



TOLL OF DEATH

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

When the full view of Long Valley spread itself upon the screen, it came as a breath-taking spectacle. Most of the guests in Rexford's penthouse were too entranced to realize that the stepped-up tints of technicolor photography added magnificence to ordinary beauty; they forgot, too, that a late summer scene carried extra charm when portrayed in the midst of winter.

For it was winter in New York, as the whining wind reminded when it rattled the windows of the cozy penthouse. It was therefore smart psychology for Craig Rexford, real estate promoter extraordinary, to be displaying Long Valley, site of his latest operations, as it had been four months ago.

Glancing about him, Lamont Cranston could discern enraptured faces in the gloom of the big living room. Even Margo Lane was sufficiently thrilled to be crowding the edge of her chair, which was tribute to Rexford's salesmanship. As for Rexford himself, his big moon face lay unmasked. Instead of beaming as it usually did, the lines in that curved countenance were arching into a highly satisfied smirk.

Craig Rexford was putting his act across, and knew it. Confident that the film in his sixteen millimeter projector was holding everyone enthralled, the promoter was finding opportunity to relax, at least facially. His voice, however, still carried its smooth, convincing purr as he began to extol the virtues of Long Valley.

"There lies nature's wonderland," praised Rexford. "An unspoiled fragment of the past, preserved to serve as a monument of the future. Long Valley, rich in both soil and tradition, is the ideal spot for the great social experiment in which I hope we shall all have a share."

Rexford must have timed that spiel, for the picture did not change until he had almost finished. Then, as though geared to Rexford's words, the panorama began to enlarge, moving toward the onlookers. Rexford obviously had taken this reel from the front of an automobile heading down the gentle slope leading into the valley from the east. The foreground kept pouring batches of the boasted farmland along both sides of the road, while he in the manner of a lecturer, identified the larger points of interest.

"To the south" - Rexford gestured toward the left of the screen - "you see Indian Ridge, a long, unbroken hillside sloping up from the valley. The trail used by the early settlers is on the other side of the ridge, but those who first arrived in this locality were prompt to settle in the valley itself."

Convinced that his audience had seen enough of Indian Ridge, Rexford swept his hand to the right, where in the center of a higher range of hills, bulged a great mass of curving granite. In contrast to the Ridge, which was a rise of bare, irregular stone, these hills to the north were wooded except for the granite landmark.

"They call that cliff Half Dome," explained Rexford. "Those wooded hills are probably granite, but fortunately they have never been quarried. Now if you will look straight to the west, to the very center of the picture, you will observe the finest sight of all - Ragged Rock."

Jutting in the background was a giant crag that really dominated the scene. It was a rugged sentinel that marked the end of the great oval bowl called Long Valley. The ground seemed to draw up toward Ragged Rock and at first glance the peak seemed to represent the junction of Indian Ridge and the hills that included Half Dome. But as the angles of the picture changed, it became apparent that Ragged Rock was an independent phenomenon.

To the left, the ridge veered off to the south, leaving a high gap that chopped it clear of Ragged Rock. From the right, the curving hills were broken by a notch, so that the next slope was actually part of Ragged Rock itself. In all, Ragged Rock reared nearly a thousand feet above the valley, though a fair portion of this altitude was furnished by the sloping ground leading up toward the towering crag.

Focusing itself upon the lower ground in the center of the valley, the moving picture revealed a small town among the trees. Soon the picture was in the town itself and Rexford was pointing out the principal buildings: the red brick courthouse, the gray stone library, the white wooden general store and a combination structure of red brick fronted by white colonial pillars, which proved to be the "Valley House," the town's only hotel. The movie took a detour to the railroad station, located on a one-track line that followed the ridge on the valley side, to climb off through the gap at the left of Ragged Rock. The station bore the appropriate name of "Valley Center" which stood for the town as well.

Then the picture was back in town again and the audience was getting close-ups of the various citizenry including the sheriff, the store-keeper and an old librarian. It centered finally upon a tall, thin man who tilted his head to gaze across the top of his glasses while he shook hands with a brawny man of a distinctly farmer type whose heavy face was coarse, thick-featured and decidedly unpleasant.

Rexford introduced the pair while one beamed and the other glowered.

"Old Henley Grantham." Rexford was referring to the thin-faced man. "His family were early settlers and he's the last of such people in the Valley. The pessimistic gentleman with the big face is Anson Venner. He owns more farm land than anyone else in the Valley - and most of the best."

The movie flickered to a sudden finish. Rexford turned on the lights and by the time his guests had rubbed their tired eyes, his face had resumed its usual complacent smile. Of the dozen men and women present, nearly all were vocally enthusiastic about Long Valley and Rexford received their comments with a polite bow, as he spread a large map on a long table in the center of the living room.

"Our plan is as simple as it is practical," stated Rexford. "We propose to buy up the farm land in Long Valley and divide it into tracts of one acre each, which will be apportioned to individuals who wish to join our post-war project."

Looking about the group, Rexford picked Cranston as his most logical questioner. Not only was Cranston reputed to be the wealthiest person present; there was something impressive in the calmness of his immobile face. Always the shrewd salesman, Rexford knew that if he could convince Cranston, others would follow.

Meeting Rexford's steady gaze, Cranston responded with a natural question:

"What is the acreage of Long Valley?"

"Enough for at least twenty thousand project partners, as we term them," replied Rexford. "With their families, the total population should exceed fifty thousand."

"What about the present land owners?"

"You mean will they sell?" Rexford curved his smile to its limit. "I think so, at the prices we are prepared to offer. Of course there is one man who doesn't like it: Anson Venner."

Cranston gave an understanding nod. The Venner that the movie had portrayed was definitely a man who wouldn't be in keeping with a decentralized world of tomorrow. The question was, how strong Venner stood with the Valley folk, but before Cranston could ask it, Rexford covered the subject.

"Henley Grantham rates right well in the Valley," said Rexford. "You could probably tell from his picture that he is an amiable sort. We've done our best to reach Venner through Grantham, who wants everybody to be happy. In fact, we've offered to make Grantham an important figure in our project. Tradition counts heavily in that district."

"How heavily?"

"More heavily than you would suppose, Cranston." Taking a pencil, Rexford drew a long curve on the map, forming an oval that stretched from the sides of Ragged Rock half way to Valley Center. "Though Venner has induced the natives to hold on to their farms, we are beginning to buy up the land in this area."

Cranston raised his eyebrows. This was a large scale topographical map that included such details as houses and contour markings of the hills. In the oval marked by Rexford, there was only one house, near the fringe, while the ground leading back to Ragged Rock was increasingly steep.

"Don't let the map fool you," chuckled Rexford. "That's good land in back of Grantham's house. I've looked at maps a hundred and fifty years old, and that's where the big land barons lived in those days. They owned everything and kept the best for themselves. They let the poor trash rent the land way down in the valley. Then Black Arthur came along -"

Rexford paused, noting that the name had struck home to Cranston. Looking up from the map, Cranston gave a recollective nod.

"I've heard of Black Arthur," he said. "Wasn't he an American Robin Hood, who flourished shortly after the Revolution?"

"Right here in this valley," declared Rexford, tapping the map. "He robbed the rich people who lived up here" - Rexford swept his hand eastward on the map - "and gave the profits to the poor, down below. He'd just about equalized matters when the law caught up with him. Black Arthur was killed up here on Ragged Rock, his favorite lookout spot. From that day on, the shadow of the Rock laid its curse on all who came within it."

At the word "shadow," Margo Lane gave a sudden start and looked at Lamont Cranston. To Margo, the name "Shadow" represented Cranston's other identity, the self wherein he tracked down strange curses and terminated their baleful influence.

Fortunately no one noticed Margo's sudden change of expression. They were leaning to look at the map, where Rexford was tracing the curve that represented the extreme ground covered by the rock shadow.

"Some of the big land owners had gone," recounted Rexford. "Those who remained began to meet up with accidents whenever they stayed at home and let the shadow fall on them. That wasn't all; whenever a death occurred, a big bell clanged through the valley, from the woods above Half Dome.

"The farmers must have been doing it, of course, but there wasn't any way to prove it. They were in the majority and in the saddle, too, considering all the cash that their friend Black Arthur had distributed among them. Likely as not, they bought up all the constables and kept the legend safe, until it faded out, because all the land barons were dead or gone."

Rolling up the map, Rexford tossed it in the corner and lighted a cigar, while he watched for reactions from the group. He expected Cranston to be the spokesman and Rexford wasn't disappointed.

"I suppose that various farmers bought the slope land," remarked Cranston. "Probably after the county took it over because of unpaid taxes."

"That's right," said Rexford. "Exactly right."

"But they couldn't sell it," continued Cranston, "because nobody wanted to live there, themselves included."

Rexford nodded, his cigar twisting as he smiled.

"But now you're buying it." Cranston's eyes fixed steadily on Rexford. "Because it's the only land you can get. You're going to use it as a wedge to defeat this chap Venner. Outsiders won't mind settling there and when there are enough of them -"

Cranston interrupted himself, with Rexford scoring an assist. The basic reason was the enthusiastic slap that Rexford planted in the middle of Cranston's back.

"You've caught the idea, Cranston!" Rexford turned triumphantly to the group. "Took the words right out of my mouth, that's what Cranston did! We'll stock that slope land with enough newcomers to outvote the local yokels if they try to side with Venner. And that's why we'll need cash" - Rexford became emphatic - "to make sure of buying when the time is ripe. Everybody will be happy" - Rexford spread his hands in a generous sweep. "The farmers will be paid good prices for their land; there will be a proper profit for investors like yourselves; and the buyers - project partners, we call them - will benefit by becoming pioneers in the world of the future!"

From the table drawer, Rexford whipped out a pad of application blanks that bore the title, "Long Valley

Development Association." While he was distributing them to the group, Margo Lane, quite fascinated by Rexford's super-salesmanship, was suddenly disturbed by an interrupting clutch upon her elbow. Then Cranston's low tone:

"Come on, Margo. Let's get out while Rexford is selling the medicine. I'm going to learn more about this before I subscribe."

It wasn't until they were in the elevator that Margo had weighed Cranston's words sufficiently to respond:

"You mean you're going to learn more about Rexford's project?"

"No," replied Cranston, calmly. "I mean I'm going to learn more about Long Valley."

And from that comment, Margo knew without asking that Cranston specifically intended to investigate the facts that concerned the insidious shadow cast by Ragged Rock!

CHAPTER II

Project Partner Vincent wheeled his weather-beaten Model A into the town of Millwood that lay over the hills from Long Valley. So far as the world was concerned, Harry Vincent was simply an enterprising young man who wanted to be the first to buy one of the acre plots that Craig Rexford would soon be offering to the deserving. Actually, Harry was working for The Shadow, a mysterious personage who not only combated crime, but didn't like his title to be mistakenly identified with a century old curse involving Ragged Rock.

Harry's car wasn't much to look at, but neither was the town of Millwood, so they merged very promptly. Parking the relic in front of a dilapidated diner, Harry strolled across the pock-marked main street to look at the mill dam where the Pleasant River swirled to a full stop. Though Harry had never before seen the Pleasant River, he knew all about it. The river's source was Pleasant Lake, some ten miles to the southwest of Long Valley. From there, the river flowed past the far side of Ragged Rock, completely avoiding Long Valley. Behind that crag it passed through an unhealthy bog locally known as sunken swamp, then, following the curve of the northern hills, it reached Millwood, which lay a few miles beyond the far side of Half Dome.

The Millwood mill was doing business, thanks to the present demand for lumber. Masses of floating logs were awaiting a longitudinal carving and the whine of circular saws vied with the tumult of the mill race. Having satisfied himself that prosperity was present in these dilapidated surroundings, Harry returned to the lunch wagon, to see how much information he could acquire over a few cups of coffee.

A brawny lumberman slid Harry the sugar bowl and accompanied it with the greeting:

"H'ya, fellow. Looking for a job?"

Harry shook his head and that brought stares from all along the counter. Why anybody would come to Millwood except to work there, was a vital mystery that needed immediate clearing. So Harry supplied the answer, along with testimonials in the form of identification cards that he had received upon application at Rexford's New York office.

"I'm a project partner," boasted Harry. "On my way to Long Valley to buy a hunk of land there. I want my own farm and my own cow. Maybe two. Cows I mean, not farms. They're only allowing one farm to a customer. That's the rule."

Harry's declaration of future independence brought grins and guffaws from along the counter, with one exception. The big man who had shoved the sugar bowl leaned Harry's way in a manner that was both serious and challenging.

"You mean this Rexford guy is selling lots already?"

"Guess he must be," returned Harry. "He said they'd take my deposit in the office at Valley Center."

"Know anybody else that's buying land there?"

"Not yet, but I will be soon. The prospectus says there's room for twenty thousand partners in this project."

To prove his argument, Harry produced the prospectus, a large folder that opened out four ways to display a map of the valley surrounded by stills from Rexford's motion picture reels. The big man read some details across Harry's shoulder, then turned to the rest of the Millwood throng.

"Maybe Anson Venner is right," declared the big man. "Give 'em an inch of Long Valley and they'll take the whole twelve miles of it. It ain't our valley, you understand" - the speaker had turned again to Harry - "so we don't hold no grudge agin' fellows like you, who want a place to settle, which is anybody's right. But too much of anything is bad - and that goes for people."

"You don't have to worry about the project," assured Harry. "It will be confined strictly to Long Valley."

"It don't matter where you keep a horse," argued the Millwood spokesman, "if it's you that's got to feed him. That's what Venner said, the last time he was over here in Millwood. It's us that will have to keep that Valley going when it gets filled up with partners on that project."

"But we'll be self-supporting," insisted Harry. "Growing our own crops -"

"With what?" interjected the big man. "The water that supplies the Valley like it is at present? Not much! A population of twenty thousand is going to need a reservoir, and it will have to be a big one." Pointing his finger to Harry's map, the man tapped Pleasant Lake. "That's where they're going to try and get it. Out of our lake!"

"Your lake?"

"And why not? It's in our county, ain't it? It's where the river comes from, that brings down the logs to feed our mill, and the water we need to run it. What Long Valley needs, it will have to get for itself. Only it hasn't got it."

The big man finished by telling the lunch counter clerk to set up another cup of coffee for Harry, just to show there was no harm meant.

"Fellows like you are welcome. You'll be better neighbors than the Valley folk, if there ain't too many of you, which there won't be, considering the water situation. What part of the Valley is your acre in.

Swallowing his coffee, Harry pointed to the section of the map that lay within the long oval shadow of Ragged Rock. The mere action brought a chorus from the men about him.

"So that's where Rexford has been buying up land!"

"Ground that none of the Valley folk will farm!"

"Say, can you beat them skinflints? Peddling what they ain't got no use for?"

"Hoping the curse will hit poor guys that never even heard of it."

"Yeah, but suppose it doesn't hit 'em?"

"It will be tough for Venner if it don't. He's been arguing against letting any strangers into the Valley -"

"But Venner or nobody else can stop 'em from selling what they don't want to keep."

Harry was starting to fold his map, oblivious to the jargon around him. Pausing, he remarked innocently that he intended to drive over through the notch to have a look at his land while riding into Valley Center. That brought another outburst from the throng.

"Nobody uses that road no more, stranger."

"It ain't even been a road, since Black Arthur and his outlaws used to ride it."

"They used to call it the high road - and you can take it stranger -"

"And keep it. We'll take the low road, around to the east of Half Dome."

Ignoring the flood of comments, Harry thrust the map in his pocket, strolled out to his ancient car and nonchalantly started for the old road leading through the notch. All this was in keeping with The Shadow's orders, though outwardly it appeared that Harry was demonstrating that the incoming project partners represented a hardy lot of pioneers.

At least Harry made a real impression.

Glancing back from the outskirts of Millwood, he saw a knot of men outside the lunch wagon surveying his progress in a motionless fashion that indicated awe. Though this could mean that they were admiring Harry's nerve in tackling an almost-forgotten road, he could sense a stronger reason.

It was already afternoon and unless Harry made the trip in fairly rapid time, he would be caught within the spread of the shadow from Ragged Rock. That menace, rather than the hazard of the road itself, was the reason why this old dirt highway was avoided, even by the natives of Millwood.

Such was Harry's conclusion and results supported it.

Despite arguments to the contrary, the road up through the notch was not half bad. True it showed signs of long neglect, but if anything, that had improved it. Seasons of rain and snow had washed away all vestiges of the road's dirt surface, but the result was bed-rock, which proved better than the average country road. By avoiding the most conspicuous juts of rock, Harry had no trouble in making the grade, though he was somewhat relieved when he reached the notch itself and saw the curving road slant downward toward Long Valley.

Then, swinging a short bend, Harry gained his first view of the Valley itself and a few moments later he was taxing the worn brake bands to gain an opportunity to drink in the remarkable sight.

A remarkable sight it was.

From this high outlet, the immensity of Long Valley rendered itself clear. The photographs, taken from the gentle eastern slope, made the bowl appear compressed. This view, gained from an elevation just north of Ragged Rock, magnified the scene as much as the pictures had dwindled it.

A straight twelve miles ahead, the eastern slope rose so gently that it appeared almost level. Less than half way to that slope, in a position which somewhat belied its title, the town of Valley Center squatted in

red, white and gray, representing its brick, wood and stone construction.

This was winter and the scene was barren, etching the town clearly against the landscape. But the season was mild in Long Valley and there were no traces of snow. Hence the ground was dried and brown, while the trees gave the effect of blackened poles, except for the occasional relief of white birches. Oddly, however, the blend did not destroy the glorious illusion created by Rexford's four-color prospectus and its verdant summer scene.

Any eye that knew good country - and Harry's eye was one - could tell that this was fine land for raising varied crops. The fact that farm houses were few and scattered in the distance, simply meant that the natives had picked what they wanted and were letting the rest stay idle. Large clusters of trees represented wood lots belonging to the various farms and the size of certain tracts was plainly distinguishable from the stone walls that served as dividing lines.

To his left, Harry scanned the wooded curve of hills from which Half Dome bulged. Over to the right, he saw the stony slope of Indian Ridge, with the one-track railway wending a serpentine course up through its lower gullies. Water alone was lacking, as Harry had gathered in Millwood, for there wasn't a trace of a stream or pond throughout the five mile breadth of Long Valley.

His survey complete, Harry released the brake and tightened it an instant later. His eyes training to the road, he had become conscious of something so ominous that he shuddered with the brake bands.

Like a great apron, a curved stretch of blackness was spreading down through the valley, blotting the rock-strewn slope that Harry's road flanked. There were patches of clear land within that monstrous curve and amid them Harry could distinguish the weather-beaten foundations of long-ruined buildings.

These were the remnants of the manors that had once dominated Long Valley before Black Arthur's curse had taken its effect upon them. The spread of gigantic darkness, its curve jagged with points like fangs, was the fateful shadow of the mighty Ragged Rock!

Gripped with something akin to horror, Harry looked over his right shoulder and saw the towering crag itself. From this angle it didn't fit the photographs that showed it serene in the distance. Instead it was a misshapen monster that seemed alive, because of the fleecy clouds that were drifting beyond it, toward the setting sun that the rock itself was consigning to an early rest.

One distorted knob that jutted from the crag could be likened to a mammoth paw, reaching to draw the curtain of night. From the circling effect that the moving clouds gave it, that paw might well be planning to include Harry and his car within the shrouding folds. It wasn't funny, that effect, not with the gathering dusk below the crag itself. It was a deathly dusk, pushing its toothed fringes toward the road, as though intending to be first with its pall of murderous gloom.

Like a whippet, Harry's over-aged car bounded down the road, the shriek of the passing wind drowning the rattles of the timeworn chassis. Harry wasn't caring about the stones that scudded from the smooth-worn tires to clatter the flapping fenders. He could hold that road as long as he saw sunlight on it; of that alone, he was sure. Harry didn't realize that if blackness cut across his path, he personally might contribute to disaster that the creeping shadow threatened, by going off the road because of sudden gloom.

Stark fear, of a sort he couldn't believe he would experience, was spurring Harry Vincent to a spot that stood for safety or destruction, a sharp dip in the time-wrecked road that seemed to invite the pronged shadow into its very hollow.

The old car hit the drop with a force that shimmied the steering wheel. His hands shaking with it, Harry

yanked the wheel hard to the left and escaped a ditch by inches. Up and out of the pitfall, he saw what had saved him from the crash that his own terror might have brought.

The saving factor was a thin slice of sunlight, streaking the very brink of the ditch, a beam of warning light that formed a last-moment barrier before it was swallowed by the destroying shadow that gulped from Ragged Rock!

CHAPTER III

Tossing like a danger signal, the girl's red hair appeared suddenly through a gate beside the road. If it hadn't flagged Harry to a stop, the girl would have personally done so, for she sprang squarely to the middle of the road and danced there, right and left, waving her arms madly. She seemed to be telling Harry that if he tried to detour around her, she would hop in his direction and still supply a human hazard.

Harry didn't take the chance. The menacing shadow lay at least a half mile behind him and he knew he could outrace it. Besides, the road was level here, where it came into a V to meet another from the general direction of Indian Ridge.

That was, the fork was visible a quarter mile ahead, and from there it would be a straight run into Valley Center. It must have been the steep road, rather than the approaching blackness that had given Harry that unprecedented scare. With the shadow of the rock behind him, Harry was chiding his own fear, but at the same time feeling tolerant to anyone who might be having similar jitters. Taking that to be the girl's status, Harry stopped and let her climb into the car.

Before Harry could shift into low, the girl grabbed his arm and pointed off beyond the gate, to the right. Breathless, she gasped a fund of local information.

"I'm Shirley Grantham. I live in that house." Harry saw the house as the girl pointed. It was large, but squatty, with a big, ugly bay window that occupied two stories of one corner.

"It's my uncle's house - maybe you've heard of him - he's Henley Grantham. He always goes down town before the shadow of Ragged Rock arrives here and I'm not supposed to stay here either."

"Don't worry," said Harry. "You're as good as gone already." Sensing that his statement had an ominous touch, he amended it. "Gone from the rock shadow, I mean."

"I'm leaving soon enough," agreed the girl. "I could walk to the fork before the shadow gets here. I've timed it often. But I'm worrying about Fred Ferris - over there."

Changing the direction of her point, the girl indicated some tiny figures, far across the humpy ground with its broken-down stone walls. They were perhaps a mile away, near the other road that forked toward Indian Ridge.

They were surveyors, working up the slope toward Ragged Rock. Even at this distance Harry could distinguish the rod and transit that two men were carrying. But from the way they hesitated, they were calling it a day, except for one man who was gesturing to the others, beckoning them up the rise, where the ever-increasing shadow was still spreading its blotting mass.

"We'll have to warn him!" insisted Shirley. "I'd never be able to run across those fields in time. I'd have to go around it anyway, and you have a car -"

Harry didn't wait for a further plea. He jolted into a rapid start that flounced the girl back against the seat.

Legend or fact, the menace from the rock was fearsome and whoever this chap Ferris was, Harry felt he deserved a warning. As for furthering his acquaintance with the attractive girl who had so suddenly invaded his car, Harry wasn't adverse to that either. Shirley Grantham wanted to warn Fred Ferris, so warn him she could, and Harry Vincent would be around to accept thanks for the favor.

Shirley was explaining matters as Harry made the V-turn that swung them up the left from the forks.

"Fred Ferris is new here," the girl said, her tone anxious as she stared ahead. "He came to Valley Center to survey some ground that Mr. Rexford bought. My uncle told Ferris about the legend, but he only laughed. I was afraid he would defy it."

"And what if he does?" inquired Harry, indifferently.

Shirley's eyes turned from the road to give Harry a searching look. For the first time she seemed to recognize that he must be a total stranger to this locality, but in accepting him as such, she was promptly puzzled regarding his frantic and almost precipitous arrival from the hill road. Sharply the girl demanded:

"You've heard about the curse of Ragged Rock, haven't you?"

"Heard of it is about all," rejoined Harry. "I thought they laughed it off a hundred years ago."

"They stopped defying it," argued Shirley. "That's why nobody has suffered from it. Look at those men with Ferris! He'll never persuade them to go up there. They belong here in the Valley and they told him they wouldn't work after the shadow fell."

The figures were much larger now, for Harry had driven well along the rough road that wangled off toward Indian Ridge. From this angle, the irregular slope to Ragged Rock produced new perspectives, giving the great crag a much different aspect; though it was quite as grim as ever.

Here the contours undulated upward to the right, like swells from the ocean, except that they heaped themselves. This rolling ground had been good farmland once, for it was clear of rocks, but where the slope began a sharper rise, stones were both numerous and large. Ferris was on the fringe of that higher ground, shouting epithets that suited his beefy build, but he wasn't directing his talk to Ragged Rock.

Between beckons, Ferris was shaking his fist down the rolling slope to where the local surveyors were hurriedly packing their instruments in a truck that practically blocked the road. Harry noted that the truck was turned toward town, so that no time would be lost in getting started.

The reason of course was the monstrous shadow. It was coming faster than before, that horror from the crag, as though the sun had sped its setting process expressly to please the spirit of Black Arthur, the guardian of Ragged Rock. Harry didn't take time to calculate the fact that as the sun neared the horizon beyond the great rock, its added declination would account for the stepped-up phenomenon. He was getting another taste of horror that had hurried him down from the notch and with Shirley as a companion it was difficult to shake off the renewed effect.

She was an intelligent girl, this Shirley Grantham, too keen to be dyed by the local color of Long Valley. Yet the fear in her tone, as she urged Harry to hurry, was all the more genuine because it was felt for someone else, that foolhardy man on the slope. And to Harry Vincent, it seemed that Fred Ferris, beefy though he was, had become reduced to the puny proportions of an insect, against his present setting.

It wasn't necessary to look up at Ragged Rock.

Even the mere stones imbedded in the turf were huge when compared to Ferris. They bulged above him in an irregular procession, like the monoliths of Druid mounds. Hulking forward, like Ragged Rock itself,

those picayune sentinels seemed anxious to lurch at the interloper who dared the wrath of the great pinnacle that probably had shed them in some geological period.

Still, the shadow of the rock predominated.

Already it was lying across the big stones on the slope. Below, its rim was literally licking toward Ferris, with all the effect of an eclipse. Shirley saw it and fairly shrieked as she flung herself from Harry's car, which was stopping close to the blockading truck. The Valley men heard Shirley's cry and turned in her direction, in alarm; while Harry, hopping out from his side of the car, paused on the step to take a look at Ferris.

His fist poised, the beefy surveyor was tilting his gaze toward Shirley. Again she shrieked, her pointing hand delivering a frantic wave. The curved shadow had reached Ferris, like a roll of lapping foam, but the girl's wailed words: "Look out!" referring to something that was coming with it.

Harry saw the thing as Ferris wheeled to spy it for himself.

A slash of gray was bounding down from the dusk-clad slope behind Ferris, bulking bigger with each lengthening leap. Compared to it, the horrified man seemed to dwindle as he stood there frozen, for the thing was gathering the approaching speed of a meteorite.

One of the rooted stones had heaved itself from the imbedding soil; like an avenger delegated to uphold the curse, it was pitching its ill-shapen mass upon the rash mortal who had mocked tradition.

Ferris took a weak-kneed crouch that seemed to sink him half way into the ground. Two things must have gripped his maddened mind: that the next bound of the huge stone would bring it full upon him; that here his doom was certain, since he was now in the pall of the fateful shadow. Swinging suddenly, he began a pell-mell flight that was slow-motion compared to the gathered speed of the eight-foot boulder that was after him.

The great stone smacked the very spot that Ferris had abandoned. If he'd flattened at that moment, the next bounce would have carried the missile over him, but Ferris wasn't looking back to tally. His frantic eyes were glued ahead, on the one thing he thought he could outrun, the rim of the ever-spreading shadow. Beyond that gliding umbra, Ferris saw the sunlight that to his mind, now fraught with superstition, could alone mean safety and life.

It was too late. The man was destined for the doom he had defied. The bouncing boulder struck at his very heels as he was making a long lurch for the shaded rim. What sent Ferris across the moving mark was the impact of the stone as it scooped him on the rebound.

For an instant, there was a glad cry on Shirley's lips. It ended when she realized that Ferris hadn't made his last leap on his own. No man could take off on a sixty-foot jump, that arched half as high. Ferris had become a whirligig, spinning crazily in mid-air as the boulder battered down the hill, cleared the road and truck in a freakish bound, and pounded down through a field below. It was gone, that stone, clatter and all, when Ferris hit the slope head first, somersaulted across a hump of ground, cleared a dip on his next jounce, and finished with a twisty sprawl upon a receiving knoll.

Harry Vincent was the first man to reach the distorted thing that lay back upward, but with its face twisted to receive the sunlight that its eyes had hoped to see.

One glance was enough to tell that the impact of the rock had knocked all life from Fred Ferris, even before he was catapulted to the crash that left him a misshapen mass.

The curse of Ragged Rock had fallen, true to its remembered lore!

CHAPTER IV

It was Harry who was beckoning now, forgetful of the jagged, shadowy curve that was snaking toward him across the undulating ground. Almost despite themselves the other men were coming to help carry Ferris to the truck. Alive or dead, they weren't going to abandon the victim to that creeping monstrous blackness that soon would engulf the spot where he had fallen.

There was hatred as much as fear in the eyes of those men as they stared up toward Ragged Rock, but they were losing no time, meanwhile, in gathering up what remained of Ferris. They accepted Harry as a temporary leader since he had been the first to reach the dead man, but they would have lost all respect for this stranger if he had stayed on the ground.

Harry didn't stay. He showed full sympathy for local sentiment by actually hurrying the men to their truck so that they could pack Ferris on board and get started. As they followed with their burden, the men were muttering angrily, but still they came. Only when they reached the truck did they pause to glare again at Ragged Rock as though ready to dispute its power.

At that moment, Shirley was clutching Harry's arm. She had come over to the truck, but not for a moment had the girl taken her eyes from a spot well up the slope.

"Look up there!" The girl blurted. "You'll see where the big boulder came from. That's where I saw -"

The other men were turning from the truck where they had just hoisted Ferris's body. But what it was that Shirley saw, was something that very suddenly escaped their interest.

Indeed, the girl's own lips were unable to continue, so great was the terror that interrupted.

Even to Harry Vincent, the scene at that moment took on one of those frozen effects that became permanently photographic in his brain. Like the men from Valley Center, he'd been gathering the fighting impulse after seeing Ferris die; the desire to go up and meet the spreading blackness and face whatever it might try to toss. Somehow the gloom seemed cowardly to have taken a victim unaware. So Harry felt, while looking past Shirley, watching the black semicircle lay its apron across the very house where the girl lived, over by that other road. The curse of Ragged Rock would have to back its own menace to convince Harry Vincent.

And with that, the curse did.

Harry's thoughts, like Shirley's words, stopped short as a great clang echoed through the valley. It was the toll of a mighty bell, a brazen stroke that chilled the group that heard it, ending the last warmth of sunlight more than even the approaching shadow could have.

A toll of death!

Again the great bell clanged and only with that second tremor did the first moment end, to begin another fraught with the same time-stopping power. It was an echo from a century ago, the horrendous peal that legend claimed had marked each ghoulish triumph scored by the shadow of Ragged Rock!

The reverberations of the first toll had persisted until the next dispelled them. Now those of the second note were being shattered by a third. Somehow, numbed brains had begun to work again and everyone was looking in the direction from which the clangor came.

The great bell was ringing from somewhere in the neighborhood of Half Dome, that bulge amid the

northern hills that tradition connected with the very thing that now was heard.

That fateful bell was tolling the death of Fred Ferris, the man who had dared the shadow of the rock. It was inviting others to defy the same menace and all such inclinations were fading from the minds of men who a few minutes earlier had been willing to take up the cause.

Harry's own knees were shaking badly enough. He could figure what was happening to the others in the group. But it wasn't the bell's fourth clang that threw the old galvanic business into this affrighted crowd. One of the quaking locals just happened to look up the hill and give a frightened cry that was more animal than human.

With a hand that wigwagged nervous fright, the fellow was pointing to the fast crawling shadow as it sneaked over the last hummock flanking this road. Like a pack of rabbits the Valley tribe piled into their truck and went clattering down the road toward Valley Center, depriving Harry's car of a useless fender as they ripped past it.

All the while, the mighty bell donged from somewhere near Half Dome, ringing out across the valley with a tumult that must have carried many miles. But the rabbit act that he had witnessed brought back Harry's nerve, even though Shirley remained petrified. Gripping the girl's shoulders, Harry steered her straight to his car and into it. Climbing in the other side, he snapped her trance with the sharp query:

"Now - what was it you saw up on the slope?"

"It was a man," replied Shirley. "At least a figure that looked like a man. It was right where the rock came from, so close that it could have pushed it."

"What happened to this figure?"

"I don't know. It was stooped, like Old Jeb. Then it just huddled itself right into the ground."

Harry didn't inquire who "Old Jeb" might be. Despite the encroaching blackness, the repeating toll of the bell, he paused for a long look up the hillside. Harry saw the spot that Shirley meant, but there was no one there.

Up ahead, this old road curved very wide of the increeping blackness except for the spot that the truck had left. On sudden urge, Harry shot the car ahead, swerved to the left of the road in deference to Shirley's gasp, and thus barely avoiding the edge of the crossing shadow, gained the remnants of daylight that came from the gap between Ragged Rock and Indian Ridge.

Shirley saw what Harry was after. He was circling to higher ground, hoping to get a crisscross view of the spot picked by the girl. Harry gained some elevation but his trip was shortened when the bad road stopped at a mound of blockading stone, placed there to keep cars from pitching into a deep gully beyond.

Harry hopped out and Shirley with him. They climbed the stone pile and gained the view they wanted. On the stony slope that fronted Ragged Rock was a small, uneven patch that represented the hole from which the murderous boulder had toppled, but there was no figure near it.

No figure anywhere.

There were other boulders, a rough line of them, trending toward the deep gully above which Harry and Shirley stood. Looking to his right, Harry saw that they were fairly close to the layers of ledges that represented Indian Ridge. There was a rough break in the lower portion of the Ridge, that followed an upward line, and Harry recognized that it must represent the branch railway that sliced up from Valley

Center and veered off through the gap.

Suddenly Shirley spoke:

"Do you notice something?"

"Don't tell me the blackness is creeping over us," responded Harry. "We're too far over to the south to catch the curse from Ragged Rock."

"No, it isn't that. It's the bell. I've just realized that it stopped."

Shirley was right. The mysterious dirge had ended. Long Valley lay amid a silent twilight and that in itself was all that Shirley had to see in order to explain the rest.

"The menace is over." Shirley's tone was very serious. "For tonight at least. The sun has set, so there isn't any more shadow from Ragged Rock. Darkness has moved in from everywhere, from the northern hills and the southern ridge. When it all folds into one, everything is safe again."

Harry took Shirley's arm to help her down from the rock pile. Then:

"Who told you all this?" he queried. "Your uncle?"

Shirley shook her head.

"Everybody knows it," she replied. "I learned it from the other children when I lived here as a little girl."

"But your uncle believes the legend?"

"Of course. We never stayed in the house when the shadow began to fall. We just went down town and then came back."

"In all kinds of weather?"

"Why, no. Only in good weather. When it's raining or snowing in the afternoon, there isn't any shadow from Ragged Rock."

Obvious though it was, that angle hadn't occurred to Harry. He was still thinking it over as they were driving back along the road. The wavery headlights of the old car were picking out the fork, when Shirley remarked:

"I went away to school and college and never came back here until this Fall, but somehow I took the tradition all for granted. It grips you here in Long Valley."

"It's gripped me already," admitted Harry, as he swung to the straight road into town, "after what we saw happen to that poor chap Ferris. Yet somehow the thing was unbelievable, with that shadowy curse and the strange death bell."

"Uncle Henley can probably explain it," asserted Shirley. "He rationalizes everything, though I must admit that he begins with unusual theories."

Harry turned a brief glance toward the girl.

"I'd like to meet your uncle," he said. "Would you be willing to introduce me to him?"

"On one condition," replied Shirley, soberly. "First, there is something you must tell me."

"Agreed," returned Harry. "What is it?"

Though the twilight was deepening, Harry was still able to catch the rather delightful smile that came as Shirley said:

"Your name."

CHAPTER V

Solemn citizens were clustered in front of the old brick court house when Harry and Shirley reached Valley Center. Conspicuous in the group were the local surveyors who had trucked Ferris's body back to town. Having deposited their cargo in the undertaking establishment that served as the town morgue, these witnesses of the tragedy were giving their version of the affair to the horrified townsfolk who surrounded them.

When Shirley introduced Harry, nobody inquired why or how he had come to Valley Center. He'd been mentioned already as a man who tried to warn Ferris, which implied that Harry was a believer in the local legend of Ragged Rock. So Harry joined the burghers as one of them and listened to their talk.

The theme was very limited. Fred Ferris hadn't listened to "what was what" and therefore had "gotten his'n" as a logical matter of course. Finding that his own testimony was immediately accepted in consequence, Harry had nothing to do but study the people themselves. He was finding them quite commonplace, when Shirley reminded him:

"Come along, Mr. Vincent. You said you wanted to meet my uncle."

Harry turned to accompany Shirley across the village green, which was illuminated with old-fashioned arc lights. They hadn't gone a dozen steps before the girl stopped short and gave the quick word: "Look!"

She was indicating a stoop-shouldered man who was approaching the group by the courthouse. He was wearing knee-boots with baggy corduroy trousers poking up from them, and a blue flannel shirt that showed at the front of a ragged jacket. A hunter's cap was drawn down over his eyes, but the visor didn't interfere with his vision, because his head was tilted up from the humped shoulders that sustained it.

If the man had straightened up, he would probably have stood better than six feet, but as it was, he looked rather dwarfish. He needed a shave and his mouth was open, fish-fashion, while his eyes had a wide, listless stare. Those attributes, however, were not enough to distinguish him from his fellow-townsmen who had already impressed Harry as a very dull lot. The question was whether this character was as dumb as he looked.

For one thing his glance was quick, shrewd in its speed if nothing else. What was more, he was not lacking in ambition of ideas when judged by the accoutrements he carried. Under one arm, the stooped man carried a double-barreled shot-gun of the "over and under" type. From a deep bag hanging from the man's other shoulder poked the head of a dead rabbit along with a forked stick that Harry took to be a frail but over-sized slingshot.

Why Shirley should be pointing out this Valley dweller, except as a curiosity, became known when the girl undertoned his name:

"Old Jeb."

Remembering Shirley's description of the stooped figure on the slope, Harry could see how Old Jeb

fitted. It was rather puzzling how he could have gotten back to town so soon, though Harry conceded that Old Jeb could have made it by a quick start and a short-cut. It had taken some time for Harry to drive up toward the Ridge, look around and come into town. But there was still the problem of Old Jeb's disappearance, which in turn could have interfered with a rapid trip to Valley Center.

"I just wanted you to notice him," explained Shirley, suddenly. "I'm not sure that it was Old Jeb I saw - if I saw anybody. But we ought to remember to mention it to uncle, after we've told him about the bell."

A question popped to Harry's mind as they crossed the green to the gray stone library, which stood on the side toward the depot.

"Everybody else is out," remarked Harry. "How does it happen that your uncle didn't hear the bell? Is he deaf?"

"No," smiled Shirley, "but Mr. Luther is. He's the librarian; you'll meet him in a minute."

Meeting Mr. Luther was practically automatic. He formed a wizened statue behind a circular counter in the reading room that formed the main portion of the library. Though hard of hearing he was sharp of sight, for he was reading Shirley's lips as she introduced Harry during their approach to the desk.

At one side of the library were a few steps leading up to a compact stack room which was filled with high book-cases. Harry also noticed a flight of stone steps that led below and it was to those that Luther gestured.

"Your uncle is down in the reference vault," Luther told Shirley, in a piping tone. "He told me you would be here before closing time, but that won't be for another hour."

Luther pointed to a clock on the other side of the reading room. He was as active as a traffic officer, with those quick hands of his, for he completed matters by spinning around on his revolving stool and pointing to a cloak room at the back where Harry could put his hat and coat. Shirley reached over and tapped Luther's shoulder so he would turn around and read her lips.

"We'll go down and see my uncle right now," said the girl. "I'm sure he won't mind if we interrupt him."

The reference vault lived up to its double title. It had a huge oak door, reinforced with iron, that made a grating sound when Shirley opened it. Inside was a room that had the foundation stones as walls, though it was cozy enough, because of a large electric heater in the corner. There was a table in the center of the room and one wall had a row of built-up bookshelves that rose clear to the ceiling, the stonework showing between the lines of books.

Henley Grantham was at the table, making notes from a dozen old books that lay spread about. Looking over his glasses, he beamed a thin-lipped smile at Shirley, as he queried:

"Dinner time already? Well, it should be! I've done more than a full afternoon's work." Plucking a sheaf of hand-written papers, Grantham passed them to the girl. "Look at all these references I've copied, Shirley" - resting back in his chair, Grantham gave a wave at Harry - "and then tell me who this gentleman is."

Shirley introduced Harry and came right to the details of their meeting. When she described how Ferris had been trapped within the circling shadow, Harry could see Grantham's eyes go further open, horror portrayed in the whiteness that spread above the iris. Grantham was sitting rigid and erect as the girl related how death had overtaken the unfortunate surveyor. Eyes went slowly shut, as Grantham pictured the grim scene.

"It must have been an accident," decided Grantham. "It couldn't have been the curse from Ragged Rock,

since the doom bell was not heard."

"But it was heard, uncle. It rang all through the Valley."

"Impossible!" Grantham's eyes were wide again. "If it had, I would have heard it!"

"But you were down here in the vault. How could the sound have reached you?"

"I should have heard it! Didn't Luther?"

"Of course not!" exclaimed Shirley. "Don't you realize that he's stone deaf? Of all the people who couldn't hear that bell, you and Luther rated first."

"You mean there were others who didn't hear it?"

"Everybody who was outdoors heard it, Uncle Henley. It came from somewhere over by Half Dome, probably in the woods above it, though who was ringing it, nobody knows."

Grantham shook his head. Apparently these facts upset some pet theory that he had long held in mind. Stuffing the notes in his pocket, Grantham left the books lying where they were and led the way up out of the reference vault. He nodded to Luther who was looking his way when he arrived, then went to the little cloak room and put on his hat and coat.

"We must investigate this mystery," declared Grantham, solemnly. "In all my years in Long Valley, I have hoped that the doom bell would never toll; but next to that my wish has been to hear it if it did. I believed that then I might explain its cause; but I have been disappointed."

They were going out the door when a sudden clangor stopped them. It was really startling to Shirley and Harry's face showed puzzlement until they heard the chug that accompanied the bell. Henley Grantham smiled as he gestured off behind the library.

"Only the evening train," he explained. "It's just leaving the depot." Then, sharply, he questioned: "That wasn't the same bell you heard before?"

"Not at all," replied Shirley. "It shouldn't have deceived me, uncle. I'm nervous I guess, and any bell would startle me."

They reached the crowd by the courthouse just as a large car arrived. The bulky man who stepped from the car proved to be Anson Venner, the big-time land owner. Venner had just driven in from Millwood, so he stated, and wanted to know the cause of this commotion. Grantham gestured for Harry and Shirley to observe Venner's reaction, so they did.

At first Venner showed an inclination to sneer at the talk of the curse from Ragged Rock, but his facial expression might have been no more than habit. Certain it was that when awed townsmen told him about the bell, Venner's eyes took on a shrewd glint that was cold in its calculation. His tone became emphatic.

"It was the curse, all right," boomed Venner, as though his statement certified it. "I told you fools not to parcel off that land up on the slope. Black Arthur drove away the people who lived there once because they made you serve them. He knows that any others who take that land will be just as bad.

"You believed the legend, didn't you? Then why did you defy it? Still, I can hardly blame you" - with a curious flare of oratory, Venner eased his voice, and even his coarse features showed a trace of sympathy - "because it is your nature to be misguided. You warned Ferris to leave the slope before the shadow fell.

"His death was on his own head." Venner drew himself up, as though delivering justice. "But we must not forget that someone set him to that fatal task. If you are looking for a culprit, there he stands!"

With that, Venner shook a weighty fist toward the far side of the group, which had spread to admit a newcomer. Quite unconvinced by Venner's oratory, Craig Rexford thrust forward, his round face showing between the fur collar of a very handsome overcoat and a tilted derby hat.

The upward curve of Rexford's lips did not denote a smile. Rexford could be as serious as Venner without becoming so violently spectacular. Nor was Rexford's voice much different from its usual purr, when he questioned:

"Were you saying something, Venner?"

"You heard me!" stormed Venner. "You know what happened here, Rexford!"

"How could I?" queried Rexford, blandly. "I just came in on the evening train. By the way, where were you, Venner?"

"Over to Millwood, that's where!"

Almost as a matter of course, Rexford turned and stared in the general direction of Ragged Rock, as though looking for the notch that lay between the crag and the hills to the north. Angrily, Venner sputtered:

"I didn't come back through the notch. Nobody uses that old road. I came around below Half Dome, on the regular road."

"Of course." Rexford gave a nod. "That's why you didn't hear the bell they're talking about. You were around Half Dome. That's all I wanted to know."

Shoving a half-smoked cigar between his lips, Rexford turned and strode toward the Valley House, leaving Venner fuming to the throng. Still spluttering, Venner was explaining that he hadn't been "around Half Dome" as Rexford put it, but had simply come home by the proper road. But Venner's arguments, like his oratory, were completely arrested by Rexford's well-placed remarks.

"Score one for Rexford," said Harry to Shirley, as they followed Grantham across the green. "Where do we go next?"

"Out to the house," replied Shirley. "Uncle Henley is getting his car, so I'll go with him. You know the way and, if you follow, you'll be in time for a home-cooked dinner."

Thanking Shirley for the invitation, Harry went to his own car. Faced the wrong way, he had to drive around the green and as he did, he was forced to stop to let several pedestrians cross the street. They were coming from the depot, a quarter mile down the road, and so far they couldn't have learned of recent events in Valley Center, for they looked quite unperturbed.

That should have flashed a fact home to Harry, but it didn't. He was too interested in observing a tall figure that looked definitely familiar, among the passengers from the train. Then all had turned the corner and it was too late for Harry to complete his observation. Swinging around the green, he took a long range gaze, but failed to see the man in question.

What Harry did see was a different figure, stooped and tattered, that crossed the green with a gait much like a lope, taking the road back toward the railroad tracks.

All during his drive out to Grantham's house, Harry Vincent found himself wondering how much Old Jeb, the strangest character in Valley Center, might know about the real menace of Ragged Rock!

CHAPTER VI

Dinner was over when Henley Grantham settled back in his easy chair to propound his theory regarding the horror of Ragged Rock. It took some coaxing on Shirley's part for her uncle to voice his notions, for all during dinner, Grantham had muttered that matters didn't fit with his long-formed idea.

"I have been studying the records of this county," declared Grantham, referring to the notes that he had brought home with him, "in hope of solving the riddle of the Rock. My conclusion was that it might prove mental rather than physical."

"You mean that people imagine things when the dusk strikes them?" queried Harry. "Things that make them walk right into trouble?"

Grantham gave a solemn nod.

"It could have applied in my case," admitted Harry. "If the darkness had filled that hollow coming down the road from the notch, I would have cracked up sure. But Ferris's case was different."

"Not entirely," asserted Grantham. "Occasionally some of those boulders loosen and slide down the slope. There is something hypnotic about that creeping shadow. Ferris could have been attracted by a teetering rock and stayed there, wondering if his eyes deceived him. And yet -"

Pausing, Grantham rose and filled his pipe. They were in the living room that occupied the bulging corner of the house, where one window faced toward Ragged Rock, another toward the road from the notch, and the third in the direction of Half Dome. Those windows rattled as Grantham stepped to the table to reach his tobacco jar, but it wasn't from any creek of the floor boards.

Accompanying the window rattle came the whine of wind, carrying the fury of a half-gale. Its direction was difficult to guess, until Grantham explained it.

"The storm is coming over Ragged Rock," declared the thin-faced man. "The first winds always rip around it! That is why they seem to change. We shall have rain tonight."

"More probably snow," put in Shirley. "It looks very cold outdoors."

"Because of the moonlight," said Grantham, with a smile. "It gives the ground a frosty appearance. But let us return to Ferris. His case is similar to some of the peculiar accidents that occurred to people many years ago. What puzzles me is the matter of the bell."

"You mean that could be hypnotism too?" asked Harry.

"Mass hypnotism," responded Grantham. "Spreading like an epidemic from mind to mind, immediately after a tragedy near the Rock. Such has been my theory, but to substantiate it, Luther and I should have heard the bell."

"You should have," agreed Shirley, "but not Luther. You always forget that he is deaf."

"That would make no difference," argued Grantham. "Since the effect would be purely mental, Luther should experience it too. In fact, Luther should serve as the best test for my theory. His mind undisturbed by ordinary sounds, he might be the first to sense a strange disturbance -"

Again, Grantham stopped, a lighted match poised above his pipe. He wasn't pausing just for a light; something else was bothering him. Tilting his head, Grantham shook out the match and undertoned:

"Listen!"

Only the howl of the wind, but it carried an almost human wail. The electric lights quivered as was their habit in rural sections where wires ran on shaky poles. As the whine faded and the lights steadied, Grantham gave an indulgent smile and struck another match.

"People have fancied many things in this valley," declared Grantham. "Some have even said that they saw the ghost of Black Arthur on the slope. My notes include such data."

Shirley gave a quick glance at Harry, who nodded. As Grantham resumed his chair, the girl spoke.

"I thought I saw something, Uncle Henley. Today, on the slope where the stone came from, I couldn't find a chance to mention it, with so much talk about the bell and your theory that didn't fit."

Over his glasses, Grantham turned his inquiring eyes toward Harry, who shook his head.

"I didn't see it," said Harry. "Shirley called it a stooped figure, something like Old Jeb."

"And then it disappeared," put in Shirley. "I suppose I must have imagined it, Uncle Henley. So you can add that to your data. Maybe it will help the theory."

The wind was back again, rattling doors as well as windows. But Grantham's face had changed. He muttered something about the back door, wondering why it should rattle. Then:

"Old Jeb goes everywhere," asserted Grantham. "Whatever he sees or finds, he keeps to himself. I wonder if he has been thinking about the Black Arthur legend!"

Intrigued by his new notion, Grantham arose and started upstairs, beckoning for the others to follow. As they reached the second floor, gusts of wind greeted them from a doorway leading into the room above the living room.

"Uncle's room," said Shirley to Harry. "He loves fresh air and always keeps a window open, except when a storm comes up. He must have forgotten it tonight."

In the room, Grantham was slamming down the window, which faced to the north. Then, hopping spryly to the west side of the room, he raised another window and thrust his head out through it. Still beckoning, he drew the others toward him and the window was broad enough for both Harry and Shirley to gain a similar outlook.

The moon wasn't visible, for it was rising from the other side of the house, but the glow was everywhere. Soon that moonlight would be gone, for huge storm clouds were looming over Ragged Rock and swooping eastward rapidly. This was a night for ghouls and goblins, when the average imagination could transform the howl of the wind into a banshee's wail, but its horror was synthetic compared to the effect that sunset had induced.

At night, Ragged Rock appeared asleep, a pygmy thing against the towering clouds. Grantham ignored it as he pointed off to the lower slope where a procession of boulders formed little lumps against the gray-brown soil.

"Was that where you saw it?"

Grantham's shout came between the gusts of wind, but Shirley didn't answer. Her hair was bundling down over her eyes and noting her predicament, Harry answered for her.

"That was the place," he shouted. "Somewhere among those boulders, at the spot where one is missing."

"See anything now?"

"I think I do, Mr. Grantham." Harry blinked, wondering if his eyes were tricking him. "No, maybe it was just the flicker of the moonlight."

Grantham spread his arms and drew the others back from the window, which he promptly slammed.

"Moonlight doesn't flicker," he argued. "I thought I saw something too, someone prowling up among those rocks. Maybe we should find out who it is."

"You'll stay right here," insisted Shirley. "You can watch the flicker of the firelight in the living room, since you won't have one upstairs. Those are my orders, Uncle Henley. Harry and I can go out and search the hillside."

Protesting all the way downstairs, Grantham finally capitulated when they reached the living room. Despite his relish for fresh air, his teeth were chattering from his sojourn at the upstairs window and he was forced to admit that he had been wrong in presuming the night to be warm. Facing the fireplace, Grantham rubbed his hands and agreed he'd better stay indoors.

"Don't go too far up the slope," he warned. "If you see Old Jeb, we can find out later what he's been about."

Setting out together, Harry and Shirley left by the back door and took the cut across the fields. Tonight there was no creeping blackness to avoid, and using the car would have been a warning to any prowler on the slope. Besides, all they needed was to reach a vantage point in the shape of a stone wall a few hundred yards this side of the boulder-studded hill. From that wall, which followed a slight rise, Harry was sure they could make their necessary observations.

The light was wavery when they gained the wall, for the edge of the cloud bank was crossing the moon. Hoping for luck in the few minutes that remained, Shirley brushed back her hair and strained her eyes toward the boulder. Suddenly, her voice came tense:

"There!"

A figure was rising from a spot among the boulders. Instead of remaining stooped, it straightened, perhaps as Old Jeb might have. But the garb that swept wide in the wind was not a tattered jacket. Harry recognized it for what it was, a flowing cloak.

It was The Shadow!

The tall man from the depot had reminded Harry of Cranston, but he hadn't supposed that his chief would already have switched to his cloaked self and come to investigate the matter of a mysterious figure that Shirley hadn't even mentioned down in town. It was almost incredible to Harry and entirely so to Shirley. Instinctively the girl sprang down from the wall, trying to drag Harry with her.

"It isn't Jeb!" gasped Shirley. "It can't be Old Jeb - or anything human! It's something from Ragged Rock, unless it's the ghost of Fred Ferris!"

Harry didn't leave the wall. The wind was coming harder and a pelt of sleet accompanied it, but he

wanted to stay briefly where he was. Frantically, Shirley tugged his arm, pointing her other hand down the slope.

"Come!" she pleaded. "I tell you it isn't Old Jeb. It can't be" - a new excitement filled her voice - "Because - look!"

Harry looked. Down the slope where the ground humped near a break in a stone wall, a crouched figure was stretching its head forward, like a human crane. Pushing ahead of it was a long-barreled gun that belonged with the hunting bag and visored cap that the stooped man was wearing. Old Jeb, the prowler of Long Valley, was taking a direct bead on The Shadow!

With a shout that the wind drowned, Harry turned to warn the cloaked figure up the slope. The crackle of the gun was sharper than Harry's unheard call. With the report, The Shadow sprawled amid a little puff of dust that looked ghostly in the moonlight. As he fell, there was another shot and a second puff merged with the first.

Shirley was climbing the wall when the dust cleared. Her amazement seconded Harry's.

The cloaked figure of The Shadow was gone!

It was Shirley who thought she could explain it, in terms of what had happened that afternoon.

"It did the same thing before," she chattered. "I told you even though you wouldn't believe me. It's something from Ragged Rock - maybe the ghost of Black Arthur. If it looks different, it's because this is moonlight."

Shirley was wrong, even about the moonlight. The clouds suddenly took care of that detail, wiping it out entirely. But in the last moment, Harry threw a desperate glance down the slope in time to spot Old Jeb scudding toward the road to the notch. A moment later the stooped runner was blotted too.

Harry never could have argued Shirley into going to the boulders to look for a victim she was sure must be a ghost. He'd have to do that on his own and meanwhile, there was the question of Old Jeb.

Anxious to trap the killer, Harry sprang from the stone wall bringing Shirley with him and started the girl on a run back to the house, an idea which appealed to her immensely.

The sleet was slashing with a cutting force, but there were still faint glimmers of moonlight, never enough to show a trace of Old Jeb, wherever he might have gone. In that icy deluge, Harry and Shirley were losing their way and wouldn't have realized that they were going wide of the house, but for the thoughtfulness of Henley Grantham.

Shirley's uncle must have recognized their dilemma, for a light appeared suddenly to their right, marking the back door of the house. They had turned in that direction and were skidding down the slippery turf when the door itself swung open and Grantham came in sight, a shawl around his shoulders, a large cane in his hand. The wind carried Harry's welcoming shout, for it was in the right direction, and a minute later Harry was thrusting Shirley into her uncle's arms.

"Tell him all about it," Harry panted. "About the ghost we saw and the shots we heard. I'm going to drive along the road and see if I can find Old Jeb!"

It was Harry's intention to drive around by road and search for The Shadow among the boulders, but the trip wasn't feasible with the sleet paving the road. A few hundred yards from the house, Harry's car side-slipped into a shallow ditch, so he dimmed the lights and waited for the going to get better. There was enough rain in this sleet to dilute it, perhaps inside ten minutes.

The wait wasn't that long.

Harry's taut nerves were suddenly conscious of a sound to his right, like the closing of the rattly door that he hadn't even opened. As he turned, raising a warding arm, he gained a swift impression of circulating blackness that swarmed toward him. From that gloom which was thicker than the clouded night a firm hand gripped Harry's arm.

With it a voice intoned a single word:

"Report!"

It was Harry's chief, The Shadow!

CHAPTER VII

It was noon and Craig Rexford had gone out to lunch. He had left earlier than usual for two good reasons. One, was that the body of Fred Ferris was being removed from the undertaking parlor, which happened to be next door to the office of the Long Valley Development Association. The other was that Rexford had to meet a friend, James Westerly, who was coming in on the noon train, which incidentally was the train on which Ferris's body was to be shipped out.

The office was still open, because it had a customer, a man named Harry Vincent who was interested in buying an acre as far removed from Ragged Rock as he could get it. Since Lamont Cranston was lounging around the office, Rexford had decided to let him talk to Vincent. This was more to their liking than Rexford supposed, since they had confidential matters to discuss.

There was a large map of Long Valley spread on a table and as Rexford's proxy, Cranston was showing it to Vincent. But Cranston wasn't talking in terms of real estate. His pencil point was resting on a spot that just about represented the original location of the boulder that had played too much hop-scotch with Fred Ferris.

"We can take it for granted that someone dislodged the boulder," asserted Cranston. "It was too large a job and too well-timed to have been a chance occurrence. It follows therefore that Shirley saw the murderer."

"And he looked like Old Jeb," added Harry.

"Whoever he was," continued Cranston, "he disappeared by the simple expedient of dropping into the hole that the boulder had left."

"You proved that later," put in Harry. "The way you dropped into that hole when Old Jeb was potting shots at you last night, was something that really baffled me."

"I dropped at the first shot," recalled Cranston, with a reminiscent smile. "It was just a trifle short. The next one was a bit long - because I wasn't there to stop it."

Harry's glance wandered up from the map and out through the plate glass window. Cranston didn't even have to follow it to know what he was looking for.

"Never mind Old Jeb," remarked Cranston. "It is better to study his case before we try to settle it. Getting back to the murderer - Old Jeb or otherwise - he was in his temporary hideout when the bell began to ring. It attracted everyone's attention and gave him an opportunity to travel this direction."

Cranston's pencil traced a line from the slope across to Indian Ridge, going past the mound where the

bad road ended at the gully.

"From boulder to boulder," affirmed Harry, "and then through the gully. He could have reached the railroad track before we even looked for him. That's the way Old Jeb did it."

"Old Jeb?"

"Who else? When I saw him here in town, he -"

Cranston smiled at Harry's self interruption and waited for the rest.

"Say, that clears Old Jeb, doesn't it!" exclaimed Harry. "He couldn't have gone away around by the tracks and footed it into Valley Center before I drove here. But if Old Jeb is innocent, what was he doing on the prowl last night?"

"Looking for a murderer," replied Cranston, "and thinking he'd found one."

"That's why he took those shots at you?"

"A good enough reason. Old Jeb appears to be a crafty sort. He could have decided that the killer would come back and try to fill the tell-tale hole that the boulder left. It was too strong a proof that the stone had been pried loose."

Harry looked toward the window again, with a different expression on his face. Calmly, Cranston once more corrected Harry's thoughts.

"Don't become too prejudiced in Jeb's favor," cautioned Cranston. "He still could have beaten you back to town. Have you looked around the depot?"

Harry shook his head.

"There is a hand-car up past the freight platform," Cranston stated. "Hand-cars coast very fast down grade and the grade from the gap is a sharp one. Listen to the noon train."

Listening, Harry heard the laboring puffs of the local as it crawled up toward the gap. Through the window he could see the heavy smoke from the locomotive, but only the tops of the cars were occasionally visible in the low cut that ran through the ledges at the base of Indian Ridge.

"You couldn't have seen the hand-car at all," was Cranston's verdict, "nor would you have heard it while that giant bell was clanging. So Old Jeb could be the murderer after all. In that case, he would have gone to the slope last night to destroy the evidence of his own crime."

"Reason enough for him to kill you," put in Harry, his tone regaining its former heat. "You'd already found the evidence, so you knew too much to live. That settles Jeb's case -"

"Neutralizes it would be a better term," interposed Cranston. "It about balances as an uncertain factor, something like Jeb's own temperament. Maybe Old Jeb has taken it into his head to uphold the legend of Ragged Rock, but that could apply to any crack-pot in this valley. Let's look for a stronger motive in picking a likely man."

Harry agreed to wash Old Jeb from the slate, at least for the time being. Searching for motive to produce the man, he came up with the suggestion:

"Anson Venner."

"An excellent start," approved Cranston, "We know that Venner doesn't want any more land sold, even on the slope. Since Ferris was surveying ground that Rexford had arranged to purchase, Venner couldn't have chosen a quicker way of blocking the business."

"Maybe it was too quick," objected Harry, "and it could certainly be no more than temporary."

"There is nothing subtle in Venner's nature," reminded Cranston. "He would pick a straight line as the shortest way to any point. No, I may be wrong. He came around below Half Dome when he returned from Millwood yesterday, instead of using the road through the notch."

"It's probably as short to make a curve around," laughed Harry, "as it is taking one that goes up, over and down. But there's nobody to prove that Venner really came from Millwood, except Venner himself."

"We'll keep him in mind then," decided Cranston, "along with Old Jeb. Any other candidates?"

Harry shook his head.

"Venner might be pinning something on Old Jeb," suggested Cranston. "Perhaps somebody would try to plant something on Venner."

"Who for instance?"

"I can think of one man, very readily."

"Craig Rexford?"

"That's right. Where was he when Ferris was killed?"

"Coming in on the evening train. He told us so over at the courthouse."

Cranston gave a very solemn nod.

"That's right," he said. "You mentioned it in your report. Rexford was out of breath, wasn't he?"

"Why, no -"

"But he must have been, after that spring from the station. I walked over with the other passengers. You were already starting for Grantham's in your car when we reached the green."

"You mean Rexford wasn't on the train?"

"I mean just that. You'll find his car in the parking lot behind the Valley House where he is staying. He hasn't any more of an alibi than Venner."

"He has less," argued Harry. "He lied, to cover himself up -"

"Not necessarily," Cranston interrupted. "Maybe he was just getting the jump on Venner. That's Rexford's way of doing things. And now, to continue with our list -"

Cranston broke off as footsteps sounded outside the office door. As if attracted to the spot where they were being analyzed, all three suspects so far discussed had assembled in front of the real estate office.

It certainly wasn't by design. Venner and some friends were merely coming down the street when they barged into Rexford returning from the station with the man he had met there, James Westerly. Old Jeb just happened to appear, carrying his special shot-gun and game bag, which was empty, except for the

forked rod that Harry still mistook for a sling-shot.

Curtly, Venner nodded to Rexford, who was both polite and insinuating in response.

"Hello, Venner," said Rexford, cordially. "I want you to meet my friend Westerly" - Rexford gestured to the portly man who accompanied him. "He just stopped off to see me. He is going to Millwood - on business."

Venner didn't know just how to take that remark. He finally ignored it by shoving forward a dapper man who was in his own group.

"This is Lloyd Thurnow," snapped Venner. "He's an expert on soil erosion. He's going to prove what you haven't told people; that the land up toward Ragged Rock is the best in this valley."

"Excellent!" approved Rexford. "That's the very land I intend to sell to my customers."

He gestured past Cranston to indicate Harry, but Venner didn't pay attention.

"You'll have to buy the land first," reminded Venner, "and sellers won't be plenty after people learn what they're giving up. Thurnow is starting on the job tomorrow and he's going to get results."

Venner walked away, taking his friends with him. Rexford came into the office and promptly introduced Westerly to Cranston, then put a polite request.

"I wish you'd drive Westerly to Millwood," said Rexford. "You can use my car, Cranston, and I think you'll find the trip worth while. Suppose we have lunch first" - turning, Rexford included Harry in the invitation - "and talk about the valley project. It's a wonderful thing, that project. The more partners, the better. We can take care of all of them."

As they crossed the green to the Valley House, Harry Vincent wondered if Fred Ferris had become a project partner in order to get his survey job.

Somebody had certainly taken care of Fred Ferris. Maybe he was just the first visitor who was destined to leave Valley Center in a crate.

Harry Vincent was becoming something of a prophet, though he didn't recognize it.

CHAPTER VIII

At three o'clock that afternoon, a flash of red hair broke the monotony of Valley Center. It popped from a car that stopped in front of the library and the face that went with it began to look around. Harry took the hint and came from the Valley House. He met Shirley in the middle of the green, while her uncle was going into the library.

Harry promptly wished that they were anywhere but Valley Center. Shirley's face was built for smiles, not the serious expression that it wore at present. The stress was off, so far as Harry was concerned, and he was already regretting the moonlight he and Shirley had wasted over such issues as Old Jeb. Today was another day in Harry's parlance, but Shirley brought up the old routine before he could speak his piece.

"The coroner stopped at the house this morning," confided Shirley. "He'd been up on the slope. He stopped at the house to get warm."

"Did you take him to your uncle's room?" bantered Harry. "You could have faced him south, where he

wouldn't see the open windows."

For the moment, Shirley relaxed.

"What!" she retorted. "Have him look at an empty fireplace? That's another of my uncle's foibles, you know. He won't build a fire in that precious room of his. He says it would smoke the place up and smoke him out."

"He ought to change his tobacco if he feels that way," said Harry. "He must have bought that stuff back when they were giving it away with coupons. But you look serious, so I'll be. What went with the coroner?"

"Zero-zero. Like the weather I mean. It was responsible. The rain and sleet must have filled that boulder hole with so much mud the coroner couldn't find it."

"That's something," grunted Harry. "It puts a new slant on murder. Do it before a dark and stormy night instead of during."

"You haven't heard the half of it," rejoined Shirley. "The precipitation, as uncle terms it, washed the dirt loose from a lot of other boulders. The whole slope is stocked with push-overs. The coroner tried a few and they rolled, oh, so easy. That makes the death of one Fred Ferris a simple verdict of misadventure."

Harry shook his head at that one, so Shirley thought she ought to top it.

"That makes me wonder about Old Jeb," the girl declared. "If anybody knows the weather around here, he should."

"You haven't caught him in the library, have you?" returned Harry. "Looking up old records, along with your uncle?"

"Book learning doesn't appeal to Jeb," declared Shirley. "He goes by crows, bunions and such. But when it comes to clouds, he can certainly distinguish between cumulus and nimbus, in his own dumb way, I mean."

"Granted. Proceed to the point."

"It's this." Shirley was as serious as before. "If Jeb knew that storm was going to hit, why did he come around at all? It's easy to see from what the coroner decided, that Jeb wanted to fill one boulder hole and loosen a few other stones. He might have known that the storm would do it."

Harry didn't tell Shirley that she was bolstering the good half of a balance sheet already issued under the name of Old Jeb. In his opinion, Jeb's case was still under advisement. Just to change the subject, Harry queried:

"What does your uncle think about it?"

"He's building up a lunar theory," replied Shirley, "and that demands more research. He's trying to learn whether strange things happen during the dark of the moon or during the full. Maybe he'll talk it over with Luther."

"You mean Luther is interested?"

"In lip reading, yes. Uncle Henley uses so many long words and technical terms that Luther likes to use him for practice. He told me so, but of course I didn't mention it to Uncle Henley. Poor Luther! He gets

so bored, sitting in the library all day, reading the titles of books at twenty feet, with that terrific eyesight of his!"

The humanization of Luther gave Harry a sudden idea. He reached in his pocket and brought out a letter that Cranston had handed him earlier. Though the letter was addressed to Harry, Cranston had brought it - with a purpose.

"Read this," said Harry, with a gesture to a handy bench. "It came this morning."

"From a girl," said Shirley, looking at the handwriting. "Isn't it - well, rather personal?"

"Hardly so. She's just another brunette."

"And what do you prefer - blondes?"

"To tell the truth" - Harry's eyes followed the curve of Shirley's rounded chin, jumped the high bridged nose that separated her hazel eyes, and paused above the level of her forehead - "I'm neutral."

Shirley could have laughed, but she merely smiled, as she settled on reading the letter, which was a brief but friendly note from Margo Lane.

"This girl sounds nice," decided Shirley. "Is she a dope - or just ignorant?"

"Just ignorant."

"That's all right. She can be cured by experience. Imagine anyone living in New York and wishing for a job in a small town like Valley Center! Or maybe you're the attraction."

"Count me out. Margo is just fed up on city life, that's all. I must admit" - Harry gave a slight gesture of mild pride - "that my notion of becoming a pioneer rather intrigued Margo. She doesn't want to become a project partner, but she's sold on Valley Center. A library job would certainly appeal to her."

"And she'd appeal to Luther," decided Shirley. "He wants me to take over, but I won't, because I'm leaving here as soon as I can find something in New York. I'll handle this, Mr. Vincent."

Shirley headed for the library and Harry went back to the Valley House, feeling quite happy because he had planted another of The Shadow's hand-picked workers in Valley Center. What knocked the happiness out of him was the empty lobby. Only a little while ago, Venner had been around there and Harry was supposed to watch him.

There was still a chance toward redemption. Harry looked across to the real estate office, expecting to see Rexford there. The door was shut, with a sign hanging on it. Harry didn't require Luther's remarkable eyesight to guess that the sign said: "Closed."

In leaving with Westerly, Cranston had automatically assigned Harry the task of watching the principal suspects in the Ferris case. With Venner and Rexford gone, Harry's chance of fulfilling that duty were about nil, unless Old Jeb came wandering by to offer a trail, which wasn't likely. However, Harry propped himself in a chair that fronted on the lobby window and hoped at least one prospect might show up.

Shirley broke that vigil by arriving with the news that Margo would be acceptable as assistant librarian, if willing to take an inadequate salary, a forgone conclusion in Valley Center. Shirley was going to the movies and invited Harry, but having seen both ends of the local double-feature, he declined to share the ordeal.

That left him alone in the otherwise empty hotel lobby, speculating on which of three men he would see first. By the time long streaks of blackness stretched the green, announcing that the sun was slipping below Ragged Rock, Harry was convinced that this business would produce a blank. He began to worry and his mood produced a notion.

Harry went to the desk and tinkled the bell that brought the clerk.

"Where will I find Thurnow?" inquired Harry. "You know, the chap who is going to test the soil tomorrow."

"He hasn't been around," replied the clerk. "Guess you'll find him over at the moratorium."

"The which?"

"Funeral parlor to you."

"Morgue to you," retaliated Harry. "What's he doing over there?"

"They gave him the back room," explained the clerk. "He's unpacking a lot of crates that came on the noon train."

"What's in them?"

"Why don't you go and find out? Maybe it's fertilizer."

"Humus to you."

Before the clerk could top that one, Harry was on his way out the door. Crossing the green, he cut between the undertaking establishment and the library and found a fenced lane that served as an alley. Entering the back door of the moratorium, Harry saw the crates that the clerk had mentioned but there wasn't any sign of dapper Lloyd Thurnow.

A truck rumbled up behind the place and a couple of healthy farmhands clambered from it. Their truck bore a cardboard placard that said "Valley Express Company" and they must have figured Harry to be Thurnow, because they nodded with the respect due a soil erosion expert.

"Give us a hand with them spare coffins, mister," suggested one, with a wave to the corner, "and we'll clear more space for you to work in. Guess old Dowdy was glad to rent his store room. It gave him an excuse to peddle some of them expensive caskets that there warn't no call for."

Harry helped with the antique coffins, which proved as heavy as they looked. When he had given the final shove to the last of four, he waved from behind the truck and it swung from the fenced lane into the road that led to the depot. Deciding that he couldn't learn anything more in Dowdy's Undertaking Parlor, Harry started back to the hotel wondering where Thurnow had gone.

At the middle of the Village Green Harry halted. What made him stop was something that he wondered at later. It could have been the tight clench of his fists, which for some reason he had instinctively closed. It might have been the peculiar shape of the long black streaks that stretched across his path, jagged shadows that reminded him too much of Ragged Rock.

Or it could have been a hush in the atmosphere itself, one of those preternatural lulls that presaged calamity. Whatever the cause, Harry's instant of pause seemed strangely prolonged. It was like waiting for something that was sure to come, despite all rational objection.

It came, the distant toll of a giant bell!

The same dirge of death that had frozen Harry on the slope below Ragged Rock. Weird, unreal, yet vaguely traceable by the echoes it flung back. It was from the north again, from somewhere near Half Dome, that bulge among the hills. As for the echoes, they quivered first from the southern Ridge, then swelled as they rolled in from the west, as if Ragged Rock had caught its share and was contributing it to the pool.

Everything stopped in Valley Center.

Probably everyone but Harry was turning horrified in the general direction of Half Dome. Harry didn't look to see, for his eyes were fixed forward, downward. After all, to Harry, the toll of the repeating bell symbolized the terror that he had personally seen creep in from Ragged Rock. Echoes no longer came across the village green. They merely came from the shadows now.

Only they weren't shadows from the Rock, those streaks across the green. They merely came from the trees, the Minute Man statue, and the buildings that flanked this open square. They meant nothing and therefore Harry could relax. His own fists, bulging so tightly before his eyes, made Harry recognize his exaggerated tension.

Harry gave a short, harsh laugh, to prove that the toll of death was not for him. Simultaneously, he opened his hands wide. A new swell of the clanging bell gave him a sensation of panic that made all previous horrors dwindle into minor recollections.

No, the clash of that discordant tocsin from the hills did not mark Harry Vincent as a victim. It simply proved that the curse of Ragged Rock could carry a two-way threat. If eyes had peered across Harry's shoulder at that moment, they would have believed that the bell was an accusing paean, singling out a man of murder.

In the half-light of the early sunset, Harry Vincent saw that his widespread palms were completely smeared with the crimson dye of blood!

Loud came the final toll of the horrific bell and the ripple of its insidious echoes stirred a lone word through Harry's brain:

"Murderer!"

CHAPTER IX

Old Luther leaned forward from the library desk and let his long-range eyesight probe the outside dusk. As before, the librarian had failed to hear the brazen bell that left a chill in the affrighted air, hence he had no idea that horror reigned anew through Long Valley.

What interested Luther was the strange behavior of a man who aimlessly roamed the village green, wringing his hands in a manner that suited Lady Macbeth. That notion caused Luther to turn and read the titles on the volumes of Shakespeare that stood near the stairway leading down to the research vault.

The man on the green was reeling toward the library when Luther took another look. It struck Luther that the fellow was drunk and might make trouble, so the librarian started to leave his desk in order to summon Henley Grantham, who was busy, as usual, taking notes in the closed room below. At that moment, the man reeled away, so Luther didn't go downstairs.

Harry Vincent was the man of odd behavior and he had just noticed Luther through the lighted doorway

of the library. The fact that he was under observation awoke Harry from the staggery mood that had swept him.

The shock of discovering his blood-stained hands had left Harry utterly aghast. Starting one direction, then another, he had been utterly unable to control his shaky knees. He'd wanted to wash the guilt from those hands of his, and his first thought had been to go to the hotel. Realizing that the clerk might see the crimson evidence, Harry had swung toward the library; now he recognized that it could not serve him as a haven.

Hoping to get out of Luther's sight, Harry found himself in the space between the library and the funeral parlor. He suddenly pictured himself as a murderer returning to the scene of crime, though he didn't know what that crime could be. Instinctively, Harry shied from the back door where he had helped load the truck, and blundered over behind the library.

The library had a back door too. It formed an entrance through a little vestibule leading into the upstairs stack room. Harry remembered it because he'd been in the library this morning, in fact had spent an hour there, before keeping his appointment with Cranston. A happy thought struck Harry: he'd go in through that door and find Grantham, who would certainly believe his story.

Grantham's theory of mass hysteria might still be unestablished, but Shirley's uncle definitely believed that the force of the Valley legend could produce physical effects upon persons who encountered it. Such a hideous phenomenon as blood from nowhere would intrigue Grantham. At least he would listen to Harry's story and try to analyze it without prejudice against the man who told it.

Harry's hand stopped as it reached for the door knob. He remembered that the door was locked, for he had seen the key inside it while hanging his hat in the vestibule during his trip around the stack room. But it wasn't the locked door that made Harry falter. The blood on his hands was the reason. He couldn't afford to leave its traces on the knob.

Then the possibility of interviewing Grantham faded when Harry realized that he'd have to sneak past Luther anyway. The steps from the stack room led down through the reading room and Harry would have to follow the wall for twenty feet to gain the stairs to the vault. Luther's eyes were as roving as they were keen; nothing ever escaped them. The trip to the vault was out.

Silence still clutched Valley Center. The villagers were probably standing stunned, waiting for harrowing news from Ragged Rock, before they budged. Only the furtive blare of a locomotive whistle broke the spell. It was the evening local, coming into town on time by some strange freak.

Harry's spell was broken too.

Experiencing the mental reactions that might have gripped an actual murderer, Harry had lost his mental whirl and was finding himself unusually canny. Quick, crafty thoughts were springing to his mind, ways of covering his dilemma tuned with recollections that he could put to rapid use.

First to get away from here.

That was easy, considering the numbed condition of the populace. No need of going back to the green. All Harry had to do was sneak past the fence on the other side of the land, so he did. From there it was easy to pick a path along the fence, behind a hedge, through a wooded stretch and thus to the station without a chance of being seen.

All along the route Harry was wondering what next.

That too was easy. The approaching whistle of the train inspired Harry's next scheme. He'd reach the station first and stop at the water tower, where the constant leakage would enable him to wash his hands. When the train pulled in, Harry could take a leaf from Rexford's note-book, adding a cute item from his own.

He'd say he'd come in on the train, if anybody asked. Harry would be able to prove it, by joining the passengers who were walking from the station. He wouldn't be a dope and arrive too soon, like Rexford.

Avoiding the station, Harry cut across to the water tower and found the trickle that he wanted. The icy water dripped into his cupped hands and he rubbed them gratefully, watching the dried blood disappear. The next thing was to dry his hands, so after making sure that they were thoroughly clean, Harry rubbed them through his hair, then took a look at them in the light and chuckled.

The chuckle turned sour.

This whole thing was so impossible, disposing of blood that came from nowhere, like the tolling bell, that Harry was taking everything for granted, including the light that arrived so conveniently. Suddenly coming back to reality, Harry made a quick retreat into the darkness, when he saw that the glow came from the searchlight of the locomotive, which was stopping at the station. The train had puffed right into Valley Center, without Harry realizing it.

That was bad.

Though there was a good chance that the engineer hadn't spotted him, Harry was cut off from the platform where the passengers were alighting from the train. There was nothing to do but huddle down beside the track and wait until the train pulled by.

While he waited, Harry watched.

Like relics from some long-forgotten past, he saw four coffins being loaded on the baggage car behind the engine. As the last one was slid on board, Harry remembered his own experience in back of the funeral parlor. He'd helped shove coffins on a truck and afterward, there had been blood on his hands!

The train was starting, the wheels of the engine spinning on the grade. Past went the searchlight, then the panting locomotive, and as the baggage car came along, Harry acted according to new inspiration and hauled himself in through the open door. There wasn't any baggage man in this combine car, so Harry wasted no time getting to work.

He felt like a murderer no longer. Rather, Harry was a crime-hunter, tracking down a vital clue. He chose his coffins carefully and picked the one that he remembered as the last to go on the truck. It was an antique type of imitation mahogany, which could account for Harry not noticing the blood.

But the blood was there.

Harry could see its ooze by the flare of the match he supplied. It took a close search at the end of the coffin, where the trickle was already clotted between the casket and the lid. Giving the lid a pry, Harry found that it was loose. It popped open and Harry's match was flaming above the dead face of Lloyd Thurnow!

Someone had handed the man short shrift.

Tipped back, Thurnow's head was a study in gore. One clout from a convenient blunt instrument had finished him. The murderer had simply packed him in the coffin, propping him at one end because the box

was considerably more than Thurnow's size. As luck had it, Thurnow's end had been the lower one when Harry shoved the coffin on the truck. In handling it, Harry had picked up those streaks of blood.

There was no need for another match. Moonlight was streaming intermittently through the open door of the baggage car, as the local labored up the slope that ran through Indian Ridge. Early moonlight this evening, creeping from the even horizon to the east of Long Valley. Blocked off at intervals by the rock formation of the ledge along the Ridge, the moonlight was only occasional, but it was sufficient to study Thurnow's body. Harry was hoping that he could add clue to clue and get a trail back to the murderer.

That trail was closer than Harry supposed.

The clatter of the train, the creak of the old wooden car, completely drowned the slight groan that sounded behind Harry's back. The noise came from the hinges of another coffin and it was tuned to the rising of the lid. Blocking the moonlight, the bulky coffin cover obscured the figure that arose from within. All that was definable was the crouch of that insidious shape.

Body bent forward, arms extended, the figure had a head that raised itself in vulturous style, that its eyes might guide a pair of clutching hands. The likeness to a bird of prey was perfect, for those hands swooped with the speed of attacking claws. They took Harry's neck in one terrific grip and hauled him back with a yank that brought his head against the coffin.

The locomotive was whistling for a grade crossing that hadn't been on the map for thirty years. To Harry, the blare trailed off like something vanishing into another realm of space. Two forms were lying silent when the crouched man came from the coffin that had served as an improvised ambush.

One form was the dead body of Lloyd Thurnow; the other, the unconscious figure of Harry Vincent!

CHAPTER X

The second feature at the Iris Theater was a Western, filled with enough gunfire to rock the rafters of the only movie house in Valley Center. Some of the audience were really scared, but they were fortunate. If they hadn't been listening to the movie shooting, they would have heard the toll of the dooming bell.

Shirley Grantham came out of the theater to find the town in a state resembling the night before. Little clusters of people were gathered together, saying nothing; glad simply to share each other's company. Shirley didn't have to ask if the death bell had tolled. Positive that it had, she dashed into the library, paying no heed to Luther's astonishment as she hurried down to the research vault. Finding the door tight shut, Shirley pounded until she received a clattering response; finally, the door swung wide and Henley Grantham stared bewildered at his niece.

Shirley couldn't find breath for words. By the time she did, Grantham had learned all from her face.

"The bell again?"

Shirley nodded.

"I have my car." Grantham's tone was grim. "We must go up there at once. Who was it this time?"

"I don't know," replied Shirley. "I don't think anyone else does. They're just standing there - so helplessly - waiting for someone to tell them."

When Grantham's car pulled around the green, it started an immediate rush for others. The tension was telling on the natives and someone bold enough to head for Ragged Rock was accepted immediately as a natural leader. Strong though the hold of superstition was, it didn't stop people from bringing along their

shooting irons; rifles, shotguns, and other forms of local artillery. In a sense, Grantham was leading an unofficial posse toward the hillside where death must certainly have struck again.

Reaching the fork, Grantham swung along the road to the left, since that was where Ferris's death had occurred. He asked Shirley how long ago the bell had tolled, but she didn't know. Their information came when they found the road blocked by a big car that had bogged into a muddy ditch, left over from last night's rain. Grantham recognized the car as Venner's and the burly farmer put in a sudden appearance from in front of it.

"Glad you're here, Mr. Grantham," greeted Venner, huskily. "I heard the bell ring when I was coming into town."

"Where had you gone?" inquired Grantham sharply. "Over to Millwood?"

"I was starting that way," replied Venner, "only I forgot something and had to come back. That's when I heard the bell. I was right by the old road that goes up past Half Dome."

Grantham eyed Venner very sharply.

"How long ago was that?"

"About half an hour - maybe a little more." Venner shrugged as though the time didn't matter. "Anyway, the going was slow, because the road was muddy. I hit the road above your house, took a swing back toward the fork -"

"Through the shadow from Ragged Rock?" interrupted Grantham. "Were you willing to risk it, Venner?"

"It was gone by that time. Anyway, I got this far, and it's moonlight now. Maybe we ought to look around."

Other cars had arrived and their occupants were piling out to hear what Venner had to say. The man who promptly agreed with Venner happened to be the last person he expected. He stepped up from the side of the road into the glow of headlights and introduced himself with a nod. The man was Rexford.

"A good idea, Venner," said Rexford. "Where do you suggest we begin - or wouldn't you know?"

Venner furnished one of his patented sneers.

"What are you doing here, Rexford?"

"I was up by the notch," Rexford gestured off into the moonlight. "Thought I'd take a hike and learn how good the old road was. It needs a lot of improving but we won't bother. When my project partners begin to settle here, I'll supply them with jeeps that can travel anywhere, even up the side of Ragged Rock."

Venner remained persistent.

"So you were up by the notch?"

"Just starting back, when the bell rang. I took a short cut across in back of Grantham's. But I had to wait until the shadow blended with the darkness."

"You mean you believe in the curse too?"

"Why not? I'm going to stay in Valley Center. I think I ought to take the advice of people who know this territory better than I do."

Rexford's statement was meant for the townsmen who now formed an interested cluster and it took immediate effect. Observing the nods that passed among them, Venner decided that Rexford was becoming too well liked, but he didn't argue the point. Instead, he bluntly took over the leadership with a big-armed gesture in the general direction of Ragged Rock.

"It's moonlight now," announced Venner. "Mr. Grantham here will tell you that the curse is off. Suppose we spread along the slope and see what we can find. I hope it won't be anything unfortunate, like what happened to poor Ferris."

Somewhat gingerly, the throng began to spread. In several minutes the widened pack was moving up the slope in what struck Shirley as an exact reversal of the rough curve that the irregular shadow followed every afternoon. At times, men dipped from sight on the undulating ground, while others suddenly appeared on the tops of the stone walls. The strong moonlight rendered the hunt decidedly uncanny.

At last a shout came from a wave of ground just to the right of the old blocked road and not far from the gully. The place was below the boulder territory, but sheltered by the remains of an ancient stone wall. Shirley and her uncle were among the first to reach the scene and they found two men pointing down into the ruins of an old cellar.

"Look thar!" A man was pointing to a star-spread body. "He must have stumbled right into it. Like a trap, I'd call it, seeing as how this was one of them old houses that was here afore Black Arthur's time!"

More shouts brought men from along the slope, among them Anson Venner. The burly leader of the local farm bloc was the first to identify the victim who lay sprawled in the old, deep cellar. Even in the moonlight, Venner could make out the man's features, for he knew them quite well.

"It's Thurnow!" boomed Venner. "The erosion expert who arrived today. But he wasn't supposed to come up here until tomorrow!" Cutting off, Venner turned in challenging style and saw the person that he wanted. "This is your work, Rexford!"

"Be yourself, Venner," returned Rexford, in his easy purr. "I only met Thurnow for a few minutes. Now how could I have induced him to come up here and stumble into an old pit that I never even saw?"

"You brought him here and threw him in - that's what you did!"

"And why would I do that?"

"You know, well enough! Thurnow was going to prove that this land was good. You wouldn't have been able to buy it then."

Turning on his heel, Rexford faced a semicircle of local farmers who had gathered around. They looked like an awkward squad, with their variegated firearms tilted at curious angles.

"Haven't I always told you this land was good?" demanded Rexford. "Haven't I asked you to name your prices for it - those of you who are lucky enough to own such fine soil? You know the motto of the Long Valley Development Association: 'Enough for all' - and that means money as well as land. Money for you who want it; land for the project partners who need it."

Nods and mumbles corroborated Rexford's statements. Venner's gift for oratory slipped him again; he was only able to splutter that he hadn't heard of Rexford's most recent offers. To which Rexford smiled indulgently and then countered:

"You claim to be head man in this valley, Venner. You should keep up on current affairs. Perhaps you have" - Rexford's face, catching the glow from the east, was smiling like the moon itself, though not quite

as pleasantly - "and that is why you changed your mind about Thurnow's value."

Venner's splutter became coherent.

"You're accusing me!" he stormed. "Thinking I'd get rid of Thurnow if I found I didn't need him. Why, next you'll be saying I killed him hoping it would be blamed on you!"

"Hoping it would be blamed on me," agreed Rexford, still displaying his arch-smile. "That's exactly right, Venner."

"Why, you -"

Any expletives that Venner added were drowned by the clatter of stones as he shoved forward to thrust his beefy hands at Rexford. Both were on the edge of the cellar pit and the stones that Venner kicked went rattling down upon some farmers who were hoisting up Thurnow's body, along with the dead man's hat and overcoat. The voices that came up from below weren't paying compliments to Venner. Rexford took advantage of the interruption to sidestep his beefy adversary.

"Perhaps you didn't follow Thurnow here," speculated Rexford. "After all, somebody had to be over near Half Dome to hammer that big bell. It's the sort of job you'd prefer, Venner - the easiest. Maybe you planted a stooge here to kill Thurnow. Let's look around and see if we can find him."

Rexford's gesture could have been a mere coincidence. At least it was haphazard, for his back was turned to the figure that he indicated. His hand gave a careless wave up the slope toward which the witnesses faced. Following it, they saw a stooped figure that came slowly up from beside the stone wall that angled across the slope above the ruins.

It was much like Old Jeb, that figure, until it straightened; then it proved to be someone else. Just who it was, only one person could have stated, and she suppressed the name with a gasp. Through sheer loyalty - if nothing else - the girl hoped that no one else would recognize the man she regarded as a friend.

The man who was steadying himself against the old stone wall was Harry Vincent. Having mistaken himself for a murderer, when alone, he was now the focal figure on a scene where others would believe his guilt!

CHAPTER XI

One howl from the human wolf-pack was enough to assemble the remnants of Harry's scattered wits. He'd been trying to remember how he arrived here and his impressions on the subject were rather vague. But there wasn't any doubt that he was where he didn't belong; the vengeful howls of the Valley tribe straightened him on that. What Harry needed was time to get going somewhere else and there was a factor in his favor.

To reach him, most of the Valley men had to go around the ruined cellar, which was a complex pitfall. Once part of a very sizeable mansion, the cellar spread to such extremes that wide detours were advisable. So the pursuit began with a spread-eagle formation that offered Harry his necessary start - or would have if he hadn't stumbled.

It wasn't the stumble as much as Harry's hat.

Harry didn't even think of the hat until he kicked from the low stone on which it lay beside him. The hat hit the slope and rolled conspicuously down the slope. Seeing it, Harry decided he really needed it and acted accordingly. His brief chase cost him at least a dozen seconds; worse than that, it put him in the

open and close enough to attract the aim of guns. Despite herself, Shirley shrieked a warning as she saw the men who circled the pit take pause and raise their guns.

What might have happened didn't.

Something sliced across the sward like a figment from the dark side of the moon. It was human, yet fantastic, this cloaked shape that hurtled from beside a knoll, to reach the spot where Harry stooped. It seemed to stretch itself along the ground in a gigantic slide that carried Harry with it, just before the gunnery ripped.

The Shadow!

Shirley didn't know him by that name, but he reminded her of a shadow, one of a sinister sort. In this bailiwick, the mere word "shadow" stood for the perpetual menace that dwelt in the umbra of Ragged Rock. Venner's share-croppers held the same opinion but they feared the jinx only in the daytime.

If the thing that had rescued Harry Vincent happened to be Black Arthur's ghost, it could look out for itself.

It did.

Out from the blackness near the stone wall came a taunting laugh that ridiculed the gunfire from below. The local marksmen had missed their target and were getting mockery in return. But it wasn't the custom for Black Arthur's ghost to laugh, hence The Shadow's favorite mode of discouraging opposition actually stimulated it on this occasion.

The Valley folk charged upward, guns coming to aim. Beside the wall, The Shadow gave Harry a shove that sent him in the opposite direction. Starting a stumbly dash, Harry heard his chief's admonition:

"Keep low, so they won't see you. Around the end of the wall and then over toward the gully -"

His hand plucking something that lay beside him, The Shadow wheeled erect. His other hand went back against the wall as his first arm delivered an underhand sling. One of the aiming gunners howled as he flew off balance, his shot-gun spurting upward instead of dead ahead.

The Shadow had bowled the fellow down with a nicely rounded stone, picked from the old wall. Picking such stones wasn't a case of choosing them, for most of them were very much alike. They varied in weight, but a hundred years of exposure to the weather had shaped them into egg-shaped missiles that could be handled like bowling balls.

More were coming, with uncanny results. The men who tried to hop them found that they jumped. Sidestepping wouldn't do, for the stones could take surprising curves. Moving slowly along the wall, The Shadow was changing the course of his improvised alley, and that added another doubtful factor, Guns were missing regularly because The Shadow gave precedence to men who aimed, bowling them out first.

Some were circling to get further up the hill, where the contour would ruin The Shadow's system. Halting where he was, The Shadow plucked stones from a single spot and kept them slinging in a rapid cross-fire. Nevertheless, the circle widened and a shout came for a general charge. In from a quadrant surged a complete flood of foemen.

With a sideward jump, The Shadow cleared the wall, just ahead of his pursuers. They didn't stop to aim; they could do that on the other side. As for jumping, they disdained such show-off stuff. Three abreast, the first arrivals clambered for the top of the wall, with another bunch boosting right behind them.

The wall disappeared in a melee of sprawling humanity, that sent stones bouncing away in all directions. So simple was The Shadow's expedient that they hadn't noticed it. In supplying his last barrage of stones, he'd been picking them from one part of the wall, mostly from the bottom, leaving only a wedged framework of larger specimens. The Shadow's high-jump hadn't disturbed the fragile set-up, but the weight of his pursuers had wrecked it.

The pile-up disentangled itself into individuals who looked around for The Shadow, but couldn't find him. The moonlight seemed to quiver under the elusive mirth of a departing laugh that might have come from anywhere - or nowhere. It left the pride of Long Valley exactly one hundred percent nonplussed.

Somewhere in the gully, The Shadow overtook Harry and gave him a helping hand. He didn't ask for explanations until they neared the railroad track. As they cut through a slanted crevice in the ledge, The Shadow spoke in a hushed tone:

"Listen!"

They could hear a slow, light clatter moving away from them, but it was further up the track in the direction of the gap. Gradually it paused and stopped, whereupon The Shadow beckoned Harry in that direction. As they walked along the track, The Shadow put his queries.

Harry answered them, a bit hazily. He told of helping load the coffins; how he'd found the bloodstains on his hand. Next his trip to the depot, the hunch he had gained beside the water tower, and his discovery of the body in the baggage car. Then:

"Something grabbed me," said Harry, ruefully. "It must have popped right out of an empty coffin, because that's what my head cracked when the hands pulled me back."

"You didn't see who the something was?"

"I wish I had," responded Harry. "I was just coming out of my coma, when he shoved me off the train, along with the body. We couldn't have been going any more than twenty up that tough grade, but I went blotto again when I landed. Next thing, I was over by the stone wall. I was getting up when I heard voices, not thinking that a pack of hyenas would be after me."

The Shadow gestured for silence as they turned a curve in the tracks. They were near the gap and Harry could see a crude shack a short way up the ledge on the far side of the track. The Shadow drew him into the shelter of the ledge itself and Harry whispered the question:

"Who lives up there?"

"Old Jeb," replied The Shadow, "otherwise this wouldn't be here."

By 'this' The Shadow meant a hand-car parked on the track itself. Harry had been too interested in the shack to notice the item that was closer by.

"It belongs down near the water tower," informed The Shadow. "Didn't you see it while you were there?"

Harry shook his head.

"It must have been up here then." The Shadow pointed to a space beside the rails. "That's where Jeb usually dumps it. I've been checking on a few facts lately."

Harry was picturing Old Jeb making trips along the railroad line on the hand-car. Pumping up grade

would be slow; a slithery down trip rapid. The latter certainly fitted with The Shadow's theories regarding a murderer's departure, but Harry wasn't willing to pin those special trips on Old Jeb. Circumstantial evidence was out of Harry's category, considering his own experiences of late.

So Harry simply asked:

"Where would Old Jeb be now?"

The Shadow pointed straight up to the darkened ledge that overhung them, and Harry realized why they had slid under its shelter. A cute trick of Jeb's to leave the hand-car as bait for someone who might come along this way. It had taken The Shadow to catch on to that one.

And now The Shadow was easing Harry toward the hand-car, helping him work quietly up its side, holding him back so he wouldn't get over to the center, which Jeb could probably see from the edge of the ledge. The grade was just right for a good start back to Valley Center and Harry thought The Shadow was going to join him on the journey. Instead:

"I left Westerly over in Millwood," undertoned The Shadow. "I brought Rexford's car over the road you tried. I parked it near Grantham's, so I'll have to go back there to pick it up. You're making this trip alone - and take this with you."

From beneath his cloak, The Shadow brought something that he thrust in Harry's hand. Before Harry had time to look at it, things were happening fast. The Shadow yanked the bat to get the handcar started and Harry responded with another pump. By then, The Shadow had wheeled across the cut and was aiming an automatic at the overhanging ledge.

All The Shadow picked as a target was the edge of the ledge, but it was quite enough. As the clatter of chipping rock joined the roars of the automatic, Old Jeb made a crouched leap from the top of the ledge to reach higher ground. The Shadow had scared him right off his perch, but Jeb rallied promptly. From the hand-car, Harry saw the stooped man flatten and aim his shot-gun and the hand-car was Jeb's target.

It was too late, thanks to The Shadow. Harry's speed-wagon was taking a curve along the sharp down grade, gathering plenty of momentum. Jeb's first shot was completely out of sight behind the bend, the second sounded like a hopeless echo.

Perhaps The Shadow was telling off Old Jeb, or he might simply be letting Harry know that he, The Shadow, had not been Jeb's second target. Again, the parting mirth could be a reminder. At least Harry took it that way.

Just a reminder that The Shadow had handed Harry something before sending him on his way. Sweeping down into the patchy moonlight, Harry took a look at the object that he hadn't noticed until now.

The thing represented the last item of misplaced evidence that might mistakenly connect Harry Vincent with a crime he hadn't committed. It wasn't The Shadow's way to forget such matters even in the midst of tumult.

The Shadow had handed Harry his hat.

CHAPTER XII

"Death by misadventure!"

The coroner croaked the verdict, certified it with a rap of his gavel, and thus officially dispelled the

mystery surrounding the death of Lloyd Thurnow.

Outside the court house the news was passed to an assemblage that broke up with mutters of partial satisfaction. Farmers in hip-boots formed the major portion of the throng, and there was a certain reluctance in their manner of departure. Beside the courthouse steps, Harry Vincent was speculating on the attitude of these small land owners, when a voice drawled in his ear:

"What d'you think on't, mister?"

"Looks like they're disappointed," replied Harry without turning. "Maybe they expected the ghost of Black Arthur to show up in court."

"Heh-heh. That's a good one. Only 'tain't the right answer."

"No? Then what is?"

With the query, Harry turned and came to a rigid halt. Until that moment, he hadn't begun to guess who was speaking to him. Now Harry knew and the discovery was a bit too sudden to be discounted on the instant.

Harry was face to face with Old Jeb.

This was the first time that Harry had actually chatted with the Valley's most unseemly character.

Indeed, it was Harry's initial experience in studying Jeb eye to eye. The fellow looked shrewder than Harry had imagined, but there was a curious effect about his eyes, in the way their gaze seemed to light and fade. Old Jeb talked with those eyes - if you could understand them. The thing was so phenomenal that it held Harry speechless.

Maybe Jeb didn't notice Harry's mood; then again, he might have. Those flickers of Jeb's eyes kept an observer guessing, whether or not Jeb himself intended it. Harry found himself trying to decide whether the stooped man knew everything or nothing about affairs in Long Valley.

Henley Grantham had said that Old Jeb kept his findings to himself and Harry found himself crediting the statement. Though Jeb was at this moment garrulous, his discussion concerned matters that were common property, had Harry chosen to inquire around town.

"Black Arthur don't bother 'em," stated Jeb. It being his turn to speak, he rode over Harry's silence, though it was almost a certainty that Jeb had noticed it.

"They say they seen him up near Ragged Rock t'other evening, rolling round stones the way he used to do with bowling balls over yonder on the village green. Didn't the coroner say nothing on't?"

Not wanting to stop Jeb's flow of words, Harry simply shook his head.

"Guess the coroner knowed better," decided Jeb. "'Tain't sound judgment to plague Black Arthur, not in this here Valley. But the death bell is diff'rent. 'Twarn't Black Arthur who rung it first, leastwise not while he was alive, and any rate the bell don't belong around the place he cares about."

Old Jeb shifted his hunting bag, adjusted a dead rabbit that was hanging over the edge beside the pronged stick, and crooked his shot-gun further under his arm. About to turn away, he tapped Harry on the shoulder and gave a gesture toward the departing farmers.

"What I was going to say," declared Jeb, "was that them fellows has been hunting up by Half Dome.

Whether Venner put 'em to it - or Rexford - what they was doing was looking for the big bell. Mebbe it was their own notion, only they hain't found no bell. Won't, nuther, I reckon."

With a chortle meant for himself alone, Old Jeb sauntered off toward the depot, where the noon train was soon due. Feeling that this warranted a report, Harry went to the real estate office, where he found Cranston alone.

Calmly non-committal, Cranston heard the details of Harry's interview with Jeb, then gestured to the large map on the table. He was ready to discuss some angles on Thurnow's death, which had occurred two nights ago, there having been a one day postponement of the coroner's inquest.

"You have provided a vital fact, Vincent," complimented Cranston. "Unlike the case of Ferris, which was direct and well established, Thurnow's death involves a complexity which the county authorities have completely overlooked. They take it that Thurnow met disaster near the spot where they found him, whereas we know that he was murdered here in town."

"Probably in the undertaker's back room," added Harry, "or am I getting too far ahead?"

"You're going too far back, I'm referring to the time, not the room. What we must trace are the subsequent actions of the killer."

"All right, chief. He slugged me in the baggage car, pitched me off with Thurnow's body, and probably carried us each by each, over to the old cellar pit."

"Are you sure?" There was a penetrating stare to Cranston's eyes. "Couldn't the killer have marched you ahead of him while he was carrying Thurnow's body?"

Harry met Cranston's probing eyes. They had a probing power that was reputed to cloud men's minds, but in Harry's case they stirred vague recollections into actualities. Under that sway, Harry began to speak as a hypnotic subject would, while Cranston, leaning closer, provided the basic promptings that went with this simple but effective display of awakening memory through suggestion.

"I was getting up," declared Harry. "Getting up from hands and knees."

Eyes fixed, Harry stooped and circled his right hand just above the floor. His left hand went to the side of his head and rested there. Cranston's voice came steadily:

"You are feeling something with your right hand -"

"Yes," broke in Harry. "It is smooth and cold. It is stone, in layers - the ledge beside the railway tracks."

"And your head hurts you -"

"Yes. My shoulder, too." Harry gave a hunch, and winced. "I hit it when he pitched me out. There's something poking in my back." Harry arched painfully; "It feels like a gun. The voice is speaking to me."

"And telling you -"

"Telling me to keep moving. We're going through the gully." Harry's feet were marking time. "Now he's stopping me; he's dropping something down there, behind me." Harry pointed backward to the floor. "Something heavy into somewhere deep. Now we're moving again" - Harry's legs were labored, as though going up a slope "and he's telling me to stop beside the wall -"

Breaking off, Harry gave a groan as he planted both hands to his head. His manner was a perfect

imitation of a man receiving a hard blow at the back of the skull. Cranston caught Harry as he swayed, gave a finger-snap in front of his subject's eyes. Coming out of his partial trance, Harry blinked at the daylight.

"Did I remember?" he inquired. "Remember enough?"

"More than enough," nodded Cranston. "I was right. The killer only needed one trip to dump Thurnow's body and march you up along the stone wall. That settles the time element."

"How so?"

"About ten minutes between the tolling of the bell and the departure of the train. Eight more for the trip up grade. Five minutes to carry the body and march you over here" - Cranston drew a short line that indicated the gully's position on the map - "but only three to get back to the tracks. At most four minutes for a flying trip down grade, on the hand-car."

"That adds up to thirty," acknowledged Harry, "but I think some fractions could be clipped here and there."

"We don't need them. A half an hour was enough. I checked the railway time table against the time sheet at the movie theater. The second feature ended twenty minutes after the train pulled out of town and that allows the necessary margin before the time when people started to the slope."

"That's right. Shirley said it took her a couple of minutes to realize what had happened; then she went to the library and told her uncle. He went right to his car and they started for the slope. That cracked the ice; the rest of the town followed."

Anxious to tear down the riddle further, Harry began to think in terms of suspects. He found himself picturing a pair of scales that were wavering badly toward the wrong side. Harry exclaimed suddenly:

"Old Jeb!"

"As the murderer?" queried Cranston. "Just why?"

"Because he's the only person who could have done it. He could have come back here on the hand-car to fix an alibi, then finding everybody gone from town, he pumped back up to his shack."

"Rather foolish, wouldn't it be?"

"It fits Jeb though. At least it could fit him" - Harry paused to consider - "but I wouldn't be sure. He may be as smart as he looks dumb, or vice versa."

"What about Venner or Rexford?"

"They're out, both of them. If either of them came back to town on the hand-car, how could they have gotten up to the slope the way they did? Venner was ahead of everybody, so I've heard, and Rexford arrived mighty quick without a car."

"That's right."

Cranston's smile told more. He waited for Harry to catch its full import and the wait wasn't long.

"What a dope I am!" exclaimed Harry. "This hand-car stuff may be just a side issue. Why, neither Venner nor Rexford has a real alibi at all, any more than they had when Ferris was knocked off. They were both on the ground before Thurnow's body was found. It's a toss-up between them."

"Which would you pick as the murderer?"

Harry couldn't answer. This was one of those heads and tails affairs where the coin hadn't stopped spinning. However, Harry was certain of one thing. He could understand why even The Shadow was forced to leave a mystery in abeyance. Plausibly, it lay between two men, but one would have to be made to show his hand.

"We have not exhausted the possibilities," said Cranston. "Nor even the probabilities. If we consider these murders from the standpoint of motive, we find Venner and Rexford deadlocked. That would seem to cancel them out, but if one is the murderer, he would be clever enough to play for such a stalemate. When guilt wavers between two men, both are as safe as a person lost in a multitude."

As Cranston finished, Rexford appeared on the sidewalk, accompanied by Westerly. Seeing Cranston, Rexford gave an annoyed glance toward Harry, which signified that Rexford wanted to talk to Cranston alone. Taking the hint, Harry picked up his hat and left. Outside, he turned directly toward the library.

It was too early to find Grantham there, but perhaps Luther could supply some local data that would be helpful. Harry Vincent was determined to do his part toward cracking the deadlock that double crime had produced.

CHAPTER XIII

Luther wasn't at his desk in the library. Usually he stayed there all day, occasionally munching crackers and drinking milk that he kept under the circular counter, but Luther now could afford the luxury of a lunch hour.

The reason was he had a new assistant to take over in his place. Perched in Luther's usual seat, Harry Vincent saw Margo Lane. For someone who had just come on the job, she looked unusually smart, but that was Margo's way.

"Good morning, Lady," said Harry, removing his hat with a bow. "I'm a stranger in town and would like to know what's going on."

"You mean the local rumors?" queried Margo. "I can give you all of them. Opinion is divided among the grange members. Half of the farmers think that Venner killed Ferris out of sheer spite and then got rid of his own man, Thurnow, just to cover up. What stimulates that notion is that Thurnow might have proven to be a boomerang to Venner, if Thurnow found the soil too good."

"Nice going," complimented Harry. "What does the other half think?"

"They say Rexford did both jobs. He eradicated Ferris just to throw some blame on Venner; then was smart enough to figure Venner would be accused of anything else, including Thurnow's death. In technical terms, Rexford was playing one ahead."

"You must have been reading the galley proofs of next week's local newspaper."

"Think so?" Margo leaned forward confidentially. "Then get this, because it won't be in print. Whatever their convictions, all farmers who own land up on the slope are going to peddle it to Rexford, right quick."

"You mean they're in favor of his project?"

"Project nothing. They're in favor of themselves. There isn't a man in this Valley who hasn't kept the first dollar he ever stole. Hard cash is their great love, because it's hard to get. Now it's coming easy."

Harry was really astounded at the surety with which Margo tossed off all this information.

"Black Arthur won't care," continued Margo. "They think his ghost is on their side, anyway. They saw his ghost two nights ago, and a few say another spook was with him, probably one of the good old gang."

"You mean they believe the ghost stuff?"

"Why not? It's been going on a long while. Everybody in this county not only believes in ghosts, but sees them. Particularly Old Jeb."

"Where have you been getting all this?"

"From Luther, of course," laughed Margo. "It was my morning's lesson in becoming assistant librarian."

"But Luther is deaf. How does he hear all these rumors?"

"He sees them. Practices his lip-reading by long-range vision. People don't mind speaking out when Luther is around. If they only knew!"

"And why does he unload it on you?"

"Because Mr. Grantham gets bored. Whenever he comes in, Luther starts feeding the current gossip and that keeps Grantham from his research."

"Why doesn't he tell Luther off?"

"Try to tell Luther off! He just looks the other way. He's mean, Luther is, in a nice sort of way. He gets Grantham interested by talking about old records and then shovels the modern dirt. Luther admitted it when I asked him, so I forgave him."

It was dawning on Harry that Margo was already becoming the best undercover threat in Valley Center. At that, he'd only heard the first part of it.

"Among the lesser of my future duties," declared Margo, "will be the privilege of reading to Old Jeb from the one and only book that interests him. It deals with divining rods."

"Divining rods?"

"Yes, like the forked stick that Jeb carries in his hunting bag. He has a whole collection of them."

"So that's what I thought was a sling-shot!" exclaimed Harry. "I get it now. The thing is one of those willow sticks that crazy chaps like Jeb carry around by the handles, figuring that the thick end will point to underground water."

Margo shook her head sadly.

"Willow isn't the best," she declared. "Old Jeb prefers hazel, or did when he looked for water. But he's gone way past that stage now."

"What's he after - gold?"

"Of course, though he's told Luther he'd settle for silver. Every night before Christmas, Jeb goes out and cuts a new divining rod from a tree of one year's growth and uses it for his next year's model."

"From what kind of tree?"

"Jeb has been trying different species, but so far they haven't brought the jackpot. The charm won't work if you cut more than one, so his quota is limited to a unit a year when he follows that system. He told Luther he's giving it up. Jeb's latest rod is his own notion."

"The one he carries now?"

"Yes. He cut it from a tree called ironwood, which is as tough as it sounds. Jeb figures it really has iron in it, on account of the name. Iron and gold both being metals, this job ought to bring results."

"Is that in the book?"

"No, indeed. But if you want to see the book, it's on the third shelf, two sections from the left, in the next to the last bookcase in the stack room. The ninth book from the end, with a blue buckram cover."

Harry went to find the book. It was an interesting old volume entitled "The Divining Rod and Its Accomplishments Through the Ages," so Harry tossed his hat on a hook in the vestibule and sat down at a reading desk. He was deep in the lore of divining rods, when he heard mingled voices from the main reading room. Putting the book aside, Harry went out and found Margo chatting with both Luther and Grantham, who had arrived together.

"I'm not interested in the dispute," Grantham was declaring. "Venner wants to control the present farmers like a lot of share-croppers. Rexford intends to fill the Valley with a lot of settlers from the city. Let them fight it out between themselves."

"It will ruin Long Valley," warned Luther, "unless someone takes control."

"The Valley is ruined already," returned Grantham, ruefully. "I am interested in it as it was, not as it will be. Why should I become the butt of both factions?"

"The farmers must trust you," put in Margo, "so I think the new settlers would."

"You seem to know a great deal, young lady." Grantham curbed his anger with a smile. "A great deal for someone who only arrived this morning."

"It only took me that long to trust you," smiled Margo in return, "so that ought to convince you."

"A good argument, if nothing else," conceded Grantham, with a bow. Then, to Luther, he said: "But why all these rumors about drafting me as arbiter, while both Venner and Rexford are determined to run things separately?"

Luther stroked his chin. He had been reading the desire from many lips, but so far hadn't learned the underlying facts. Luther was a better snooper than an analyst. As Luther's echo, Margo couldn't supply the answer either, but Harry felt that he had learned enough to give an opinion.

"Venner is losing his hold on the Valley," Harry told Grantham. "But Rexford can't go through with his project without a water supply. The farmers are afraid that everything will fall half-way and the same will apply to project partners like myself. Somebody will have to take over if this feud between Venner and Rexford continues."

"Feud?" queried Grantham sharply. "You hold them responsible for these recent murders?"

"I wouldn't say that," rejoined Harry. "But those victims wouldn't have come to town if the dispute hadn't started. Next thing, it will spread to a war between farmers and project partners, unless some compromise is reached."

Shouts were coming from the village green, and in the outcry the name "Grantham" sounded like a chant. Stepping out through the door, Grantham received waves and cheers from a gathering crowd of villagers. Joining the group were Venner and Rexford, each with a few friends, both apparently feeling that it would be good policy to accept the local sentiment.

Seeing Cranston near the flank that included Rexford, Harry decided to join him and help the cause. Soon, Harry was looking over shoulders to see Rexford moving toward Grantham, who was now in the center of the throng. With him, Rexford was drawing Westerly, the portly man who had visited Millwood two days ago. From the other side, Venner approached, bringing a companion who had a long, thin face that ended in a blocky jaw.

"Caleb Jarrock," identified Cranston in an undertone. "He's the second largest landowner in these parts."

"You mean outside of Venner?"

"Yes, and outside of Long Valley. Jarrock happens to own the timberland that supplies the big mill over at Millwood, as well as an interest in the mill itself. Westerly was trying to meet him the other day, but Jarrock wouldn't see him."

"You mean Westerly wants to buy out Jarrock?"

"Yes, to help Rexford's project. Meanwhile Venner is offering inducements to Jarrock to keep things as they are. As long as the mill stays in business, Pleasant Lake can not be acquired as a reservoir for Long Valley."

Apparently something was in progress, for Henley Grantham was starting toward the Valley House along with Venner, Rexford, and their respective satellites. Watching them go, Cranston spoke to Harry in an even tone:

"That conference should mark the end of trouble in this Valley. Instead, it may mean the real beginning!"

CHAPTER XIV

It was all settled very nicely, so nicely that it wasn't settled at all. High above Long Valley, Ragged Rock seemed to gloat over the confusion it had caused.

Always, Ragged Rock was the dominating factor, dwarfing the schemes of little men. Every day, at noon, its fateful shadows would begin to creep, filling first the crannies that lay under the great crag's bulges; darkening next the rough base of the great rock; finally spreading with that jagged, ever-speeding pattern that all men feared.

Formerly, villagers had ventured toward the Rock before the hour of noon. Now old incidents were being broached: how, during a previous generation, some boys had fallen while trying to scale the cliff, late in the morning when the Rock was not taboo. The answer had come to light after many years; the boys must have wiggled beneath some overhanging chunk of stone and therewith tasted the effects of the baleful shadow.

Similarly, night-time was no longer safe. Recently, the ghost of Black Arthur and a henchman had been seen by moonlight, but this was nothing novel. Often in past years, such ghosts had been reported, and they were always proof that the power of Ragged Rock was to manifest itself with a recurrence of its curse.

No longer would a native of Long Valley venture within a mile of Ragged Rock, even at the crack of

dawn.

Margo Lane was hearing this chit-chat from the gossipy lips of Luther. Meanwhile, Harry Vincent was getting the other side of it from Shirley Grantham. They were meeting down town every afternoon, and in the evenings Harry sometimes called at the house. Shirley had asked her uncle about the legends and he attributed them to the same old cause: mass hysteria.

Grantham's theories were beginning to hit on all cylinders. Old legends that he thought were buried completely in forgotten records were cropping up from nowhere. Even his explanation of the mystery bell was established, for not a shred of evidence had been gained in the vicinity of Half Dome.

Grantham had modified his theory as follows - Either the imaginary clanging of the bell was spread through the terror that persons saw when viewing one another's faces; or the sound was real, but an unexplained natural phenomenon that somehow had been coincidental with death.

No longer could Grantham remain puzzled because he had not heard the bell while in the research vault, because Shirley had also failed to hear it while concentrated upon the Western picture at the local movie theater, and the same applied to the entire audience.

Grantham intended to make further research on the subject, but he was too busy with his present task of smoothing the rift between two factions. So Shirley was doing the work for him, not in the old record vault, but upstairs in the stack room, where the books on psychology were kept.

It was there that Harry found Shirley on this particular afternoon. She was in a corner of the reading room, sorting a few books that lay on a bottom shelf, flush with the floor. She had chosen this bookcase because most of its shelves were empty and she could lay odd volumes on them.

"How is your uncle making out?" inquired Harry. "In the business of making everybody happy, I mean."

"They're giving him the run-around," returned Shirley, "if you know what I mean."

"I don't - at least not entirely."

"Well, he's become the messenger boy between Venner and Rexford, who just won't speak to each other. They watch each other, though, like hawks, and then expect Uncle Henley to tell them what the other was up to."

"How about Jarrock and Westerly?"

"They're just a couple of eggs," defined Shirley. "Hawk's eggs, that are likely to hatch. They'll be checking on each other next, my uncle says."

Harry nodded at that plausibility. Then:

"Rexford has bought up a great lot of options," he declared. "If this thing fizzes, they won't be worth a nickel on the dollar."

"I know it," returned Shirley. "Uncle Henley is afraid that Venner is counting on buying them up cheap."

"Not Venner," said Harry. "The farmers wouldn't let him have them." Harry didn't add that this was Cranston's opinion. "The thing would just simmer into a local land company that would mean nothing."

"Nothing except more trouble for my uncle," put in Shirley, bitterly. "Do you know what he has to do this afternoon? Drive all the way around Pleasant Lake, to estimate just how good a reservoir it would be."

Why, he won't get back until midnight!"

Mention of the reservoir was important to Harry, who was carrying on for Cranston, while the latter was in New York. Since Cranston was due back on the noon train, which was to arrive shortly, Harry was anxious to snap up any last bits of valuable information.

"Do you mean Jarrock may be going to sell the mill to Westerly, so the lake will be free for other use?"

"Of course not," returned Shirley. "Rexford is just trying to force the issue. Venner knows it and thinks its grand because he knows it's just a waste of time. Between them, they're sending Uncle Henley on a wild-goose chase."

The noon train must have arrived during this conversation, for footsteps suddenly introduced Cranston. Coming through the stack room, he nodded to Shirley and asked where her uncle was. Learning that Grantham had probably started for Pleasant Lake by this time, Cranston remarked, a bit disappointed:

"I suppose I'll have to look through the records myself then. I'd hoped he could find the ones I wanted. Some of the old title deeds may be helpful in solving this Valley project. After all, if Rexford wants me to invest in land, I should first learn if he's buying it from those who really own it."

Harry suggested lunch, which pleased Shirley, so they accompanied Cranston to the desk in the big reading room, where Margo handed Cranston the key to the research vault. Cranston went downstairs and Harry began looking over the old volumes of Shakespeare which occupied a wide shelf, while Margo and Shirley held a conversation.

They were getting along nobly, these girls, too nobly to suit Harry. Finding that their conversation deepened after the five minute mark, Harry interrupted it and reminded Shirley about lunch.

"Luther will be back shortly," said Shirley. "Then Margo can go with us. Can't Shakespeare hold you that long?"

"Why not get your hat?" queried Margo. "You'll forget it like you always do and have to come running back for it."

Harry went through the stack room to the vestibule where he had left his hat. Returning, he heard a low call from the corner by the empty bookcase and saw Cranston standing there. Before Harry could put any questions of his own, Cranston was asking him what had developed lately, outside of Grantham's coming trip to Pleasant Lake.

Briefly, Harry recounted his own findings as supplemented by Shirley's statements.

Cranston's eyes became strangely distant.

"The curse may strike again, very soon," spoke Cranston, as though his distant gaze pictured the growing gloom from Ragged Rock. "Something will have to break the tension in Long Valley."

"Rexford and Venner are playing for big stakes," agreed Harry. "It's a question which would take the risk."

"Only one could afford to take it," supplemented Cranston. "The one who deals in murder, under the shelter of superstition. That is, if either Rexford or Venner happens to be the man responsible."

Harry gave a troubled nod.

"I've lost sight of Old Jeb entirely," Harry was forced to admit. "He hasn't been using the handcar, because it's over by the station. But where he's keeping himself, I really don't know. He hasn't even been in to look at his book."

Seeing Cranston's eyebrows raise in interest, Harry found the book on divining rods and brought it. As Cranston started to turn the pages, Margo's voice called that she was ready to go to lunch. Harry called back that he'd be right there. Cranston's hand restrained him as he turned.

"Burbank is in town," said Cranston, quietly. "He came on the train with me."

Knowing Burbank to be a vital cog in The Shadow's machine of human assistants, Harry was immediately intrigued. Both as a contact agent and a technician, Burbank usually figured when The Shadow had some special plan.

"Take these." Cranston handed two watches to Harry. "They are synchronized to the fraction of a second. Give one to Margo and keep the other for yourself."

"You have a third?"

"Yes, and Burbank has a fourth. You are going to Old Jeb's shack. Margo will stay here at the library. Burbank's post will be the highway junction on the eastern slope."

"And where will you be?"

"At the other extremity of the Valley," replied Cranston, calmly. "Somewhere near the top of Ragged Rock."

At that moment, Margo repeated her impatient lunch call and its very significance helped hold Harry aghast. That call meant that it was already afternoon, when any spot on the sheer but rugged face of Ragged Rock might be a pocket of doom-filled gloom. Either as himself or The Shadow, Lamont Cranston intended to defy the mighty curse!

"Whoever has revived the legend," asserted Cranston, calmly, "can not afford to neglect it. Death must be attempted and at a time when the bell is ready to ring. How closely those two are related is something we must learn. Therefore I have decided to challenge the curse, in the hope, that it will fail."

Dangerous though the decision was, Harry recognized that Cranston's choice was right. Knowing too that Rexford, Venner, and Jeb were all present in the Valley, but unaccounted for, Harry saw that Cranston's plan might logically reveal the murderer. But there was something far more certain in the air.

"Those watches have stop-hands," said Cranston, "When we four hear the toll of death, we must immediately time its strokes to the exact instant and keep precise check. From our results, we can triangulate to the exact spot from which the sound comes."

"With four lines to work from," nodded Harry, "we'll have it right to the dot."

"Three are sufficient for a perfect triangulation," remarked Cranston. "Of course a fourth would be more than helpful - or should I say, less than fatal?"

Cranston gave a parting smile as he waved Harry on his way to the luncheon date. That smile was a last reminder that Lamont Cranston was soon to face a threat which no man had ever been known to survive!

CHAPTER XV

A transformation was under way within the thickening gloom that fronted Ragged Rock. A half hour before a man had strolled openly into that fatal area, after making sure that no ordinary observers were nearby, a thing that was almost foregone.

The Shadow didn't want it noised among the farmers that one of their number had seen Lamont Cranston defy the curse. In entering this realm of doom as Cranston, The Shadow had done so purely for the benefit of one specific man, the unknown murderer whose nefarious business required him to keep check on this sector.

So far, no doom.

Therefore The Shadow was becoming himself.

Among a cluster of curious rock formations, The Shadow was putting on a black cloak and a slouch hat that more or less merged him with the base of Ragged Rock. A geologist would have found this interesting terrain, considering the size of the odd-shaped rocks.

From their shape, they looked like mushrooms that had sprouted overnight, from an uneven surface of similar rock. Some of the formations were broken, but whether they had fallen from their own sheer weight, or had been knocked apart by loose rock falling from the cliff above, was a question that might have been answered both ways.

The rough ground led upward and The Shadow was forced to move through narrow channels formed by the base rock. Those were the times he blended with the gloom, so smoothly that eyes could never have detected him. Then, coming, into wider spaces, The Shadow would reappear again, with gray rock as the background. Always, however, he avoided the squatty formations, some as high as a dozen feet that looked ready to topple on the slightest pretext.

Some of these mounds were so cracked that they looked like piled-up slabs and often the largest specimens were on the top. Then, in contrast, there would be jagged stones close by, pinnacles formed from the gray-streaked stone that formed the foundation of Ragged Rock itself.

It was probable that few men had ever ventured up this preliminary slope where, by their very structure, the vast stones seemed to shout "Beware!" It wouldn't take the curse of Black Arthur to bring disaster to an unwary prowler. The Shadow discovered that, when he picked steep short cuts up slanted surfaces, instead of going around by narrow alleys in the irregular crust. Often, in gripping a stony projection, he would feel it yield, so he was careful not to depend on any hold until he tested it.

Looking back after a climb of a few hundred feet, The Shadow saw that his vertical progress had not been great. Rather he had ascended a series of giant steps, streaked with zigzag pathways leading past the curious clumps of piled and tilted stones. Here and even higher there were little patches of soil among the fissures, from which hardy shrubs sprouted. Among the rocks, The Shadow could see sizeable clusters of such vegetation.

The rough-hewn, natural pathways widened frequently into redans forming walled open-spaces that looked like crude fortifications. Small wonder that Black Arthur and his outlaw band had chosen this terrain. Not only could they beat a perpetual retreat up among these rocks; the loose stones would have served them as missiles to hurl down at pursuers.

Indeed, from this level, The Shadow could see an over-abundance of such stones down at the bottom, some so close that they could not have been pitched from a great height, or they would have bounded further. Out beyond that rocky debris was the rough but turfy ground where the lines of permanent boulders were stationed; past that ring lay the undulating slope itself, rolling down toward Valley Center.

All this rock, viewed from the Valley, looked like a portion of the crag itself. Only by a personal visit had The Shadow been able to check the true formation; at that, it was not too clearly visible, because already the gloom from Ragged Rock was laying its thick apron past the boulder line.

Actually on the face of the cliff, The Shadow dug his fingers into deep cracks and took toe-holds with his soft-tipped shoes. Though his progress was now slower, he gained elevation much more rapidly, until he came to a bulging bunch of cliff that formed a literal umbrella above him.

Instead of grabbing for the edge, as he would have clutched a cornice, The Shadow worked around the bulge. Slanting back again, he came to the top of the thrusting rock, paused there and exerted pressure on the edge. A treacherous chunk broke loose and The Shadow watched it float straight downward; striking a hundred feet below, it bobbed into one of the pathways, skewed off at an angle, struck a block of wall and scudded in the opposite direction.

It was like a giant game of the sort seen at a country fair, dropping the rock to find the right pocket. If The Shadow had trusted to that chunk, he would have found himself part of the game, but he wouldn't have counted, not being able to bounce and zigzag like a piece of rock.

The fall of the missile and its subsequent clatter sent up a curious echo that died with a suppressed gasp. The foot of Ragged Rock had a way of hushing up whatever happened in its grim preserves.

Continuing his climb, The Shadow made another survey after the next hundred feet. Here the whole foot of the huge cliff could be seen in one wide sweep. Thanks to the gray hue, The Shadow could see the streaky slants that made paths, with their widened junctions. They looked level from this altitude, but having cut across their zigzags, The Shadow knew that they occupied at least the height of a three-story building, perhaps more.

The reason for the last-named amendment was the fact that The Shadow had to no degree explored those numerous by-paths, which formed a veritable maze. Some one familiar with that walled labyrinth could make a rapid trip from one sector to another, whereas a stranger could become lost among its tricky branches. This was something to be remembered for a future investigation.

Chiefly, The Shadow was interested in looking back to see if anyone had followed him. As for his hat and cloak, they were necessary accoutrements on this climb against the face of the darkened cliff. Below, as Cranston, The Shadow could have taken refuge first among boulders, later amid the rock strata. Up here, he would be an open target for rifle fire, if visible.

Still, The Shadow was hoping that someone would try it. Occasionally, he kicked a loose bit of stone down to the bottom and watched it play "Pigs in Clover" in the giant's pin-game at the bottom. Those were bait to bring out a marksman, who if he did appear, would be a murderer crawling from beneath his stone. If Old Jeb showed up with his shot-gun, for example, he would prove himself the culprit that The Shadow wanted. For it was a verdict absolute that no one belonging in Long Valley should venture into the rock shadow that now was sweeping wide.

Only a murderer had done so. Hence, The Shadow was safely beyond gun range of anyone else. With jutting batches of stone always handy, he was ready at any moment to find a fox hole on the face of the crag itself!

There wasn't a trace of motion below, so The Shadow straightened for the last long lap to the summit of the crag.

It was hard going near the top, enough to demand The Shadow's complete concentration. Time was becoming short, as the cloaked climber could tell by the glances that he gave toward the wide-spreading

shadow below him, which had familiar markings transforming it into a tremendous sundial.

Most conspicuous of those markings was the Grantham house, down toward the fork. Though it didn't represent the extremity that the umbra reached, it tallied approximately with the hour-mark at which the fatal tocsin had twice rung. The circling spread, moving faster and faster, was sweeping rapidly toward Grantham's.

Up past the last bulge of crag, The Shadow reached the summit. The sunset struck him with a mighty burst and coming to his feet upon the top-most pinnacle, The Shadow formed a figure that might well have represented Black Arthur. To be seen here wouldn't matter; indeed would only add zest to the local legend, for the peak was not within the forbidden shade of Ragged Rock.

Off to the west, The Shadow could see Pleasant Lake, with its river forming a ribbon down through Sunken Swamp, behind Ragged Rock. Though the slope was much less steep in that direction, the swamp banked right up to it, forming an immense quagmire that the road from Pleasant Lake skirted far on the other side in order to reach Millwood. So sodden was the swamp, its depth established by the tree branches barely poking from its bubbling ooze, that it formed an impassable obstacle for anyone who might wish to scale Ragged Rock from the easier side.

Turning toward Long Valley, The Shadow saw the time-mark edging against Grantham's house. Scanning the ground rapidly but keenly, he saw nothing that resembled motion until he had worked into the line of boulders. Dark though it was, that ground did not blot off The Shadow's vision.

Like ants from a hill, two tiny figures wiggled into being. Curious things that paused to move their hands as insects would their feelers. Funny creatures, working around the boulders, from a few hundred yards apart, toward what would prove a focal point among the zig-zag pathways at the base of Ragged Rock.

Watch in hand, The Shadow eyed them. They were human, those pygmy things, but they were primitive in action. They were stalking each other in that weird terrain that lay before The Shadow like a gameboard!

No longer did The Shadow need to count himself as prey. His work lay below, not here upon the summit. The Shadow took one long steady look toward Half Dome, toward the north, saw that the spaces were vacant between the bare trees that topped that lower summit.

Then, swiftly, the cloaked shape vanished from the jutting peak of Ragged Rock. Starting down the dangerous cliff, The Shadow was beginning a descent that he knew would prove a race with death!

CHAPTER XVI

The clang of the great bell almost lifted Margo from her perch behind the library desk. She threw a frantic glance toward Luther who was rearranging books along the shelf. Loud, penetrating though the alarm was, Luther didn't hear it.

Margo looked at her hand and found she had the stop-watch in it. Not only that, she'd started it going, and by the seconds it was clicking off, she could tell the exact moment when she's first heard the clang.

It was just the result of practice that Margo had been doing all afternoon. Harry had told her that the bell would startle her if it tolled, so Margo had trained herself for the situation. But the word 'startle' in Margo's vocabulary was far short of an adequate definition of the sensation she experienced.

Over at Jeb's shack, Harry was realizing that himself, as he ticked the fateful moments of the bell's brief but horrendous repeats. In this locale, where the echoes were fostered, the clangs came with a powerful

smash that quivered the ledge above the railway cut. Nevertheless Harry kept tabbing them steadily while he felt the atmosphere chill around him.

Nothing ever jolted Burbank. Away down on the eastern slope, the proprietor of a lunch stand was standing with a wide mouth that could have swallowed the batch of hot-dogs sizzling on his griddle. His few customers were riveted in varying positions, with one exception. He was a man who sat with his back toward the rest, munching a hamburger as he stared through the window toward the highway junction. Nobody saw his face, nor could they see the stop-watch that his hidden hand was operating under his other elbow.

Maybe a stranger could be excused, though the brazen throat of that horror bell should have jarred him on its own sour merits. Everybody else knew that something terrible must have happened within the pale of Ragged Rock.

They were wrong.

If anything, the bell had postponed disaster. From a spot near the crag, The Shadow could see two figures halted by their boulders. They were petrified, gazing toward the north, and from that attitude, The Shadow knew that they heard the death clarion. It was too late for him to use his stop-watch, even if he wanted to waste time with it.

At this great height, The Shadow had not heard the dooming bell.

There was a short laugh, from the figure on the cliff, as he made mental note of that fact. Then, to speed his descent, The Shadow took a short but hair-raising slide to a knob below, grabbing it before he pitched from its outward bulge. The rock broke, but in clawing the remainder, The Shadow managed a side fling that slid him to another bulge, where luck was better. Dangling by his finger tips, The Shadow kicked into a toe-hold. Hanging almost upside down, he worked to the safety of a perpendicular stretch.

Even The Shadow didn't care to try that stunt again, though he did manage to speed his trip by occasional slanting slides. More than half way down, he found a wedge in the rock and paused there for a look below. He wanted to find the quickest course, but he included the two men in his survey.

The big bell had ceased minutes ago. That was apparent from the actions of the men. Curiously, each appeared to be the victim who somehow had escaped the toll of death, for both seemed emboldened by the existing situation. They had dodged up past the boulders and were now among the zig-zag paths, pausing, listening, then making quick stalks for each other.

This sort of thing could help The Shadow's purpose. Counting on the pair blowing cold when the going became too hot, The Shadow bent his complete effort to the descent into the thickening darkness. Looking below would be useless, very soon, the way the gloom was growing.

Just as The Shadow reached the top of the zig-zag steps, the climax came. The light of an early-rising moon showed the two men against the grayish rock, though they were too vague, still too far off to be identified.

They were moving into one of those walled spaces that formed a small redoubt. As their background, they had one of the mushroom-shaped tumuli, that listed from the lower side of the meeting ground. As they confronted each other, The Shadow drew an automatic, to pepper long-range shots about them and halt whatever thoughts of violence either or both might hold.

At that moment, one man halted; with a shout, he pointed frantically toward the bulky lump of stones. The other swung to look up at it, then changed his mind. His falter was just the wrong duration. Down

from the pile came the tipped top slab, to strike the head and shoulders of the man who hesitated. He crumpled like something made of clay.

Away from the far side of clattering stone mound went a stooped figure that reached a downward fissure. The Shadow caught only a fleeting glimpse of the murderer who had crushed one victim, but the man who had cried the warning had seen the killer earlier. Taking advantage of his angle, he bounded down the zig-zag path to intercept the stooped man. Both were gone from sight as The Shadow cleared the first rough ground that intervened.

Before The Shadow could even view the fighters, their battle was finished. A gun stabbed from the hidden pathway, with three staccato shots. Only for an instant did The Shadow see a figure reel back up from the path, then go plunging forward out of sight. Another victim had been added.

It took The Shadow a few too many minutes to reach the murder area. The zig-zags were too round-about and tricky, so he kept clambering over the intervening humps, but found them to be delaying hazards. At last he reached the first victim and in a glance identified him. The rock had crushed the back of the man's head but left his face intact.

The victim was Caleb Jarrock, the long-jawed man from Millwood. Instantly, The Shadow could name the other, by his recollection of their varying proportions. Approximately Jarrock's height, but pudgier, the second man, the second victim must have been James Westerly, the prospective buyer of the mill.

Neither of these had rated as the hidden murderer who lurked in the shelter of Ragged Rock whenever he felt his presence needed. The thing now was to locate Westerly's body and pick up the killer's trail from there.

Like the spirit of Black Arthur, The Shadow made a swift glide down the path that angled from this open space. Ten yards below, he stopped short at junction with another fissure. This was where Westerly's body should be, but it was no longer there. The murderer had taken it with him.

Once that same killer had lugged another body - Thurnow's - with a very definite purpose. This case was different, and how different, The Shadow immediately understood. Its necessity had turned the advantage against the murderer, giving The Shadow an even better trail.

To over-take a footloose fugitive could be difficult. To stalk a man who had a heavy burden should be difficult. The only advantage that the murderer might have, was his knowledge of the broad maze among the rocks, but The Shadow was too keen to try a blind trail.

Instead, The Shadow made a quick reversal, He picked the nearest spot up toward the cliff from which he could view the full array of labyrinthine paths. The few minutes needed to reach that spot were worth it - or should have been.

Once there, The Shadow turned and faced the moonlight. His gaze quickly swept the outer ground to make sure his man had not gone that way. That settled, The Shadow studied the maze. Every path was visible from here, except for a few blind spots, but nowhere was the burdened killer visible!

Was he lurking behind some mound of rock?

That question would soon be settled. Considerable time had elapsed since two victims had heard the tolling of the great bell that meant death for both. The menace of the circling blackness was past, for moonlight now reigned full. Cars had stopped on the old roads, and men from Valley Center were pouring up the slope.

Keeping tally on the blind spots in the maze, The Shadow crouched beneath a blackening bulge and saw the searchers reach the zig-zag passages, after finding nothing in the boulder area. They were spread wide, when a shout announced the discovery of Jarrock's body. Immediately, the rest began to turn that way and in threading mistaken routes, they passed through every one of the vital spots that The Shadow could not see.

Killer and victim had really disappeared!

CHAPTER XVII

It was midnight and the last of the searchers were returning from the slope, stopping at Grantham's house for the coffee that Shirley and Margo were pouring freely. The Valley men were hard to stir to wrath, but their mutters were becoming ugly. Between times, Shirley kept hoping that her uncle would be home soon, to halt the rising tide of something very serious. Margo could have answered that Cranston could do the same, wherever he was, but silence seemed the best course.

At last the door opened to admit two men whose arrival made both girls grateful. One was Henley Grantham, the other Harry Vincent. They told their story over the coffee cups.

"We met up among the rocks," declared Grantham. "Odd that I should first run into Vincent, because I wanted to tell him that I'd tried the road through the notch, just because he said it could be done. I thought it would save me time, because I wouldn't have to go way around by Millwood."

"Why didn't you drive in here?" asked Shirley. "Or couldn't you drive past the cars that blocked the old road?"

"I couldn't drive past anything," snorted Grantham. "Vincent is going to bounce me up to the notch tomorrow and we're taking a whole set of new springs. That's where the heirloom we call a car caved completely. Right on the hump."

"Then you had to walk home!"

"That's what I started to do, until I saw the whole population of the Valley wandering all over the slope. I cut across to the foot of Ragged Rock and trapped myself in a lot of crevices I didn't know existed. That's where I met Vincent."

Harry explained that he'd been among the last to search the zig-zag paths, something that the rest had rapidly abandoned on the obvious assumption that the murderer must have fled elsewhere. He didn't add that he had sneaked into that labyrinth from the gap side, long before Grantham had blundered in from the direction of the notch. The girls saved him explanations when they asked what the Valleyites were ugly about.

"Rexford showed up," announced Harry. "Late, of course. Late enough to have ducked somewhere and come driving back to find out what had happened."

"What about Venner?" inquired Shirley.

"He was late, too," replied Harry, "so Rexford didn't have a fall-guy. Since Jarrock was the victim, everybody was asking how come. They were meaning it, too. Just enough for a lynch threat for Venner to play smart for once, when he did show up."

"How?"

"By demanding a fair trial for Rexford. Result: Mr. Rexford is now in the protective custody of the local

sheriff and tomorrow's inquest may degenerate into a trial."

Since it was late, Harry and Margo decided to leave. On the way into town. Margo put the prompt question:

"What about Old Jeb?"

"No hide nor hair of him," replied Harry, "either at the shack, or among the searchers. Of course Jeb always hunts alone."

"That's what worries me. Did you see Lamont?"

"No. But the bell was for Jarrock, so he ought to be all right, even if he did defy tradition."

They pulled up outside the library where Burbank was waiting in the dark. Margo had a key to the little back door and unlocked it. As she turned on the light in the stack room, Margo grabbed Harry's arm.

"Old Jeb!" she whispered. "Over there, where we keep his book."

One quick glimpse was enough for Harry. He recognized the stoop-shouldered form that made a quick turn past the next book-case. He caught sight of the rifle barrel sticking out from under Jeb's arm and saw the hunting bag against his hip, Jeb's cap was pulled down to hide his face, which made it all the sneakier. As Jeb went from sight, Harry swung the other way to intercept him, drawing an automatic as he went.

Burbank hooked Harry's arm, gave him a half fling that disarmed him, and coolly said:

"Wait."

Around from the book-case came Lamont Cranston, straightening from his stoop. The gun barrel was Cranston's cane, poked behind his arm. The hunting bag was The Shadow's cloak, folded square. The cap was the slouch hat, its side rims turned in under.

"The power of suggestion, as Grantham would say," observed Cranston, dryly. "Since Burbank has never seen Old Jeb, he didn't fall for it."

Cranston's purpose dawned on Margo.

"Why, that clears Old Jeb!" she exclaimed. "If you could fool us this close, Lamont, the real murderer must have been getting by with it all along!"

"Not necessarily," put in Harry, to show he still could think. "Old Jeb is the character anyone could imitate and he's smart enough to know it. So he doesn't have to care. His lawyer would call for a test like the chief gave us and its success would be Jeb's alibi."

"Nice going, Vincent," approved Cranston. "What's more, you may be right. We'll get back to Jeb later. Meanwhile, let's triangulate and I hope you all deliver, because I can't."

They laid out a big map and stood looking over Burbank's shoulders while he cut strings and measured them according to the speed of sound. Two lines would have done it, but the third was the clincher. All Burbank did was check the stop watches and make the proper calculation of space in relation to sound travel, according to the scale of the map.

Pinning the ends of the strings at the library, the gap, and the road junction respectively, Burbank swiveled them until they met. One thumbtack nailed them right against the very front of Half Dome.

"Just what everybody thought," said Margo, in a disappointed tone. "But Luther says the farmers have searched all around Half Dome and over it."

"The bell didn't clang from the top of Half Dome," declared Cranston. "If it had, I would have heard it. The sound would have risen and from where I was, I saw the whole summit of Half Dome. No bell was in sight."

Burbank was checking the chart with pencil lines, from a time-marked ruler. They tallied exactly with the strings.

"The sounds couldn't have come from the sides of that curved rock," asserted Burbank. "It is wide enough to throw the calculations out, which can't be, because they're right."

"Which proves," declared Cranston, calmly, "that the sound came from the solid rock itself. Which is absurd, as Euclid would say, but in this case proven. Unlike Ragged Rock, which is really ragged, Half Dome is as smooth as it sounds - and as solid."

Straightening his hat brim, Cranston put the slouch model on his head. Sliding his arms into his cloak, he handed Margo a book which he had used to produce the square bag effect.

"Put it back on the shelf," said Cranston. "Old Jeb may want to read it later, after I've talked with him about divining rods, old style."

Harry stared at the half-transformed figure of The Shadow.

"You mean you've got the answer to the bell, chief? And the motive to the murders?"

"There is only one answer to the bell," returned The Shadow, drawing his finger across the map. "The motive depends on the thing this valley needs. Old Jeb should have found it and therefore could be the murderer.

"He is close-mouthed, Old Jeb, as Grantham says. That too can have a bearing on this case. But Jeb may talk, under due persuasion. So sit tight until I return, unless something undue develops. I don't mean news of another murder. I already know about that."

Leaving his agents quite amazed, The Shadow strode out into the night. Keeping to spots that blocked off the moonlight, he made his way to the depot and continued up the railroad cut. The first stop was the shack near the gap, but Jeb wasn't there.

After a general search across the slope, The Shadow spotted the stooped figure that he wanted. It was sneaking toward the scene of double murder, the fissured base of Ragged Rock. If guilty, Jeb was doing the familiar deed of a murderer's return, but with purpose, since the second body still was missing. If innocent, his business might even more concern The Shadow, provided the stooped sneaker was actually Old Jeb, which The Shadow had personally proven to be doubtful.

At least the stooped man had some purpose and he soon proved himself to be Old Jeb. Reaching the zig-zag pathways and working well to the top, the stooped man produced a pliable forked rod, too willowy to be his ironwood model, and gripped the two prongs that constituted handles.

Apparently Jeb was looking for something more or less familiar, for when he reached a clump of bushes, the stock of the divining rod began to point. By then, The Shadow had made a detour and was on the opposite side of the clump. These were the bushes Jeb wanted, for he thrust the forked rod in his bag and began to paw the ground among the brush.

At last it gave, not just a clod of dirt, but a whole slab of rock that opened like a concealed trap door.

Leaving the slab wide, Jeb made one of his natural crouches and disappeared into the hole. Right after him, like a blackened patch dispelling in the moonlight, came The Shadow.

This time The Shadow was too soon. Turning, Jeb was blinking a flashlight as the cloaked figure came. Jeb saw two things: The Shadow, which he didn't expect, and a crude prop which held up the slab, and was what he was really after. Being a man of simple mind, Jeb merely punched the prop.

The slab came with a thwack that The Shadow could have outraced if Jeb hadn't been in the way. Since Jeb was, the slab overtook The Shadow, so hard that it flattened Jeb with him, at the bottom of some crude stone steps. But the only one who rose was Old Jeb. Finding his flashlight, the stooped man turned it on the unconscious face beneath the slouch hat.

With a chortle of satisfaction when he saw the face of Cranston, Old Jeb put away the flashlight and hoisted The Shadow over his shoulder with a single, powerful sweep.

After which, the half-wit with the master-mind proceeded down the secret shaft to some strange destination deep beneath Ragged Rock!

Thus ended The Shadow's trail.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was lynch-time in Valley Center.

Outside the courthouse the angry citizenry stormed, while the inquest dawdled within. Craig Rexford was playing for the good old count of misadventure to square him in the death of Caleb Jarrock.

After all, Jarrock's death was much like those of Ferris and Thurnow, but that was hurting Rexford rather than helping him. The coroner was even "allowing he'd been wrong" in those two instances and in that case he'd have to hold Rexford.

It was getting well along in the afternoon and the mob was getting stormier. Twice, Henley Grantham had gone out to calm them; between times, he had made some phone calls to other counties asking for a few spare sheriffs if needed.

All the while, Anson Venner was seated with folded arms, smugly watching the goings on, ready to be of help if wanted, though what sort of help he didn't specify.

Shirley Grantham found her uncle coming from a phone booth and stopped him with a plea.

"You've got to get Rexford out of here," she insisted. "You know this town well enough to realize why."

"It's getting late, I know," nodded Grantham, his tone worried. "When the shadow falls from Ragged Rack, they'll begin to go crazy."

"And if the bell should ring!"

"The bell!" Grantham went taut. "I hadn't thought of that. It could mean death -"

"For Rexford," put in Shirley. "A nice lynch party on our lawn, if they'd go that far. Into the shadow, I mean."

"Vincent could get Rexford away," decided Grantham. "Over the notch road, where they wouldn't expect

him to. It would be worth the chance, particularly as the other roads are barricaded already."

"By the mob?"

"Yes. Get over to the library and talk to Vincent. Meanwhile I'll sidetrack Venner. He's playing the goshawk - or the buzzard - just watching for Rexford to make a break."

Shirley waited until she saw her uncle speaking with Venner, then the girl left the courthouse. Sight of her red hair brought a brief cheer from the crowd, for Shirley shared Grantham's popularity. Such quick recognition pleased Shirley because it proved there was still plenty of sunlight. Hot-heads wouldn't be thinking in terms of Ragged Rock for a little while yet.

Arriving at the library, Shirley found Harry talking with Margo, who was running the place while Luther enjoyed the inquest. As one of Rexford's project partners, Harry had deemed it was wise to stay well clear of the courthouse, but there was something else that bothered him more.

If ever The Shadow was needed, it was now. Yet he hadn't come back from his hunt for Old Jeb.

Through Luther, Margo had learned that Jeb had been seen around town the day before, some time after the finding of Jarrock's body. Only a little while ago, she was sure she had personally spied the stooped man over near the courthouse. But considering The Shadow's impersonation of Jeb, as a proof of the difficulty in identifying the latter, Margo wasn't sure.

Harry's hopeful opinion was that The Shadow had actually returned to town, as Old Jeb instead of Cranston, but in that case, he would certainly have contacted his agents. These speculations broke off as soon as Shirley arrived.

Briefly, Shirley told the plan. Harry was to be ready with his all-service car and trust that it would do the jeep act. When and how to pick up Rexford was something she would learn from her uncle. With that, Shirley was gone again, and Margo was reaching for the telephone as it rang.

The call was from Burbank, observing from a hotel window. He stated that Venner had come from the side door of the courthouse and was gathering some cronies into a car. They were going down the good road that led around to Millwood. Harry explained that it was part of Grantham's plan and then hung up.

"Venner can't be going to Millwood," said Harry, "because the road is barricaded well enough to trap a tank, right at the county line. Venner is probably going to look it over."

"Millwood is where you're going," reminded Margo. "Don't you think you ought to phone there and arrange a reception committee?"

"Absolutely," rejoined Harry, reaching for the phone, "I'd better post the sheriff. Rexford isn't too popular over there, either."

In three minutes Harry was talking to the Millwood sheriff. Margo could hear a high excited voice across the wire and never had she viewed such a mingling of bewilderment and amazement as appeared on Harry's face. As he dropped the receiver, Harry stared stupefied. Then:

"Rexford is tops in Millwood," declared Harry, in a trancelike tone. "Venner is the man they want!"

"Snap out of it," urged Margo. "Give me the rest."

"They're coming to get Venner," continued Harry. "Over the notch road, so they won't be stopped at the barricade."

"A mob from Millwood, you mean? But why?"

"Because" - Harry took a breath and became himself - "this afternoon a body was found floating up against the Millwood dam. It happened to be Rexford's closest pal, James Westerly."

"Westerly was murdered too?" echoed Margo. "But how?"

"With a gun. They found three bullets in him. That doesn't smack of Ragged Rock. It spells Venner to the Millwood boys. Having met some of them, I can understand."

"But why should Venner -"

"Don't you see the way they look at it? They figure Jarrock was really going to sell out. Millwood isn't for Jarrock, who thought he owned the place, any more than Long Valley is really for Venner."

Margo nodded. Those facts were all too plain.

"Millwood thinks Venner is in back of murder. He had to get rid of Westerly, so he wouldn't buy the mill." Harry was punching home the details. "So Venner killed Westerly and dumped him right where the Millwood boys would get the blame. Figuring Jarrock would blab, Venner finished him for a double-crosser but did it on home ground. That was to put trouble right on Rexford, which it did."

"It all adds up," agreed Margo, "from the Millwood standpoint, at least."

"But not necessarily from ours. It still could be Rexford, unless Old Jeb -"

Again the phone was jangling. It was Burbank again. Harry took the call in short order and started for the door.

"Burbank says that Venner's car is going up the old road past Half Dome," called back Harry. "That means he's going to barricade the notch. He's playing right into the hands of that Millwood crowd -"

"Wait a minute!"

At Margo's call, Harry halted, remembering that after all he'd promised to help Rexford. To calm himself, he sprang a wise-crack, which was always a big help.

"What is it, my hat?"

"Yes, your hat for one thing." Margo sat back with a nervous laugh. "You've never failed to leave it in that vestibule."

"Never? I remember once I didn't -"

Harry stopped right short; then added:

"Or did I?"

"Don't start asking yourself conundrums," pleaded Margo. "I have a few for you. First, how did Venner get so smart, to go up to the notch where he can block you? Second, why didn't the sheriff over in Millbrook call somebody at the courthouse here?"

"Venner isn't smart," said Harry, slowly, as great light continued to dawn. "Somebody told him what to do."

"But only Grantham talked to him."

"And it was Grantham who talked to the Millwood sheriff, when he did call here. Grantham said he'd attend to matters. Apparently he has."

Margo snapped her fingers.

"Grantham knows that Venner is guilty!" she exclaimed. "He's sent him to the right place. The notch will be cleared when you get there with Rexford."

"If I get there."

"Why won't you?"

"On account of my hat. I did leave it here, one time before. I'm understanding something the chief didn't tell me. What I've just found out, he already knows."

"Why wouldn't he tell you?"

"On account of -" Harry cut short. "Margo, remember the time we went out to lunch? Just you, Shirley and myself?"

Margo nodded. During that momentary silence, the sound of an ugly roar floated through the door. The local mob was hungry, in terms of lynch, not lunch.

"We three," put in Margo, hurriedly, "because Lamont was down in the research vault."

"Only he wasn't," returned Harry. "He was up in the stack room just above. I thought he was putting back some books -"

"But he couldn't have come up," interrupted Margo. "We'd have seen him come around past the Shakespeare shelf."

"Only he was putting back the shelves," continued Harry, as though he didn't hear. "One shelf in particular. The shelf that is right on the level of the floor, in the corner book-case. With that shelf gone and the rest for a ladder -"

This time the phone was interrupting. Sweeping up the receiver, Margo said:

"Go ahead, Burbank."

Burbank went ahead, briefly. Dropping the receiver Margo turned to Harry with an idea that really clicked:

"Get Rexford to Grantham's house. Then hop up and bring back Venner. That's from Burbank, who is trained just to deliver in the pinch. Here comes Shirley, to say things are ready - which they aren't - but without telling her why, I'm going to talk her into running interference."

Shirley's red hair flashed through the doorway, lacking about two-thirds of its burnish, for the sun was really going over the hill, which meant Ragged Rock.

"Get your car in back of the courthouse," panted Shirley, to Harry. "Uncle is going to talk to the crowd, while you get Rexford away."

"And where's your uncle's car?" demanded Margo.

"In the garage," replied Shirley. "Getting the springs fixed. They're pretty bad -"

"We'll take it as is," snapped Margo. "Come on."

As the girls followed Harry from the library, a great cheer rose from in front of the courthouse, signifying that Henley Grantham had again appeared to prove the strength of his local popularity. But far beyond, greater, more powerful than any living man in Long Valley, loomed the towering peak of Ragged Rock, the final authority in all disputes.

From that grim pinnacle already stretched a shadow that was the harbinger of the insidious bell that again today might deliver its toll of death.

Only one personage could offset that gathering menace and he was absent; perhaps forever:

The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIX

Hardly had Harry wheeled his car behind the courthouse before the cheer out front turned to the most bloodthirsty howl that he had ever heard. The mob was trying to outdo the ugly bell that terrified Long Valley and the job was truly competitive. It didn't scare Harry, for he expected it.

It was Rexford who was really scared.

Tumbling into Harry's car, as a few friendly hands shoved him there, Rexford fairly bleated:

"Grantham was going to stop them, but they've found out. We haven't a chance!"

"We have plenty," snapped Harry. "Watch."

Harry's old buggy could go, and did, as a flock of other cars came surging seemingly from all directions. They were closer than Harry believed they would be, for the mob had found out faster than he knew, but there was still a space between the pincers grip. Harry made it, by a few feet on each side, but Rexford only groaned.

Other cars could out-speed this one. The chase would be over within half a mile. So it would have been, except for what happened at the garage, just beyond the Village Green. As Harry zoomed past that spot, another car shot out, with a red-haired girl at the wheel. It didn't join the pursuit; it stopped it.

Shirley just couldn't make the turn and the angle she stopped at blocked the narrow street. Cars began to stack up while she stalled and tried to start. Others behind them changed course and went around by other routes. But the half mile Rexford worried about was nearly all Harry's by that time.

They were hitting it fast up toward the fork and Rexford was very happy. Other cars were away behind, Shirley's coming with them, now that the blockade didn't matter. Up ahead loomed Ragged Rock in all its sinister majesty, its great circle marking time just short of Grantham's house. Harry swung right at the fork, hit a pace that gladdened Rexford, and then came to a shrieking stop in front of Grantham's gate.

"Get out." Before Rexford could protest the order, Harry certified it with a thrust that sent the moonfaced man out through the door. "Hop into the house. You'll be safe there."

The next job was Venner, and Harry wondered if he'd make it. He wasn't half a mile along the road before he saw he would - and why. Down the road came Venner, running as fast as his rugged legs would bring him. The Millwood mob had shown up soon as Harry feared, but it didn't matter. Their cars

had met those of Venner's contingent, in a nice head-on melee. Venner's pals had put up enough of a brawl to give him a good start and Venner could really run, with those brawny legs of his.

Those legs were caving though, when Harry took Venner aboard. Speeding back to Grantham's, Harry pulled up in front of the gate. Venner was husky enough to put up a fight where Rexford hadn't, so Harry simply pulled out the ignition key and threw it as far as he could in Grantham's yard.

"Go look for it," suggested Harry, "unless you want to be sensible and come into the house."

Neither idea sounded sensible to Venner, but he took the latter. It wasn't until they reached the porch that Venner nearly wilted. Aghast, he pointed to the thing that was creeping across the porch.

"The curse!" gasped Venner. "From Ragged Rock!"

Another man was huddled just inside the door; namely, Rexford. At Venner's gasp, Rexford showed a similar spasm, then straightened up.

"That's why you brought me here!" exclaimed Rexford. "They won't dare follow!"

"You mean they didn't dare," corrected Harry. "Look down the road."

Rexford looked. Already the jagged shadow was forming a blockade more potent than any human hands could have built. With the same hope, Venner looked the other way and saw that the Millwood tribe had halted on their side. Once outside of their own preserves, the Millwood boys had respect for other traditions, particularly when they saw that the Valley crowd was idle.

One car had detached itself from the Valley Center group. Shirley was grimly driving into the dangerous black disk, bringing Margo with her. Almost immediately, Grantham himself came dashing up on foot, not being able to convince a single driver that a car trip would be safe.

"Get away, you fools!" shouted Grantham. He meant it for Harry and the men with him, as well as Shirley and Margo, who were just alighting. "There is still time, if you hurry."

Harry held the door open so that everyone could go inside. As they did, Grantham reached the porch.

"Those wolves will wait!" stormed Grantham. "When it gets dark, they'll tear this house apart and you with it."

"That gives us a breathing spell, retorted Harry, wondering how he was so calm. "So come in for one yourself."

"Get out now!" roared Grantham. "Look, Venner. You can join your Valley friends. If you go the other way, Rexford, the Millwood bunch will protect you."

The two men had huddled clear back to the stairs. Reaching them with waving hands, Grantham was beginning to convince both that his plan was best. Harry stepped up to see that neither Venner nor Rexford wavered; hearing him, Grantham wheeled suddenly with a gun.

Two screams sounded very distant. They came from Shirley and Margo at the door. Grantham's finger was stopped on its trigger; Harry's hands, outstretched, were short of the minimum distance for a lunge. It all looked black, as black as the encroaching gloom that was gathering outdoors, when Grantham's hand suddenly moved downward.

Blackness shifted up beside Harry Vincent; cloaked blackness, attached to another gun. The .45 loomed

right for Grantham and promised him more return than his .38 could give. Harry didn't turn to look at The Shadow. It was sufficient to know that his chief was really here.

Under the persuasive threat of that automatic, a slow march began, straight up the stairs. It continued into Grantham's own room, where the night chill was sifting through the open window that faced toward Half Dome. The fireplace did not help, for there was no fire in it. Grantham never would have a fire in his fresh-air room.

At the door stood blackness, the cloaked shape of The Shadow. It moved forward, with the same approach of doom as the great gloom from outdoors. Here in the upstairs room there was still some sunlight, though the shadowy hush had settled well beyond the road out front.

Past the cloaked shoulders of the avenger who confronted Grantham, Harry could see the white faces of Margo and Shirley. Like himself, they knew that some strange thing must happen soon. Up through the windows filtered the horrendous blackness, and then:

A sudden whirr.

Eyes went toward the fireplace. Down from the ample chimney came a strange device, produced by the automatic response of a photo-electric cell. It was a large, square box, with a phonographic record in its top. The rest of the machine was an amplifier of a most powerful type.

The record played.

From the amplifier came the thunderous note of a mammoth bell, so discordant that in this room its single note was deafening. Loud enough to shatter windows with its vibration, the dong of that recorded bell did no damage, because it had an outlet. It issued through the window opposite the fireplace on a straight line with the curved rock called Half Dome.

Back came the smash of the bell itself. Just as the fireplace was a sound-box for the room, so was the room a sound-box in itself. Those waves followed a true path, to spread but not enough to miss their broad and lofty target, the stone center of the wooded hill.

This was the answer to the triangulation, the reason why it had fixed upon Half Dome itself. All the smooth rock lacked was the upward tilt that would have thrown the noise up to the summit of Ragged Rock when The Shadow was on that pinnacle. All dependent upon a timed device to which Henley Grantham had fitted his scheme of murder, founded on tradition.

Hitherto the menace of Ragged Rock had kept all persons away from this house where Grantham himself obeyed the rules of the imaginary curse. Now his device was known to those who stood in his own room and it was dawning on the clustered outdoor throngs. Some of them had cut around the fringe of the spreading circle and were in a line with Grantham's northern window. They caught the clang when it was on its way to Half Dome and heard it before it ricocheted back. They were passing the word along.

The great bell clanged its customary repeats. As the record stopped, the machine itself was drawn up into the fireplace by a pair of mechanical lazy-tongs that acted with a smooth but effective indifference. Outside, the pall had thickened, but in this room, Grantham's face was still plain, livid with the vicious glare of defeat.

Vast schemes had faded for Henley Grantham, but he did not regret them.

"You guessed the truth." Grantham's snarl was meant for The Shadow. "You saw that whoever owned water could own this Valley. I knew it all along, when I roamed here years ago, hating the farmers who

had taken the land of my ancestors. My family alone remained after the period of Black Arthur and the rogues who traded on his name.

"They had all the water that they needed, Venner and his sort, who, like the men they ousted, were still sharing too much land among too few. There had been more of them than us, so the game was to outnumber them, and I was hoping for the day when I could do it. Then Rexford arrived, with the very plan I was unable to produce.

"A plan that was really noble. Good enough to bring a profit that was well-deserved, but not to gain the power that was my ambition. I wanted Venner's land and Rexford's people. Those gained, I would become the sole owner of Long Valley, the real monarch of all within my sight."

His gun still dangling idly from his fingers, Grantham turned to Venner and Rexford.

"I played you against each other," bragged Grantham. "I had my alibi, which someone unfortunately discovered, a way of getting from the research vault of the library and out through its back door, without being seen by Luther. One night I found Vincent's hat on the way out and wore it myself. Running into him, I took him along, just to have a scapegoat.

"To pin crime here and there was my game. Eventually you two would weaken and you did. You both entrusted all your affairs with me. Rexford was getting the land and he was going bankrupt through Venner" - Grantham had turned again to the doorway - "because the reservoir was being blocked."

A curious change swept Grantham. His venom ejected, he began to soften. Even his tone was sad, when he declared:

"I was sorry for Jarrock and Westerly. They were only checking on each other. Jarrock made a good victim for the bell, but I had to do something else with Westerly. So I took him to Black Arthur's cave, under Ragged Rock. I alone knew about that cave, with its huge flowing spring that disgorges all the water this valley would ever need.

"Wasted water that seeps underground and fills up Sunken Swamp, which is always boggy, even when the Pleasant River is low. That was the secret supply that I could divert when I controlled Long Valley. And who would find it for me? Old Jeb, with his divining rod. Of course I was blaming things on Old Jeb too, because he was convenient, but I was saving him for later."

Harry saw the understanding that swept Shirley's face. She realized - as did Harry - that Grantham had done the Jeb act that night he sent them up the slope. It was Grantham, not Jeb who had fired those shots at The Shadow. Whatever sympathy Shirley felt for her murderous uncle, ended with that glance.

"Old Jeb knew about the secret spring," sneered Grantham, "with its thousands of gallons flowing every day. He thought he'd found it with his hazel rod, but he'd only sensed the tremors of the ground on the far slope of Ragged Rock.

"Of all persons, Jeb told me. So I showed him the book and told him to keep the secret. I talked him into hunting precious metals. Old Jeb was safe until you came" - Grantham was stepping toward The Shadow - "and now I know that Jeb met you. He told you what he knew and you arranged this trap between you."

Like a crazed lion that fancied its cage bars had melted, Grantham hurled himself upon the figure in black. Up came The Shadow's automatic to clash Grantham's revolver. Locking, they reeled across the room, toward the window opening on Ragged Rock. Margo pressed the light switch, hoping it would aid The Shadow in his fight, while Harry, pulling his own gun, tried to aim at Grantham. Seeing the move,

Grantham backed against the window, swinging his cloaked adversary as a shield against Harry's fire.

The window shattered under a roaring blast. Sagging, Grantham nearly drew his opponent with him. Harry sprang to aid his chief and as he did, the slouch hat fell away, while the loose cloak dropped back. The man who came to his feet at Harry's left was Old Jeb!

Limping steps were coming up the stairs. Into the room came Lamont Cranston, carrying Jeb's fancy shot-gun. Handing the weapon to Jeb, Cranston received the cloak and hat as though they were mere trifles in a meaningless masquerade. Venner and Rexford, friends at last, were bringing Grantham to his feet to meet Cranston's calm gaze.

"Sorry, Grantham," said Cranston. "I would have had this out with you alone, but I was a bit crippled from my meeting with Jeb. You should have put a better prop on the door of Black Arthur's cave. We talked it over, down by the underground spring, and Jeb agreed to be my leg man.

"He went back and forth from town, all day, telling me what was going on, and delivering a few instructions. When it came to a showdown, I thought I'd better rig Jeb so you wouldn't know him, so I gave him these" - again Cranston gestured the hat and cloak, as he laid them across his arm - "he could pretend he was the man he always wanted to be. What did you say his name was, Jeb?"

Old Jeb licked his lips and answered:

"Black Arthur."

Shadows had closed around Long Valley when Henley Grantham, man of murder, started his trip to the hospital that would be a stop-over on his journey to the county jail. A cloak and hat upon his arm, Lamont Cranston gazed from the broken window of the upstairs bay, studying the profile of Ragged Rock against the last crimson of the sunset.

That dye would stand for blood no longer. The menace of Ragged Rock was ended. The blackened gloom that daily stretched from the traditional cliff would become a forgotten legend, shattered by its human counterpart:

The Shadow.

THE END