbling on the metal rollers meant for them.

The guns were talking as The Shadow reached the stairs, but the wideness of the fire proved that the marksmen still were tripping. Downstairs, the fifth man saw The Shadow coming and hopped into the elevator, slamming the sliding door. He was helping himself, and The Shadow, too.

For when the rest came dashing through the passage, they found it dark. Before they could use their flashlights, they were tumbling anew. The whole passage was crawling with approaching varnish cans that The Shadow had started rolling from a rear storage room.

OUTSIDE, half a block away, The Shadow was getting into Moe's passing cab before the men in the lacquer plant even reached the back door. The cab whipped away, swung a lighted corner, and was gone.

The only two who witnessed its departure were the private detectives. They were coming from the drugstore, where they had telephoned Purnell.

Though they recognized the cab, the dicks still thought it empty. Even as it passed the light, they couldn't see the cloaked passenger, who rested deep in the rear seat. He looked like what he was - a shadow; and the observers didn't guess that they had seen a living one.

They heard a sound, though, those staring men; a tone that might have come from anywhere. Unable to

connect it with the departing cab, the dicks looked all around, then stared at each other as the weird tone faded.

It was strange, that tone, and shivery. It seemed to mock them with its trailing note of mirth.

The laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIV. ACCEPTED CHALLENGE

Crisp and pompous, Hubert Purnell was presiding over the meeting of the manufacturers at the Hotel Metrolite. His steely eyes, always a contrast to his dryish face, had a probing glint, sharper than ever before. There was steel, indeed, in Purnell's gaze, for he was ready to prove that he could answer any test.

Other members were watching Purnell, thinking that they knew all that was in his mind. Only one member could have told the rest what Purnell was about to say. That member was Lamont Cranston. He had put Purnell to a very recent test, that couldn't be ignored.

"Before we begin our business," announced Purnell, "I must mention a fact that we cannot ignore: namely, that an organized plot seems to be in action against the members of this association."

The members listened with interest. Purnell, of all men, was bringing up the subject of Kerring and Fitzcroft. He, the only member of M.S.A. who had no alibi at the times when two murders had occurred! He was taking the bull's horns too boldly, they thought, but they were wrong. Purnell was very clever. He tried some tail twisting, first.

"One member of our group can testify to what I say," declared Purnell suddenly. "I refer to Lamont Cranston."

He stared coldly at Cranston, as though in accusation, and The Shadow returned the gaze with equal coolness. More intrigued than ever, the listeners were treated to Purnell's first twist.

"Only the other night" - Purnell's tone showed a change to sympathy - "our good friend Cranston was attacked by masked men, who tried to murder him. I refer to the incident in Central Park. I fear that it meant much more than the surface showed."

Clever of Purnell, to mention Cranston's case before coming to those of Kerring and Fitzcroft, the men who had really taken the brunt of crime! It wasn't the limit, though, of Purnell's ingenuity.

"I can understand Cranston's situation," continued Purnell, "because, only a short while ago, I had a fortunate escape of my own. I feel that you should know the details."

Therewith, Purnell gave them to the amazed group.

He stated that he had planned to stop at the Excalibur Lacquer Co. on the way to his meeting. Deciding that it would cause too much delay, he phoned the plant, instead. Men were working in the label room on the third floor. One went down to get some papers from the office, so that Purnell could check them over the phone.

Running across a prowler, the worker gave battle, and others came to his aid. Fully armed, the lurker managed to escape. One of Purnell's men, quite fortunately, was a watchman, who had an extra gun. But for that, the workers might have suffered at the prowler's hands.

Police were now investigating the case, and it was quite obvious that the lurker, whoever he was, had

been lying in wait for Purnell.

All the while he spoke. Purnell kept watching Cranston.

Of course, The Shadow knew that Purnell had phoned the lacquer plant after a call from his detectives. Purnell was simply telling Cranston to keep hands off.

If Cranston wanted to suspect Purnell of murder - well enough. In his turn, Purnell could wonder why Cranston had taken such interest in the deaths of Kerring and Fitzcroft, while more active members of the association were willing to let the law handle both cases.

Definitely, Purnell implied that both he and Cranston were innocent of crime, and was suggesting that they drop their investigation of each other before it became a full feud. Fair enough, if Purnell had no hand in murder. In that case, his hiring of two snoopers was a defensive measure to ward off false blame.

Contrarily, Purnell, considered as a double murderer, could be playing a much deeper game. It would be a very clever thing for him to smother circumstantial evidence through sheer weight of the supposed integrity that he had been building up for years.

If The Shadow had any thoughts along that line, he did not show them. He simply retained his immobile gaze and let Purnell form his own conclusions.

SATISFIED that Cranston had at least caught his hints, Purnell went on to other matters. First, he took the bull's horns one by one, by referring first to Kerring, then to Fitzcroft, in very saddened tones. His mention of the dead men passed easily. He had softened it by first referring to problems of the living; those of Cranston and Purnell, himself.

Then Purnell moved swiftly to his big surprise. His glance was now traveling about the entire group, occasionally singling individuals, including Lambron and Brenz.

"Our funds have been raised," he declared. "We can plan further assessments, for the benefit of all. We have a great duty, gentlemen: the proper handling of sums that will increase as this association grows. I believe that the duty must lie in the hands of one man, who can act as an arbiter in all disputes.

"As head of this association, I can insist that such power be mine. Instead" - his eyes took in all the listeners - "I herewith announce my resignation, not only as president, but as a member of this association."

It was a master stroke. Men came to their feet, insisting that Purnell stay in charge. Waving them down, Purnell was gesturing to a thickset man beside him, whose pudgy face was excited like the rest. The man that Purnell indicated was Peter Dryne, the lone survivor of the crusading three that formerly included Kerring and Fitzcroft.

"Dryne is your man," Purnell argued. "Let him take full charge. He can carry the banner, wherever it should go."

"No, no!" broke in Dryne. "I haven't your vision, Purnell. You lead, and depend upon me to support you. Withdraw your resignation; accept our vote of confidence, instead."

In all the furor, The Shadow was studying the faces of Lambron and Brenz. Each, in his own lupine way, was studying Dryne. Lambron looked as though he would like to devour Dryne bit by bit, while Brenz showed preference for taking him in a gulp.

Certainly Dryne, alone, wouldn't control the association long; not with these wolves in the organization.

Two against one, they could crowd Dryne out and then fight each other for full control. The way they suddenly forgot Dryne, to glare at each other, was indication of the more distant future that they both considered.

It looked as though Purnell had played right into the paws of Lambron and Brenz, tossing them Dryne as prey.

Or - had he?

Purnell could resign, and rejoin the organization later. If Lambron and Brenz reached the top, one would then eliminate the other. Purnell could dislodge the one who remained, and put affairs in order. All within the bounds of the integrity that Purnell claimed as his watchword.

There was another way of looking at it.

Should Purnell's real watchword be crime, he would be covering his tracks quite neatly. His resignation apparently disproved any profit motive on his part; thus, suspicions of his hand as one of murder would fade.

Afterward, should Purnell be recalled to head the association, his slate would be clean. He could be the "outsider" suggested by Weston, but the commissioner would never suspect that Purnell and the unknown person were one and the same.

All very speculative, for the present. The Shadow did not need to deal in such conjectures. He had already come to an opinion. His first step was to keep Purnell right on the spot where he no longer wanted to be, as chairman of the association. Only with Purnell still in office, could crime be properly cracked.

PURNELL was gradually quieting the many voices that wanted him to remain in charge. He wouldn't listen to any arguments against his resignation. He was sure that members would agree to it; he was anxious for people to see it his way.

Cranston promptly did. With a wise smile, Purnell let him have the floor - and immediately regretted it.

"We should be fair to Mr. Purnell," was Cranston's calm comment. "We should remember that he once had high intentions for this association. A man of such intentions should never be forced to give reasons for his resignation. It would be unfair to force him into an admission of incompetence. Persons are apt to exaggerate incompetence into a matter of guilt -"

"Stop!" Purnell's face had purpled. Rage was sweeping aside his accustomed coolness. "I did not admit any incompetence!"

"Of course not," assured Cranston. "I specifically stated that you had not."

"But, you spoke of guilt. What kind of guilt?"

"Whatever kind the rumor mongers might choose. They create their own conclusions, Purnell. I propose" - Cranston turned to the others - "that we accept Mr. Purnell's resignation without further discussion."

It was The Shadow's challenge to Purnell, that motion. Others, overlooked its significance, for they didn't realize that a verbal feud had been going on between Purnell and Cranston, under the guise of general remarks.

The sudden willingness of members to accept the resignation indicated that they were tending toward the

very implications that Cranston had presented. Purnell took the one action that could save his face.

"I withdraw the resignation," he asserted. "You have convinced me that the organization still needs in my services. You may depend my sincere and complete efforts in your behalf."

He was in time to turn the tide. The meeting adjourned with all present acclaiming Purnell, though neither Lambron nor Brenz proved overenthusiastic.

Lambron's sallow face took on a shrewdness; he couldn't hide his scheming reflections. Brenz also gave outward indications. His deep-set eyes seemed to recede farther, in contrast to the forward thrust that he gave his heavy jaw.

Unlike in many respect, these two still had the same ambition. Each wanted to take over the association and show huge profit from its increasing funds. At least, Cranston had balked them for the time, though he had left the control in the hands of Purnell, a man who still might be accused of murders with which Lambron and Brenz had thoroughly disproven all connection.

AFTER the meeting, The Shadow met Margo Lane. In a quiet corner of the cafe lounge, Margo heard all the details, told from the Cranston viewpoint.

The Shadow watched the expression that came to Margo's face as she began to express certain possibilities that he had already considered, but had not mentioned.

"Purnell is craftier than you think, Lamont!" she exclaimed. "Look at it this way: suppose he hired that mob we met in Central Park. He could have done it easily, without revealing who he was. Money sent to some person who would kill for a price -"

"Go on," suggested Cranston, as Margo paused. "Almost anyone could arrange it, including Purnell."

"Well, he used the mob again," continued Margo, "to get rid of Tim Lanney. You said yourself that Tim lived near Kerring's. He might have seen Purnell's car around there."

"Tim didn't mention it."

"There could be another reason, then," declared Margo. "Anyway, those thugs nearly bagged you, too. When Purnell found out you'd gone to the lacquer plant, he figured you were trying to draw the crooks again. So he was smart. He called the workmen instead. Don't you see how clever it was? He disassociated himself from the crooks! He threw the burden on you."

"He did throw me a burden," admitted The Shadow. "It wasn't easy, dodging those workers without hurting them."

"How clever Purnell is!" added Margo. "He even faked an order for inflammable varnish, so his own workers wouldn't know about it. You were wise, taking a copy of the shipment order. I'm glad Tim gave you that little book of his."

"There is a great deal more, Margo, in that little book -"

"But you found enough to incriminate Purnell. Why don't you turn it over to the police, Lamont?"

The Shadow shook his head.

"All circumstantial evidence, Margo. We need real proof."

"But if -"

"That's the trouble, in one word," interrupted The Shadow, in Cranston's calmest style. "If. Think it over, Margo, and you'll see how far 'ifs' can carry us. Take Lambron and Brenz for example. If Lambron hadn't been able to account for all his actions at the time when Kerring was killed, or if Brenz hadn't been in New York, either could be a murderer.

"If Brenz hadn't a perfect alibi the night when Fitzcroft was slain, or if Lambron hadn't been in Philadelphia at the time, how different it all would be. Or, to make it even more speculative: if Kerring had been murdered in New York and Fitzcroft in Philadelphia, circumstances would have been utterly changed."

Margo showed annoyance.

"You're reaching the preposterous stage, Lamont," she said. "Maybe I deserve a little sarcasm, because I've been jumping to too many conclusions regarding Purnell. But let me tell you something. With Kerring and you dead, there's only one crusader left. I mean Peter Dryne. If Purnell is the murderer - and no one else in the association can be - you have practically handed Dryne a death warrant, by keeping Purnell in office."

There was an ardent ring to Margo's words, and she saw that she had struck home. Never before had Cranston's face looked more serious, nor his nod so solemn.

"You are right, Margo," he said. "But there is one point with which you will agree. Dryne will be safe so long as he does not meet Purnell alone."

"Dryne might go driving in the park -"

"No. That sort of stuff is out. It was a makeshift, in my case, and it didn't work. Whereas Kerring and Fitzcroft were really handled in a direct style that counted."

"But how will you keep Purnell and Dryne apart?"

"It won't be necessary, Margo. It's simply a case of watching one or the other. When they get together, all the better. That's when something can happen. Or, to be even more specific, something may happen as soon as those two have a chance to get together."

"Something that may be prevented?"

"Certainly. Otherwise I wouldn't risk it." Cranston's tone had a conviction that gave Margo a sudden thrill. "Because I promise you this:

"The prevention of Dryne's death, at the right time, can solve the murders of Kerring and Fitzcroft in just the style we want. It won't leave a doubt as to who killed them. Theories, no matter how farfetched, will stand as absolute evidence when we land that stroke home!"

Listening, Margo felt sure that she understood the whole motive behind Cranston's challenge to Purnell. But her thoughts ran farther.

She saw Cranston as The Shadow, master of justice, behind the challenge that was to place the blame for twofold murder upon the hands responsible for those crimes!

CHAPTER XV. PRELUDE TO MURDER

SWIFT-MOVING crime had reached a brink, to pause. In contrast to the thrill-packed days when two murders had occurred in rapid style, those that followed were very slow indeed. A week full of days in

which nothing, or almost nothing, happened.

In Philadelphia, the director of public safety was wearing out his office carpet while he held fire on the Kerring murder, waiting for the New York police commissioner to do something about the Fitzcroft case.

Meanwhile, in New York, said commissioner, one Ralph Weston, was waiting for his ace inspector, Joe Cardona, to bring in proof of murder committed by anyone other than Hubert Purnell.

Cardona wasn't getting anywhere at all.

He'd never struck a case like this before. Joe would have liked to slap it on Purnell, to get some action, but he knew that Weston wouldn't let him. The commissioner read Cardona's reports, and approved them, even though Joe regarded them as the equivalent of so much blank paper.

Cardona couldn't even express himself to Weston. The only friendly listener he found was the commissioner's occasional companion, Lamont Cranston.

Thus, Cardona, quite unwittingly, unburdened his woe to the law's most powerful ally, The Shadow.

First, Cardona mentioned the Kerring case. The Philadelphia police had something to go on, with that one. They could take it for granted that Kerring had been at home all day, alone in the house.

As soon as dark came, at approximately six o'clock, someone had dropped in and given Kerring a slug from a .38 revolver, right through the heart. The body had stayed on the rug where it fell until Lambron and others discovered it, five hours later.

The Fitzcroft murder was different.

First, nobody knew when Fitzcroft had come home. He went out often, unlike Kerring. Why he had decided to be in his apartment at ten thirty in the evening was a neat little mystery in itself. Anyway, he had been there when somebody called and treated him to the same dose that Kerring had received.

This time, the murderer had used a different gun, one of .32 caliber. That didn't fool Cardona. Different guns didn't mean a different murderer. Joe had a theory that accounted for the shift to a smaller caliber, which was a point in itself.

He figured that Fitzcroft must have been a trifle wary. The killer couldn't have packed too large a gun, or Fitzcroft would have noticed it.

There was another trouble: the length of time between the murder of Fitzcroft and the discovery of the body the next day. Many people had been in and out of the small apartment house during the intervening period. Milkmen, delivery men, canvassers, even some of Fitzcroft's friends, and persons from his office.

Cardona had found a half a dozen people who had knocked on Fitzcroft's door and gone away before Purnell and Cranston had come to find the stiff body seated in a chair. It was too bad that the people who knew Fitzcroft well had supposed that he was simply out of town. Fitzcroft had a habit of making trips without announcing them. Otherwise, his body would have been discovered sooner.

In fact, as Cardona mentioned, history had almost repeated itself in reverse.

"Remember how Lambron, the guy with the long-term alibi, found Kerring's body?" queried Cardona. "The same thing nearly happened over again in Fitzcroft's case. Brenz was with friends all evening - pretty near all night - when Fitzcroft was murdered.

"We'll, anyway, Brenz went around to see Fitzcroft the next morning, about eleven o'clock. Had his chauffeur with him, the same as Lambron had his secretary. Brenz hammered at the door, and sent the chauffeur down to find the janitor, which he couldn't, because the janitor was still drunk.

"So they waited around a while, hoping Fitzcroft would slow up, which he didn't. If they'd only tried the door, the way Purnell did later, Brenz and Richtle would have found the body and reported it. Well, it doesn't matter. It would only have meant an hour or so sooner, if they had."

Cranston had a question:

"You spoke of delivery men, inspector?"

"Yes," said Cardona. "They left a lot of things. The place would have been cluttered up outside the janitor's door, if a junkman hadn't come along and taken a pile of boxes and other rubbish that was waiting for him.

"The janitor has been fired. It was too good for him. The intruder should have practiced on the guy before going after Fitzcroft."

SCARCELY observing the slight smile on Cranston's lip, Cardona changed the subject by asking him a question:

"Have you seen Mr. Purnell lately?"

"Nearly every day," The Shadow replied. "He'd moved one of his companies, the Industrial Paper Roy Corp., to larger quarters."

"Did Purnell move, too?"

"No. He is still at the same place. He is having it altered into special offices for the Manufacturers Security Association. He is taking an unusual interest in that organization."

Cardona grunted.

"He ought to," said Joe. "The outfit will need some more members, considering the way they've been knocked off."

"Speaking of the members," commented Cranston, "Peter Dryne is out of town, but will be back late this afternoon."

"Peter Dryne?"

"Yes." Cranston's tone was very casual. "I supposed that you would remember him. He was a very close friend of Kerring and Fitzcroft. I might say that Dryne was the one man who saw things precisely as they did."

Cardona's interest was strongly aroused.

"You'll be seeing Dryne, Mr. Cranston? Where does he live?"

"He has a penthouse not far from Times Square. The next time I go up there, I shall phone you, inspector. I am sure that Dryne would like to meet you."

Two purposes were accomplished through that chat with Joe Cardona. The Shadow learned the sum and substance of all that Cardona had uncovered during more than a week of intensive investigation.

Cardona's results were very meager; they didn't supply The Shadow with anything that he really needed. The important point was that Cardona's facts did not refute any of The Shadow's own findings.

As for the second accomplishment, The Shadow had drawn Cardona into the case, more definitely than the inspector could have possibly realized. Keeping tabs on chance meetings between Purnell and Dryne had proven much easier than The Shadow anticipated.

With Purnell in New York and Dryne out of town, the whole thing was covered by Cranston's own visits to Purnell's office, to see that Purnell himself was still around.

Even Purnell couldn't have suspected the full meaning of those visits. He'd insisted that all the members of the association drop in to see him, and Cranston hadn't called more frequently than others. However, Cranston had been in often enough for Purnell to keep tabs on him, too.

True to his veiled promise, Purnell had called off the blundering detectives who previously sleuthed Cranston all around Manhattan.

THE afternoon was getting late. Soon, Dryne would be back from his extended trip. He'd been getting new members for the Manufacturers Security Association. Naturally, Purnell would want to see him this evening, in a private conference - the very thing The Shadow wanted to watch. To keep everything under control, The Shadow had thrown obstacles into the path.

As Cranston, he had suggested that other members of the association drop in to see Dryne as soon as he returned. It would be something of a surprise party, but not for Dryne. The real surprise would strike Purnell, when he found out about it.

It was not quite five o'clock when Cranston dropped into Purnell's office. Purnell greeted him with a friendly smile. He'd seen most of the members today, he said. Brenz was among the callers, and so was Lamborn, who happened to be over from Philadelphia. Rather proudly, Purnell showed Cranston around the place.

Everything had been changed.

Purnell's office was refurnished, and it contained some squatty metal filing cabinets, which were stocked with data concerning the association. More cabinets would be bought as soon as needed, but they were comparatively unimportant.

Purnell wanted Cranston to see the outer offices. Men were redecorating them, and the workers were busy day and night. A painting job was under way at present, and Purnell actually enjoyed the smell of it, because it smacked of enterprise.

"The painters wanted to charge overtime for night work," declared Purnell. "I wouldn't hear of it. I finally found men who would work at the usual price. I'm going to wait here until they come, and see them get to work before I go home. I'll save money for our association."

Maybe Purnell was saving money, but certainly not in the careful way he insisted upon, when his own cash was involved.

Purnell hadn't redecorated any of his own offices in years. To him, normal expenses were extravagances, and he was indulging in them at present because the association was paying the bills. He would probably have become indignant had the fact been mentioned, so The Shadow avoided it.

Purnell suggested that Cranston go out by the freight elevator, because the regular exit was blocked off by the painters. Purnell had trouble finding the elevator operator, so Cranston went down by the

stairway.

It was dark outside, and Moe Shrevnitz's cab was waiting. Entering it, Cranston waited a short while, then leisurely transformed himself into The Shadow.

Well obscured in his cloak and hat, the human blackout ascended the stairs and approached Purnell's office. The Shadow's return was timely. Purnell was on the telephone, talking to Dryne, who had just arrived at his penthouse. Purnell was in a rather testy mood.

"Yes, I'm going home," he snapped, "but I wanted to see you first... What? Come up to your place, with a lot of people there? Nonsense!... Very well, when you get rid of them, I'll see you. Not before... Of course, our business should be confidential. I want to know how you really made out on your trip -

"I'll tell you what, Dryne. I'll go home and come down to see you later... Yes, after dinner, of course... What's that?... More people coming in? You're getting too popular, Dryne... No, don't worry about it. If they won't leave, you can meet me down here.

"Yes, I'll call you first. If the crowd hasn't left you, you can leave them -"

Since Purnell was finishing his call, The Shadow moved away. Instead of going directly to the rear stairway, he skirted the outer offices, to look over the night crew of painters.

They had just arrived, and were very busy. Too busy to see the black-cloaked form that observed them from the semidarkness of a doorway. Of course, The Shadow saw the painters perfectly. They were in the light and were wearing white.

Their faces interested him. He remembered those toughened countenances. The Shadow was still picturing them as he reached the darkness of the stairs. Descending in the gloom, he indulged in a soft, but significant laugh. Yes, he remembered the faces of the painters.

They were faces that he had glimpsed twice: once in Central Park; again, in an obscure garage where Tim Lanney had kept his truck while in New York. Faces that belonged to thugs; features that The Shadow had discerned sufficiently, even when they were masked.

The murder crew that Purnell disavowed was back, on duty outside his private office. Why they had been assigned to such duty was no mystery to The Shadow.

His whispered laugh was proof that he knew!

CHAPTER XVI. THE UNSEEN GUEST

AS Cranston, The Shadow had arranged for guests to be at Dryne's. As Cranston, he didn't have to keep those guests there. They did it for themselves, smothering Dryne's hints whenever he tried to end the party. In fact, the only guest who seemed at all sympathetically disposed toward Dryne was Cranston, himself. He could afford to ride with Dryne. Two other men were insisting, in much louder tones, that the party ought to last all night.

Andrew Brenz was one; Ralph Lambron the other.

When it came to throwing parties, Brenz was an expert, whether at home or elsewhere. He insisted upon being the life of the party, and making his life a long one. Tonight, Brenz had a rival in Lambron.

Tired of commuting between Philadelphia and New York, Lambron had decided to stay in Manhattan overnight. Having nowhere else to go, he was willing to stay in Dryne's penthouse until dawn.

Peter Dryne was a very earnest man. He tried to make everybody happy, but there were times when it went too far. This was one of those times.

With a dozen guests all over his penthouse, and more due to arrive, he didn't know what to do about it. So he asked Cranston's advice. Very considerately, Dryne urged Cranston out to the entry by the elevators, so that no one else would overhear.

"I don't know what to do about it." Said Dryne in an unhappy tone. "There's only one place where I can go, if I want quiet" - he gestured along a hallway, from which the noise of merriment came crashing - "and that's my study."

"Why should you want quiet?" inquired Cranston. "You should be in the mood for a party, Dryne, now that you're home."

"It's on account of Purnell," said Dryne. "I told them he was coming here, and they said fine. They'd all like to see Purnell, but he doesn't want to see them. He and I have business to discuss."

"It could wait until tomorrow -"

"You don't know Purnell. He likes results. He says that tomorrow is another day, and he would like to begin it with complete facts covering my recent trip. You haven't been active enough in the business end of our association to understand Purnell's mania for handling matters promptly."

Dryne was actually complimenting Cranston. The Shadow had taken great pains to show disinterest in the business of the association. On questions of raising funds, or policies of expenditures, Cranston always voted along.

He couldn't be active in the M.S.A., he said, not with his penchant for travel. Within a few months, he intended to start on a long excursion up the Amazon, in search of forgotten jungle cities; hence, he wouldn't be on hand to help with association affairs.

All of which simply meant that Lamont Cranston had avoided the tag that had been placed on Kerring, Fitzcroft and Dryne. Once the M.S.A. became a racket, Cranston would be where could not even object, let alone prevent it.

True, there had been reason to get rid of him, as evidenced in Central Park, but that had been a matter of present expediency at the time it took place.

Definitely, Cranston was just another member of the association, under no danger, unless someone chose to annihilate the whole group. Such wholesale slaughter would never happen. One man, alone, was an obstacle to crime's clear path: Peter Dryne.

Odd that Dryne should be worrying about a get-together with Purnell, when such a meeting was the equivalent of a one-way ticket to an execution block.

"I've told them that Purnell wants to confer privately with me," insisted Dryne. "The sooner I can see him, the sooner I can return and tell them the results. Purnell might even join the party after the conference. But I must have quiet, first."

"You won't find quiet here."

"I'm afraid not. I thought you might help me talk the crowd into leaving, but I suppose it won't work, Cranston. Well" - Dryne shrugged wearily - "I'll have to put up with it until Purnell telephones me. I'll tell him that I'll leave and meet him at his office."

THEY were strolling back along the hall, past the study and into the living room. The party was spreading itself into other rooms of Dryne's ample penthouse. Some of the overflow was moving out on a roof terrace, which Dryne had arranged in the style of an Italian garden. Dryne could only speak hopelessly to Cranston:

"The more, the merrier, I suppose. I might as well let them overrun the place. I hope they don't get so boisterous that I shall have to summon the police."

"Suppose I call my friend, the police commissioner," suggested Cranston, "and invite him over. He likes parties, particularly if they fit in with his work. I think that Weston would welcome a chance to keep an eye on Lambron and on Brenz. It is something of an opportunity, finding the two together."

Dryne liked Cranston's suggestion. He said that Cranston could call the commissioner from the telephone in the study. Dryne had already begun to regard Lambron and Brenz as the main reasons why the rest were staying. As usual, each was trying to be the life of the party, at the other's expense. However, this evening, neither Lambron nor Brenz had an echo. The party was for association members only. So Lambron had left his secretary, Mordan, downstairs; while Brenz's chauffeur, Richtle, was outside in the limousine.

After looking over Lambron and Brenz, The Shadow decided to see what their toadies were about. He managed it quite simply.

Pushing through the two dozen guests, he headed for the study, but didn't stop there. Strolling past, he reached the elevators and pressed the button. In Cranston's manner, The Shadow looked idly about and thoroughly surveyed the square-shaped hallway that formed an entry to Dryne's penthouse apartment.

There were two elevators, but only one was in operation at night. There was also a door to a fire tower, tightly shut and latched, so it couldn't be opened from the outside. Turning about, Cranston looked at the open doorway of Dryne's apartment. The study was at the left of the short hall, but the rest of the apartment was around the corner to the right.

As Dryne had said, the study was secluded. But, even with the door shut, the loud noise of the party might penetrate. Purnell wouldn't like it, and Dryne knew it.

The elevator arrived. Reaching the ground floor, Cranston strolled around the foyer. There was a desk, with a clerk behind it, and telephone booths in a corner beneath a stairway that led up to the second floor.

The elevators were around a corner from the desk, out of the clerk's view. They had indicators, marking the floors. The arrow above the unused elevator pointed to "B," indicating that the extra car was in the basement for the night.

Calling the Cobalt Club from a phone booth, The Shadow invited Weston to the party. Judging from Cranston's quiet tone, the commissioner must have supposed that the affair was a formal one, quite free from horseplay. Hearing that both Lambron and Brenz were present, with Purnell coming later, Weston declared that he would be right over.

Leaving the building, Cranston stepped into Moe's cab, which was parked up the street. He received a brief report from his agent. It was The Shadow, not Cranston, who stepped from the cab. Fully cloaked, The Shadow was indeed a living blackout as he moved through a space beside the apartment building, to reach the rear street.

A few cars were parked there; among them, Brenz's very elaborate limousine. It was the only car that

had occupants, and they were very easy to see, because the convertible top of the limousine was drawn down. Two men, both in the back seat, holding a little conference of their own. Two who shouldn't have been so friendly, considering the feud between their masters.

One was Brenz's chauffeur, Richtle. The man that he had invited into the open car was Lambron's secretary, Mordan.

Neither saw the slouch hat that lifted over the side of the car, followed by cloaked shoulders that blurred into the surrounding darkness. The Shadow listened to their buzzed conversation, which came in snatches.

Mordan, first:

"We'd better be getting up there."

"Yeah," agreed Richtle. "Only, you're the one that's going up."

"You're coming as far as the second -"

"After I move the car, sure. I guess I'd better move it right now."

Richtle slid out from the deep cushions in order to reach the front seat. He turned on the headlights and started the big car. It didn't travel very far; merely to a short service alley under the shelter of the apartment house.

Moving along the wall, The Shadow saw the limousine stopped just beneath the small balcony of a second-floor apartment, which was dark, and looked empty because its broad French windows lacked curtains.

It would have been easy for Mordan to stand up on the rear seat and reach that balcony. Instead, he decided to go with Richtle, who was out from behind the wheel and starting toward a basement door at the end of the short alley.

Following, The Shadow watched the pair enter the basement; he noted the direction that their flashlight took.

With a low-toned laugh, The Shadow retraced his own route, but he didn't stop at Moe's cab. Instead, he slipped from his cloak and hat, folded the hat inside the cloak and draped the latter on his arm. It looked as though Cranston carried a light overcoat, or an evening cape, when he re-entered the apartment house.

Stopping at a telephone booth, The Shadow made another telephone call, this time to Inspector Joe Cardona. Though his guise was Cranston's, The Shadow spoke in the strange, whispered tone that was identified with his garb of blackness.

Cardona had heard that voice before. He listened, punctuating The Shadow's weird-toned orders with short words of agreement. When The Shadow voiced instructions, Cardona was always willing to accept them, even though he wasn't always sure where they would eventually lead him.

Crossing the foyer, the cloak still inconspicuous on his arm, Cranston entered the only operating elevator and rode up to the penthouse. Inside Dryne's apartment, he stepped into the study, opened a closet door and bundled his hat and cloak upon a shelf.

The Shadow was still Cranston, quite unburdened with any extra garments, when he rejoined the party.

Soon, Commissioner Weston arrived, to be greeted by his friend Cranston. The friendship underwent an immediate strain when Weston found himself the recipient of a riotous greeting.

Brenz was handing Weston a glass, bawling for the others to join the commissioner in a drink.

Lambron wouldn't join. He wanted another drink, but would take it later. He wouldn't waste a good drink on any police commissioner. He liked directors of public safety. They had a good one in Philadelphia, better than the police commissioner in New York.

The crowd was too hilarious to consider Lambron's words an insult to Weston. So the commissioner swallowed his pride, along with his drink. The only serious interruption came when Dryne answered the ring of a telephone bell that clamored from his study. He was gone a little while, and the guests quieted down when he returned.

"I've just heard from Purnell," announced Dryne. "He won't think of coming here! Why, he could hear all the shouting, even over the telephone! I'm going to gather all my papers" - he glanced at his watch - "and leave in about twenty minutes."

"That will get me to Purnell's office by the time he arrives there; perhaps sooner. If only a few more of you can become serious, I might invite Purnell here after the conference."

With that, Dryne stalked to the study. Weston stepped away from Brenz, who was offering him another drink; he also shook off Lambron, who was approaching to offer a half-drunken apology.

The commissioner was looking for Cranston, the man held up by Dryne as a serious example for the others. Not finding Cranston, Weston went out to the terrace garden to hunt for him.

Commissioner Weston had gone the wrong direction. The man who had really found Cranston was Dryne. But Dryne didn't know it. Closing the door of his lighted study, Dryne had stiffened, rooted in his tracks.

Near the desk stood a figure cloaked in black: too weird to be human, too real to be a ghost. Eyes from beneath a slouch hat burned like living fires. Cloaked shoulders were fronted by a gloved hand that held a leveled automatic. The voice that spoke was sinister, a whisper that would have suited a being from another world.

"Sit down, Dryne," spoke The Shadow. "We have matters to discuss, you and I. Your best plan is to listen."

CHAPTER XVII. THE DOUBLE TRAIL

STILL transfixed, Peter Dryne kept staring at the strange guest who had hitherto remained unseen, wondering how The Shadow had invaded the penthouse. Only Dryne's features were mobile. They underwent a multitude of changes that The Shadow understood.

Faced by The Shadow, men revealed their true selves unwittingly. Crooks and honest men alike, their emotions flooded to the surface under The Shadow's probe. Dryne was honest; he was standing the test, but he stood it too well.

Dryne couldn't believe that anyone confronted him thus would be friendly in intent. Nor could he realize that The Shadow was an actuality, rather than a creation of his own imagination.

Seized with a mad impulse to prove that The Shadow didn't exist, Dryne hurled himself upon the human specter. He was sore that he couldn't receive bullets from a phantom gun muzzle.

No bullets came, though the gun was real enough. Instead, The Shadow grappled Dryne, hooked an arm around his neck to stifle any shouts, and reeled the man to the chair behind the desk.

Dryne's attack wasn't all madness. He had plenty of strength in his thickset shoulders. However, The Shadow soon had him clamped, and they were staring eye to eye, Dryne searching The Shadow's burning gaze with a very indignant glare.

Arguments were no good with Dryne.

The Shadow mentioned Kerring and Fitzcroft in a tone that only impressed Dryne the wrong way. His glare seemed to ask why hadn't The Shadow saved them first? Dryne's eyes tuned to challenge, as though he believed The Shadow to be the actual murderer, intent on adding Dryne's own scalp to those of Kerring and Fitzcroft.

No, Dryne wouldn't take The Shadow's suggestion: namely, to stay here and let someone else go to Purnell's. When The Shadow gave him a chance to speak, Dryne gurgled that the whole thing was a trap. There was only one thing to do with Dryne - that was to put him where he would have to stay; so The Shadow did.

Taking a half nelson on Dryne's shoulders, The Shadow flattened the sturdy man on the floor and began to bind him with straps that The Shadow had wisely taken from Dryne's suitcase in the closet. Dryne saved his breath, at first, in order to struggle. When his writhing didn't get him anywhere, he decided to shout.

Too late. By then, The Shadow had him properly trussed, and was able to gag him before his calls could be heard above the commotion of the merry-makers outside the study.

The closet was large, so The Shadow not only put Dryne inside, but also locked the door and took the key. It would be fatal to The Shadow's plans, should Dryne be found too soon. Time, incidentally, was looming as a very important factor. The Shadow had spent several minutes dealing with Dryne, and couldn't waste any more. Gliding from the study, The Shadow closed the door behind him, hiding its motion by his own form.

It was as if blackness had suddenly blotted the door; then dispelled itself. Noting a small table in the hall, The Shadow removed his hat and cloak, bundled them in the darkness under the table, and rejoined the party in his guise of Cranston.

THE first person he ran into was Weston, but before the commissioner could express indignation at being invited to such a party, Cranston gestured him aside.

Lambron and Brenz were having an argument. It was over the last round of drinks that had been brought up. Each wanted to pay the check, which came to a little under nine dollars. Lambron was trying to force a ten-dollar bill on the attendant who had brought the drinks, while Brenz was shoving a bank roll in between, trying to peel off a batch of ones.

"The privilege is mine," insisted Lambron. "You can take care of something else, Brenz."

"I'll take care of this," Brenz argued. "Keep your privilege, Lambron."

"I still insist -"

"And so do I!"

Others were gathering about, laughing. Cranston stepped aside, and Weston became interested.

Lambron and Brenz had changed tactics; they were behaving in Alphonse and Gaston style, bowing to each other and making a joke out of the situation.

"If I leave this to you, Brenz," said Lambron, "you must leave something else to me."

"Suppose I leave this to you, then," returned Brenz, "and thus end the argument."

Lambron bowed, but when he proffered the ten-dollar bill toward the man who waited for it, Brenz thrust his wad of money into it, much to the amusement of the onlookers. It was Cranston, however, who provided the next touch. He approached the disputants, showing some money of his own.

"Suppose we split it three ways," he suggested. "Give the man your ten dollars, Lambron. Let him keep the odd dollar for the tip. Brenz and I will each give you an equal share."

Lambron handed the ten-dollar bill to the attendant and sent him on his way. Cranston counted three one-dollar bills on the table, inviting Brenz to do the same. Brenz counted three from his roll; placing them on Cranston's. Then Brenz added another bill to the heap, saying:

"The odd dollar."

"No, no," protested Cranston. "I shall supply the odd dollar. Here!"

He placed another on the heap and handed the lot to Lambron, who started to wad the money and put it in his pocket. An odd look came on Lambron's face; his fingers had felt something in the heap. The Shadow could see him drawing something from his pocket; whatever it was, Lambron hid it by bringing out two one-dollar bills. He handed one to Brenz, the other to Cranston.

"You each gave me an extra," reminded Lambron. "Take them back. I've already paid the odd dollar."

Lambron was turning away. From the corner of his eye, The Shadow saw what he had in his hand. It was a visiting card, with something written on it; the card had come to him among the dollar bills. But Brenz wasn't giving Cranston much opportunity to watch Lambron. Brenz was waving the dollar that Lambron had handed back to him.

"What about this?" demanded Brenz. "Should we let Lambron pay the odd dollar?"

The Shadow had put his own dollar away. He reached into his pocket again.

"I guess we're each in a dollar," he said to Brenz. Casually, Cranston brought out a dollar bill. "Do you like to gamble, Brenz?"

Brenz stiffened, for a moment, at the possible reference to the hidden enterprise that accounted for his wealth. Then, cautiously, he said:

"Occasionally, yes. In a small way."

"This way is small enough, Brenz. You can match me for my dollar. Here -"

He plucked Brenz's dollar, adding it to his own, and turned the two over as he laid them on the table, one diagonally across the other. Cranston reached in his pocket for a coin, and Brenz did the same. They flipped them.

"You're matching me," said Cranston. "What do you have, Brenz?"

AT that moment, Brenz's eyes went toward the dollar bills. The green side of the lower bill was upward,

and on it Brenz saw words, inscribed in ink. He remembered that he hadn't looked at the green side of his bill when he held it. Brenz turned a quick glance toward Cranston.

"I'm matching you," reminded Brenz. "So call your coin first, Cranston."

The Shadow raised one hand from the back of the other and glanced at his coin.

"Tails."

Brenz took a look at his coin, but didn't show it. He simply flipped it into his hand, and then to his pocket, meanwhile reaching his other hand to gather in the dollar bills, which he quickly crumpled.

"Tails, here," said Brenz. "Sorry, Cranston. You lose."

With a nod, The Shadow turned to chat with Weston. He didn't have to watch Brenz move away and open the bill that bore the message. He knew that Brenz had lied, when saying his coin lay tails.

Brenz knew that Cranston wouldn't call his bluff over a mere dollar. Brenz had simply wanted to keep the dollar that Cranston had given him. He'd regretted that he hadn't looked at it before Cranston suggested the matching game.

Lambron and Brenz had drifted far apart, each drawing some of the guests with him. With the whole penthouse as a strolling ground, it gave them a wide range. Cranston suggested that Weston come with him to the roof terrace, so Weston started. When he arrived there Cranston was no longer with him.

The Shadow had decided to change direction. Still Cranston, he was strolling toward Dryne's study. He ran into Lambron, who gave him a surprised look as they met in a doorway

"Hello, Cranston," said Lambron. "Where's your friend, the commissioner?"

"I'm looking for him, Lambron," returned The Shadow. "Where is your friend Brenz?"

Lambron's sallow lips smirked.

"My friend," he repeated sarcastically. Then, even more emphatically: "My very good friend Mr. Brenz!"

Cranston was turning at Lambron's gesture. The sallow man indicated another doorway, through which Brenz appeared and inquired:

"Did someone call me?"

Then, seeing Lambron with Cranston, Brenz changed tone. He became sarcastic, too. "Don't match money with Lambron," he said to Cranston. "He'll gyp you, sure!"

Before Lambron could retort, they heard the ringing of a telephone bell. It was in the study, and its persistence told that no one was there to answer it.

"Dryne must have gone," commented Cranston. "Suppose we answer the telephone."

They went into the study, which was still lighted, though Dryne wasn't in sight. Cranston was picking up the telephone, when Weston appeared at the door. The others told the commissioner that Dryne had gone. In fact, Cranston was saying the same, over the telephone:

"Mr. Dryne has gone... This is Mr. Cranston speaking... Certainly, come up if you wish... Oh, very well
_"

Hanging up, Cranston approached the door, remarking that it was some friend of Dryne's, who wasn't coming up. As they walked through the penthouse, Cranston suddenly found that he was out of cigarettes. He decided to return to the empty study and call the desk, to have some cigarettes sent up.

BUT Cranston didn't return to the study. From beneath the table in the hall, he produced a hat and cloak and put them on. He was The Shadow again, as he waited just within the door that opened to the elevators.

The Shadow was looking at two other doors. One was the door of the unused elevator. It was slightly ajar. So was the door that opened to the fire tower. Someone had opened it and wedged it slightly, so that it wouldn't latch.

Soon, the regular elevator arrived, and Cardona stepped off. He was the person whose call Cranston answered. But Joe had said he would come up; not that he wouldn't. Cranston had simply stated the case in reverse, for reasons that were to be apparent immediately.

The elevator door went shut, the car was going down, when Cardona stepped into Dryne's hallway. There, Joe froze, his hands lifting as he felt the pressure of a gun.

Then, a whispered voice. The Shadow's!

"Quiet, inspector," it said. "Sorry that I have to use persuasion, but we have no time to waste. I know that you will co-operate."

Cardona nodded. He understood the gun. It had stopped him like a trip hammer, better than anything else could have. The Shadow lowered the automatic and turned Joe about. They moved out to the elevators. There, The Shadow undertoned again:

"Turn around."

Joe was back to the unused elevator, when The Shadow reached into the slight crack at the edge and slid the door wide. He drew Cardona backward, into what Joe almost feared would be the elevator shaft. Instead, it was the car, but Cardona's short trip ended very oddly.

Pressed by The Shadow, the inspector stumbled into something like a closet, just large enough to receive him. Before he could guess what it was all about, The Shadow was closing the door. Cardona heard the final words:

"Stay right where you are. You won't have to worry about what's going to happen, inspector. You'll find out when the time comes. Be ready."

Then The Shadow had closed a metal door, twisting a knob that locked it. Cooped up in darkness, with cold metal all about him, Cardona began to wonder why he'd agreed to co-operate. Having gone this far, however, Joe decided to see the rest through.

Stepping from the darkened elevator, The Shadow closed the door as he had found it. He pressed the elevator button, giving it a series of shorts and longs that brought sharp buzzes from the darkened car. They sounded like a special signal, that could be heard on the fire tower.

Of course, the regular elevator arrived, summoned by the button. By then, The Shadow had become Lamont Cranston. As he entered the lighted elevator, he looked back and saw a tremble of the fire-tower door. On the downward trip, he heard a very faint clang echoing down the adjoining shaft.

Someone had answered the buzzes, sneaking in from the fire tower to enter the spare elevator where The

Shadow had left Cardona. Reaching the ground floor, Cranston looked back as he strolled across the foyer. He saw the dial of the extra car, its arrow moving downward, until it stopped at the second floor.

Instead of leaving immediately, Cranston laid his cloak and hat across a chair arm and approached the desk. He asked the clerk how long ago Mr. Dryne had gone out.

The clerk wasn't sure: in fact, he didn't remember seeing Mr. Dryne. So he called to the elevator operator, who couldn't remember, either. He was a new man and wasn't positive what Dryne looked like.

"Sorry, Mr. Cranston," expressed the clerk. "But I've been busy answering calls, sending up orders, and what not. Mr. Dryne must have left while I was occupied."

A buzz was coming from the switchboard. Answering it was one of the clerks duties. He picked up the telephone, spoke, and then turned suddenly to Cranston.

"Is Commissioner Weston still upstairs, Mr. Cranston?"

"I believe that he is."

"Whoever is on the phone," said the clerk, "is speaking for Mr. Dryne. He says that Mr. Dryne wants the Commissioner to join him right away. He'd like his friends to come along, too, but he doesn't say where."

"Call the penthouse," was Cranston's suggestion. "Give them the message. They know where Dryne went."

With that advice, Cranston left, picking up the garments he had laid on the chair. Outside, he nodded to Weston's chauffeur, who was in the commissioner's official car, which, as usual, was parked in a choice space by a fire plug. Moe's cab wheeled up, and Cranston entered it.

By the time the cab was rounding the corner, Cranston was putting on the cloak and hat that transformed him into The Shadow. He was going to need his black regalia, for his part as Cranston was finished. Moe caught a whispered laugh from the rear seat of the cab.

The Shadow didn't have to name the destination. Moe already knew where this trip was to lead. Straight to the end of an alibi trail, where The Shadow, in person, would solve the riddle of double murder by revealing crime's system in full operation!

CHAPTER XVIII. WHERE CRIME FAILED

IT was, indeed, a double trail that The Shadow had arranged. The cloaked avenger was following one route, and Joe Cardona another. Never before, however, had the ace inspector taken a trail like this one. Joe had heard of crazy rides, but this beat them all.

First, Cardona couldn't figure what kind of a contraption contained him. It wasn't a coffin, nor was it a closet, though it might have been a cross between them. At least, it wasn't air-tight, so Joe didn't find it troublesome to breath, but he was certainly badly cramped.

That happened to prove advantageous, following the trip down in the elevator.

It was after the trip that hands had taken Joe's container, tilted it, turned it upside down, and let it over what seemed the edge of a precipice. Fortunately, they hadn't dropped it, though it did take a slight jolt. By then, Cardona was glad the thing was cramped, for he could brace himself within it.

The handlers had laid it flat after lowering it, so Cardona rode quite comfortably for a while. He decided that they were taking him somewhere in a truck. When the ride ended, he expected some more peculiar handling, and got it. The metal box was slid down to the sidewalk, but this time, Joe congratulated himself because he was right side up.

Next, it was on an elevator, going upward. Finally the contrivance was being rolled, smoothly, easily, to its journey's end.

Though uncomfortably stiff, Cardona was able to poke his hand into his pocket and make ready with a stubby gun. He was none too soon, for voices were telling him what was to happen next. Two voices.

"Open the door," said one, "and let him flop right here."

"We'll have to move him, then," spoke the other. "We can't leave him right in front of the cabinet."

"We'll roll the cabinet somewhere else."

"That's a good stunt. Over with the others. Hurry, though. We've got to lam."

The metal door came open and Cardona started the flop that the men expected. It wasn't strategy: it was something he just couldn't help. His cramped legs buckled and he went forward, because his weight was against the door. He heard a voice chuckle:

"That's what you call a dead man's fall -"

Right then, Cardona was proving he wasn't dead. Catching himself, he swung upon the two men in the dimness of a room that seemed to be an office. One against two, but Cardona had a ready gun, that glimmered in the filtering light from a window. More than that, he was a dead man come to life!

One man, rather thin but rangy, went backward with a plaintive bleat, his hands shaking as he lifted them. Sight of a dead man back in circulation was enough to break the fellow's nerve. The other, of blocky build, found himself immediately and made a lunge for Cardona, who wheeled to cover him with the gun. Joe's sudden turn was too much for his cramped knees. They buckled.

Both men were swinging for Cardona, intent upon making him a substitute for the corpse they hadn't brought, when a strange laugh froze them. It came from the doorway through which they had entered. Whispered mirth, that carried identity with challenge. Only one being on earth could provide that sibilant mockery.

The Shadow!

KNOWING that the laugh meant death to crime, the two men didn't wait for the blasts of an automatic to succeed the mirth. They came about, the blocky man quaking like his thinner pal, to face the muzzles that they knew awaited them. Each looked into a yawning .45 that was meant especially for him. Side by side, the crooks kept jostling each other's arm, because of the shivers that they couldn't restrain.

Then, the shakes were accompanied by a clanky obligatio. Cardona had clamped a pair of handcuffs on the crooks, a bracelet for each man's wrist. He frisked them, but found they had no guns, so he pushed their hands down and shoved them over by the window.

With a nod of thanks to The Shadow, or rather, to the mass of blackness that represented Joe's timely rescuer, Cardona turned to the prisoners.

"In a hurry to lam, were you?" he queried. "Let's have a look and see who you are."

Cardona's look rather surprised him, though The Shadow's low-toned laugh was one of expected recognition. Crime had indeed produced an odd alliance. The prisoners were Mordan and Richtle. Joe's finding of Lambron's secretary in collusion with Brenz's chauffeur smacked of something that closely resembled a double cross.

Looking around the office, Cardona could see its fixings, because his eyes were now accustomed to the light. He even saw The Shadow, standing near the blocky cabinet in which Joe had been brought to the place. Cardona put a query:

"Say - whose office is this?"

The Shadow, didn't have to answer. Cardona had reached the desk, on which lay a large, flat, check book.

Opening it, Joe read the printed name that ran across the end of each check: HUBERT PURNELL.

What a climax!

It backed Cardona's hunch that Purnell was crime's brain. Great stuff, The Shadow letting Joe take a free trip to crime's headquarters. Otherwise, Cardona never would have uncovered the missing links: Mordan and Richtle.

Cardona wanted to see something else. Observing that The Shadow had approached the cowering prisoners and was keeping them quite helpless, Joe took a look at the metal box that had brought him.

It was a very interesting contrivance. Outwardly, the thing matched the new filing cabinets that stocked Purnell's office, but it had a very special difference.

The drawers of the cabinet were nothing but dummy fronts, made into a single piece, which formed a hinged door. One clamp had held the door shut during Cardona's ride.

Having opened the door, to let its contents sprawl, Mordan and Richtle had planned to clamp it shut again and slide it to the corner of the room, among the regular filing cabinets.

"I'm beginning to get it," declared Cardona. "Some other guy was supposed to be in this thing. A dead guy, and I know who he is: Peter Dryne!" Pausing a moment, Cardona turned to The Shadow and inquired anxiously: "Is Dryne still alive?"

"Quite alive," assured The Shadow. "A trifle uncomfortable, but safe. He's in the closet of his study, inspector, doing his bit toward crime solution. He isn't as uncomfortable as you were during your recent trip."

Cardona turned to the desk, to reach for Purnell's telephone. The Shadow halted him with one word:

"Wait!"

FOOTSTEPS were sounding outside the door. They came from the rear elevator, which served as a route to Purnell's private office while workmen were busy painting the outer rooms.

When The Shadow gestured Cardona over near the door, Joe felt quite sure that the arrival must be Purnell. It was ten minutes since The Shadow had certified Cardona's capture of Mordan and Richtle. About time for Purnell to appear.

All was silent, for The Shadow was close beside the prisoners when the door came open. A hand found

the light switch and pressed it. Cardona recognized Purnell, saw him turn toward the desk, only to halt at sight of Mordan and Richtle cowering by the window, so huddled that their mutual handcuffs didn't show.

Purnell didn't see The Shadow; the cloaked visitor had faded behind a filing cabinet when the lights came on.

Purnell's voice was sharply quizzical:

"What are you two doing here?"

"I'll tell you, Purnell." The offer, in Cardona's gruff tone, caused Purnell to swing about, new surprise wrinkling his withery face. "They didn't have a chance to lam before you got here."

"To lam?"

"I mean they couldn't beat it. Run away. Or flee, as you would probably describe it. You didn't expect to see them, did you?"

"Why... why, no! I expected to find Peter Dryne."

Purnell's eyes had turned toward the special filing cabinet that stood with its trick door wide. Cardona had an idea what was in Purnell's mind.

"You expected Dryne, all right," declared the inspector. "You expected to see him dead, right here on this floor! A neat stunt, Purnell, hiring Mordan and Richtle to bring the body here. Clever, your buying out a couple of mugs who belonged to Lambron and Brenz."

"But... but I don't understand!"

"I'll make it plain for you, Purnell," said Cardona. "You murdered Kerring and Fitzcroft without bothering about cooking up a shaky alibi in either case. You wanted to get rid of Dryne, too, so you figured it was time you covered things. So you killed Dryne in one place, and arranged to have him taken somewhere else."

Purnell's eyes lost their steely glint and actually registered horror, as he queried:

"Has Dryne been murdered?"

The question stumped Cardona. His whole theory was suddenly deflated. Here he was, accusing Purnell of a murder that hadn't been done, for The Shallow had declared that Dryne was still alive. Assuming Purnell to be the killer, the situation no longer made sense. In fact, it was slipping worse and worse, the more that Cardona contemplated it.

Why, of all places, should Purnell have wanted Dryne's body in this office, where it would incriminate him even worse than if it had been found in Dryne's own study?

A strange whisper crept to Cardona's ears; at least, he fancied that he heard one: a suggestion from The Shadow, waiting in the darkness, that Cardona try another tack. Joe turned to Mordan and Richtle.

"One thing is sure," Cardona gruffed: "You two thought you were bringing, Dryne here, instead of me. Somebody was supposed to step up to Dryne when he was leaving the penthouse, poke him with a gun, and shove him into the wrong elevator. Right into that thing" - Cardona nudged at the trick filing cabinet - "and let him have the blast, with the door of the elevator shut.

"It was your job to pick up and deliver when you heard the elevator buzz. You'd know that sound all right, better than a muffled gunshot that you mightn't hear at all. You two were thinking you were bringing a body, Dryne's body, instead of me. But, coming here - I don't get it."

NEITHER Mordan nor Richtle offered to supply the answer. Both were looking dumb, as they could properly do, considering the error they had earlier made.

Cardona was confident, though, that he had the general facts. Someone, certainly not Purnell, had planned to murder Dryne at the penthouse, letting Mordan and Richtle tote the body away.

Again, Joe had a vague impression of The Shadow's whispered laugh; this time, approving in its tone. On the right track, Cardona used his head anew. He took another look at the filing cabinet. Then:

"I get it!" he exclaimed. "The thing is a plant! Purnell was to walk in here and find Dryne's body! Before he'd know what to do about it, people would show up, and there Purnell would be, with the goods right on him! Pinning Dryne's death on him would mean he'd take the rap for Kerring and Fitzcroft, too."

Swinging toward Purnell, Cardona saw a grateful expression on the financier's withery face. Urged by The Shadow, Cardona had turned his hunch inside out and now was getting somewhere, on the theory that Purnell was innocent.

"Look at that thing, Mr. Purnell!" exclaimed Cardona, pointing to the fake filing cabinet. "Do you know what they were going to do with it? They were going to leave it right here. I'll tell you why, too. Because when we found it, we'd think that you had it here, to ship Dryne's body away. Get it? The very thing they used to bring the body, here, would be evidence against you!"

Low-voiced approval was whispering from The Shadow's corner, only to be drowned by other sounds: the pounding of hurried footsteps coming to the office door. It was the sequel that The Shadow knew was due, and had planned to await.

Men were arriving, as Cardona had finally guessed they would. All part of the plant to find Purnell with Dryne's body, as evidence of murder!

Blackness was stirring from the corner. Cardona didn't see it, because he had turned toward the door. The Shadow, master of darkness, was stepping into light. It would take the hand of The Shadow to write the last chapter of this alibi trail!

CHAPTER XIX. THE LAST CHAPTER

THEY came across the threshold - Commissioner Weston, flanked by Ralph Lambron and Andrew Brenz. Behind them were others, pushing forward, who practically shoved the first-comers into the room. Everyone was looking for a man who wasn't present: Peter Dryne.

The fact that someone had phoned the hotel clerk, and told him to summon Dryne's friends to Purnell's office, was proof, it seemed, that Dryne expected trouble. However, Dryne's absence was suddenly forgotten, when Weston and his companions looked about the room.

Purnell's presence was natural; but seeing Cardona was something of a surprise. Sight of Mordan and Richtle was even more so, yet that was not the climax.

It was The Shadow who really held the scene.

In full view, he stood beyond Purnell's desk, his arms folded, while his hidden lips phrased a mirthful greeting. A strange tone, with a sinister touch, that men of evil could regard as mocking challenge. To

everyone who crossed the threshold, the burn of The Shadow's boring eyes meant challenge.

Men stood silent, awed, as though they faced the head of a strange tribunal, a being who was to serve as judge and jury in the interest of impartial justice.

They saw The Shadow nod. Cardona understood. Briefly, Joe told his story, and traced the facts it represented.

"My hunch was wrong, commissioner," said Cardona, in conclusion.

"This proves Purnell is innocent. Nobody would have tried to plant this on him, otherwise. I only wish I could prove something more."

"You have."

It was The Shadow who spoke. His words gripped the listeners. They waited, breathless to a man.

"You have proven a very obvious fact," revealed The Shadow. "Namely, that a scene of murder can be faked. Death may be delivered in one place, and found in another, even when such places are different cities!"

Two men shifted suddenly, but their moves carried them mere inches. The Shadow's folded arms had whipped apart, thrusting two gloved hands forward, each with a leveled automatic. Like pointers, the weapons picked out the shifters and held them frozen. One gun covered Ralph Lambron; the other weapon was pointed at Andrew Brenz.

"You two are friends," declared The Shadow, "though it was your game to pretend otherwise. The proof of your friendship is there." His eyes glanced momentarily toward Mordan and Richtle. "Those two are very close, yet no closer than their masters."

Something incredible was striking home to both Weston and Cardona. The Shadow was placing the murders of Kerring and Fitzcroft upon Lambron and Brenz, the two men whose alibis were absolute!

"I SHALL reconstruct the Kerring murder first," declared The Shadow. "On a certain afternoon, you, Andrew Brenz" - his eyes were fixed upon the man he named - "stopped at the home of Donald Kerring, in Philadelphia, and invited him to ride to New York in your car, to attend a meeting there.

"At six o'clock, your chauffeur, Richtle, drove the limousine into an obscure garage midway between your hotel and the Metrolite, where the meeting was to be. Before Kerring could guess why you had stopped there, you murdered him, Brenz, by putting a bullet in his heart.

"Aided by Richtle, you wrapped Kerring's body in a scatter rug that you had brought from your hotel suite. You placed the body in an empty box on a truck that was in the garage, ready to leave for Philadelphia. Then you hurried to the meeting, Brenz, taking Richtle with you, so that he would have an alibi, too."

Brenz's deep-set glare, the thrust that he gave his heavy jaw weren't enough to refute The Shadow's statement. The whole thing was plausible, as The Shadow described it. Brenz could have murdered Kerring in New York at six o'clock, for his alibi was one dependent upon place, not time!

"The truck was driven by a man who did not suspect its cargo," continued The Shadow. "His name was Tim Lanney, and he kept the truck in an old stable not far from Kerring's Philadelphia residence. At half past ten, Lambron" - The Shadow concentrated on the sallow man - "you and your secretary, Mordan, stopped in the stable and took Kerring's body.

"You carried it, rug and all, to Kerring's house. Using his own keys to enter, you framed the death scene in Kerring's library, then left by the window. You backed your sedan from the driveway and waited in front of Kerring's until the neighborhood watchman came along. You talked him into finding Kerring's body."

How perfectly it fitted! Lambron's alibi was one of time, not place. He and Mordan had been with the Philadelphia director of public safety for hours, before and after six o'clock, which Lambron knew would be established as the time of Kerring's death. But that didn't prevent Lambron from faking the Philadelphia murder scene between ten thirty and eleven; the deed which was to give his secret team-mate, Brenz, an ironclad alibi, too!

Having found the weak spots of the Kerring case, The Shadow came to the Fitzcroft murder. His accusing eyes remained fixed upon Lambron.

"It was turnabout, this time," declared The Shadow. "You murdered Noyes Fitzcroft. Not in New York, Lambron, but in Philadelphia. He came over there to see you, probably at your invitation, on the nine-o'clock express from New York."

"That evening, you insisted upon taking Lamont Cranston to the North Philadelphia station." The Shadow was quite impersonal in mentioning Cranston's name. "Cranston's train left just before Fitzcroft's arrived. Unfortunately, Cranston had not yet gained an inkling of your contemplated murder.

"You met Fitzcroft and took him to your office. You shot him through the heart while he was seated in a chair. You cut the slip cover off the chair, and had a piece of furniture that duplicated the chairs that you had often seen in Fitzcroft's New York apartment.

"Aided by Mordan, who had been with you right along, you crated Fitzcroft's body, chair and all, in a solid box. The next morning, Tim Lanney stopped at your awning factory, on call, and picked up the box, which he supposed was an awning shipment for delivery in New York."

Lambron's attempt at a derisive grin was more like a sickly leer. In his case, The Shadow had also stayed within the bounds of established fact. Lambron's alibi was one of place, not time. He could certainly have murdered Fitzcroft at half past ten, in Philadelphia!

"The box was delivered at Fitzcroft's apartment house, in New York." The Shadow's gaze turned to Brenz. "You were there, Brenz, to receive it, before noon. You and Richtle carried it upstairs and left the chair, with Fitzcroft's body in it, in the middle of the living room.

"An easy task, since Fitzcroft's janitor was never about. You took the box that you had broken apart and left it with other rubbish, on the rear street, where the junk man picked it up.

"You and Richtle didn't have a worry, Brenz. You had both been at a night club called the Spotlight all during the preceding evening, long before and after ten thirty, the time at which Fitzcroft's death was accurately established!"

LAMBRON and Brenz looked at each other, momentarily forgetting that they were supposed to be enemies. Then, rather than give themselves away, they glared separately at The Shadow. He had more to tell them.

"Tonight, you both planned to murder Dryne," declared The Shadow. "A simple thing, to slay him as he left the penthouse, and have Mordan and Richtle bring him here, to pin three crimes on Purnell, the man who lacked an alibi in every case. One of you had to murder Dryne, and you were trying to decide which, when Cranston happened into your discussion.

"You were veiling things by arguing about paying for the drinks. Cranston's offer, to split the check three ways, delayed you. As you were putting money in your pocket, Lambron, you found a card from Brenz on which he had written that he would attend to Dryne."

From Lambron, The Shadow turned to Brenz.

"In your turn, Brenz, you received a message on a dollar bill. It said that Lambron would settle Dryne's fate. You each left murder to the other, and Dryne escaped death entirely. It only remained for Inspector Cardona to make his trip in the delivery box intended for Dryne's body, and your whole game was broken wide."

Lambron and Brenz were exchanging glares that ended in dumfounded headshakes. They hadn't written those messages, either of them! It was Cranston who had slipped a written card among the dollar bills that went to Lambron! Cranston, too, who had put a message on the dollar bill, which he added to the one held by Brenz!

He'd seen to it that only he would handle Dryne, and thereby save him from scheduled death. For Cranston was The Shadow!

Neither Lambron nor Brenz voiced that discovery, for fear it would entangle them more. Instead, they broke into a sputter of denials regarding the murders of Kerring and Fitzcroft. Both killers were arguing that there wasn't any truck driver named Tim Lanney.

For answer, The Shadow opened the door and Tim stepped into the office. A wire from Cranston had brought Tim to New York. Moe had gone to bring Tim, after delivering The Shadow at Purnell's office.

With him, Tim had his little book. From it, he showed Weston the time when he had picked up Lambron's so-called awning shipment in Philadelphia; also, when he had left it at Fitzcroft's New York apartment.

The Shadow reminded Tim about the varnish crates. Tim showed the book to Purnell. The Shadow had given Tim the lading bill, so the truckman produced it, too.

"This was to help frame you, I guess," said Tim to Purnell. "These fellows" - Tim motioned toward Lambron and Brenz - "must have sent the cash for some varnish I picked up at your plant. My truck got wrecked in Jersey, and if I'd been in it, I'd never have come out alive. Not after the way that varnish blazed."

Lambron and Brenz were silent but contemptuous. Tim's testimony was just another parcel of circumstantial evidence. Neither Lambron nor Brenz intended to talk, and they were sure their tools, Mordan and Richtle, were equally determined to say nothing. They thought that no one could crack their hidden partnership; not even The Shadow. They were wrong.

Almost through the door, he paused to look back at the defiant pair. He spoke a few words to Brenz.

"You took the lion's share, Brenz," declared The Shadow, "when you hired the crew to plant the time bomb on Tim's truck."

The Shadow's gaze turned to Lambron.

"Your name is appropriate, Lambron," The Shadow added, "because you were the lamb. How fully you trusted your partner, Brenz! Remember how you counted upon Cranston to prove that you were in Philadelphia at the time Fitzcroft was supposed to be murdered in New York?"

"Brenz found that out, Lambron. Having a crew all hired to dispose of Tim Lanney, later, he used those men ahead of schedule. He phoned them to go after Cranston, that night in Central Park. He wanted to kill your alibi, Lambron.

"You were working fifty-fifty. One of you was to take over the manufacturers' association, and split with the other. It would have been so easy, with Kerring, Fitzcroft and Dryne dead; with Purnell standing trial for murder.

"But it wouldn't have stayed fifty-fifty, Lambron, if Brenz had disposed of Cranston. It took you a long while to crate Fitzcroft's body, and then get down to see Director Thurling. Only Cranston's statement could prove that you hadn't hopped over to New York and back to Philadelphia, Lambron, with time out to murder Fitzcroft in his own apartment -"

THE SHADOW'S words were interrupted. Lambron was flinging himself upon Brenz. So was Mordan, because he, too, would have been a victim of Brenz's double cross. Richtle had to come along with Mordan, because the two were handcuffed together. And Richtle, realizing that no one could afford to trust a double-crosser, hurled his weight on Brenz with the others.

They couldn't stop Brenz from pulling his revolver, a weapon which he had carried in case he had lost the toss and been delegated to murder Dryne. Brenz used his gun swiftly, with Lambron as the target.

Staggered by a bullet in the chest, Lambron sagged, but didn't lose his grip on the gun that he, too, had pulled.

Clutched by Mordan and Richtle, Brenz couldn't dodge when Lambron fired. Despite his mortal wound, Lambron didn't miss. His shot found Brenz's heart. Hitting the floor, the big-jawed murderer was dead when his sallow partner gave a last convulsive cough and slumped across the body of his companion in guilt.

A door slashed open, bringing armed men from the outer offices. They were met by a cross fire from The Shadow's ready automatics; shots accompanied by a challenging laugh that they recognized too late.

These were the men that Purnell thought were painters. Actually, they were the crew that Brenz had twice used, when trying to dispose of Cranston and Lanney. Brenz had planted them here, hoping they'd be recognized and regarded as hirelings of Purnell.

The Shadow's big guns stopped that startled tribe. Weston and Cardona piled out to seize them. Two men popped in from a hallway, to aid the capture. They were the private detectives hired by Purnell for a truly legitimate reason. He'd wanted them to help in solving the murders of his good friends, Kerring and Fitzcroft.

With Lambron and Brenz dead, their accomplices crippled and captured, crime's reign was through. All that remained was to answer Purnell's telephone, for its bell was clanging as though the rattle of guns had started it.

Purnell smiled when he recognized Dryne's voice across the wire. Dryne had wriggled out of his bonds and pounded on the closet door, until the elevator man came and broke it open.

Dryne wanted the arrest of the black-cloaked intruder who had imprisoned him; but his demand ended quite abruptly when Purnell explained how the black-clad visitor had saved Dryne from death. In mentioning The Shadow, Purnell looked toward the doorway, where he thought the cloaked fighter stood. So did the others, but they only stared at blackness. Crime's conqueror had gone.

From darkness below, they heard the parting mirth of a triumphant laugh. Weirdly, it faded, but its significance remained. Listeners knew that only The Shadow could have solved the riddle of the alibi trail!

THE END