

THE SHADOW MEETS THE MASK
by Maxwell Grant

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A reign of terror in a series of daring crimes that defied solution... An accusing voice blocked The Shadow's moves toward justice, as a murdered gangman came back to life threatening death and destruction in a fear-ridden city!

CHAPTER I

"- AND this great city is in the grip of a continual crime wave, despite the arguments of the police to the contrary. To refute those arguments, I give you statistics which can not be denied. Remember: figures do not lie -"

It was the voice of Ron Meldor, self-styled the "Citizen of Justice" but known in certain other circles as the "Crackpot of WVX." His tone, energetic in its delivery, had a flamboyance that attracted listeners, whether they agreed with him or not. Whether crusader or fanatic - or perhaps a dash of both - Ron Meldor had captured the highest Crossley rating of any Manhattan news commentator.

Meldor's voice was striking a steady note, as it always did when he talked in facts and figures. Dispassionately he was comparing past statistics with present, to prove that Manhattan was experiencing more crime per capita than in the gory times of the Five Points Gang or the heyday of such notorious characters as Lefty Louie and Gyp the Blood.

Then, with a blatant rise, the announcer's voice proclaimed:

"- And even now, while I am broadcasting from my sealed suite in the Hotel Alexandra, crime may be rampant in Manhattan - and why not? My statistics show that a crime is perpetrated on an average of seven minutes during a period of twenty-four hours!

"It is now just seven minutes after ten o'clock on this Wednesday evening. So far as days of the week are concerned, Wednesday is as good as any other from the standpoint of criminals. Given a place for crime, they will choose their own time and operate at leisure.

"Nor do they respect persons. They will rob anyone if it proves profitable and dispose of anybody who tries to interfere, should convenience so demand. Why, even now, perhaps within sight of this very hotel, some genius of crime may be hard at work, mocking our police and the law for which they stand!"

There was an organ sting to emphasize Ron's pronouncement; then, the commentator's voice resumed its low, convincing pitch:

"Yes, even now, some man of crime may be hard at work -"

The man with the mask gave a low, derisive laugh as he reached over and turned down the radio. He'd enjoyed it so far, the masked man had, but he didn't like that crack about being hard at work. The man with the mask liked to handle his crimes easily.

For instance, the wall safe that at present occupied his efforts. It belonged to Rufus Howland, the millionaire who had been so active in the United

Charity Drive. Old Howland had a habit of matching cash contributions with equal amounts of his own; like as not, this wall safe was stuffed with currency that the philanthropist had parked, intending to deposit it in the bank tomorrow.

Anyway, it was worth a try -

Under the deft touch of the masked man's fingers, the combination was responding with the click of hidden tumblers, sounds that he could hear through

an appliance which he pressed against the safe front. His was the manner of a physician handling a stethoscope, which indeed his device resembled. To him, the clicks of a combination were like heart beats.

That was why he had tuned down Ron Meldor. Scientific crime presented enough problems without vocal interference from the commentator who denounced it. Still, this man who could have styled himself "The Mask" found Meldor's half hour harangues rather amusing, even inspiring in the course of crime except when they interfered with the sound of safe tumblers.

He could have called himself The Mask, could this genius of crime. Whether

he did or not was another question, like that of his actual identity. At times his mask could be regarded as superfluous; at the present moment for example. His face could not have been seen even without the mask, for it was turned directly toward the safe.

Hence only The Mask's eyes were visible; eyes as narrow as the mask-slits that half hid them. They were glinting as they watched his own hand at work, as

though the mind behind those eyes was exerting some strange force of will to make the safe tumblers obey.

Then, tuned to another organ sting from Meldor's broadcast came a sharp, harsh hiss muffled only by the hanging fringes of the bandana mask. It meant success, as the action of the deft hands proved. One whipped away the listening

device and bundled it beneath The Mask's top coat; the other turned the safe-knob and brought the steel door wide.

Green currency displayed itself in neat crisp bundles, a sight that would have excited the average crook. But there was nothing rabbit-y about The Mask, not even when his slitted eyes viewed such tempting lettuce. The hard part of his labors done, The Mask preferred a little relaxation. He reached to the radio on the table beside the wall safe and tuned up Ron Meldor.

"Quarter past ten," the commentator was saying, "and my broadcast had reached the half way mark. Time for another crime to be completed, if the law of averages is running true to form. Remember, present statistics indicate that

two hundred and fifty-seven crimes are committed daily in Greater New York."

The man with the mask was chuckling as he reached into the safe. Tilting his head toward the radio, he mimicked the tone of Ron Meldor.

"That's a lot of crime, Ron," he remarked. "Well, tonight you can call it two hundred and fifty-eight."

"Tomorrow I shall probably hear from my good friend the police commissioner," came Meldor's tone, sharp with sarcasm. "He will say that I have

exaggerated these statistics by including minor infractions of the law. I have a

full right to count even small violations, considering how the commissioner overlooks the large -"

"Nice going, Ron," chuckled The Mask. "Well, this counts as a large one - a very large one -"

The Mask was counting the money as he threw the accent on "very." He managed it rapidly, for the bills were all in sizeable denominations. They totaled close to fifty thousand dollars, which The Mask bundled away beneath his dark coat. Then, closing the safe, he removed his bandana mask and coolly

used it to wipe away anything bearing a reasonable similarity to fingerprints.

This process didn't reveal the unmasked face, for with his removal of the bandana, The Mask canted his soft hat at a rakish angle and leaned to listen to

Ron Meldor. While one hand was mopping the safe front, the other was again toning down the radio, giving it a subdued effect.

"- And if the commissioner has crime so well in hand" - the tiny voice of Ron Meldor was storming like a tempest in a tea-pot - "why should I find it necessary to broadcast from a locked and isolated hotel room? Why should I require my own bodyguards, privately hired, to watch outside this hotel? I can tell you why!"

Ron Meldor must have taken a long pause for breath, because The Mask found time to insert a delayed remark.

"Tell us, Ron," imitated The Mask. From his pocket, he drew a cigarette and raised it to his lips. "Don't you think the commish could protect you in a pinch?"

"Because I have been marked for death," came the voice from the radio. "Every day my mail-bag shows dozens of threatening letters. Crime is striking closer - closer -"

"That's right, Ron." The Mask was lighting his cigarette as he spoke. "It's going to strike even closer."

The Mask was turning toward the open window of Howland's living room. Against the background of Manhattan's skyline was a lighted sign on an old-fashioned building only a few blocks away. Its gleaming letters bore the name:

HOTEL ALEXANDRA

There was something resembling a subdued echo in The Mask's chuckle as though his narrowed eyes had picked out the very window of the room from which Ron Meldor was making his nightly broadcast. Then, half-turning toward the radio, The Mask halted short, his head tilted with his face away from the light. He was listening to something quite different from the broadcast.

Creaky footsteps were coming from a darkened entry leading into this front living room. Reaching his hand to an ash-tray, The Mask tamped his cigarette and left it there. His other hand let the match-pack fall; with both hands free, his fingers began an impatient, clutching motion.

His hand finding the base of an ornamental table-lamp, The Mask shifted at an angle beyond, so that the shade hid his face. Yet the glow through the translucent shade was sufficient to cast his shadow on the wall, where it registered in huge proportions, like a crouching monster waiting for its prey.

Only a shadow, this, but enough to stir the creeping man to rapid action. Into the living room sprang a worn-faced, gray-haired man whose cutaway jacket and shoestring necktie listed him as Howland's butler. In his tight, thin-knuckled fist, the fellow was brandishing a revolver that looked like a family heirloom. Waving the gun in the direction of the black-splotched wall, the butler shouted:

"Stop where you are, thief!"

The Mask must have gauged it to the length of the lamp-cord, for he withheld action until the butler's drive had reached a precise point. Then, even as the butler was aiming, The Mask gave the lamp a fling with a jerky, side-armed motion. The missile was aimed as well as it was timed.

Dodging backward, the butler was throwing up a warding hand as he pointed the gun with the other. The lamp drove his forearm back against his face; the gun sputtered upward as he reeled. The two shots that burrowed into the ceiling

seemed to help the butler's sprawl with their recoil.

The crash of the lamp broke the echoes of those futile shots and the smash

was followed by the slam of a closing door, denoting the departure of The Mask.

There was a feeble bleat from the felled butler; then a voice, tuned down but defiant, stormed from the radio in the corner.

"- And if you are listening in, Commissioner Weston" - Ron Meldor was working to his highest pitch - "I call upon you to heed this call from a Citizen of Justice! Despite your claims to the contrary, crime has become a paying game. I call upon you to put a stop to it, not tomorrow, but now!"

If Commissioner Weston happened to be heeding that demand, he was doing so

too late. Already a smooth-working crook, known only as The Mask, had proved that he could make crime pay - not tomorrow, but tonight!

CHAPTER II

THOSE shots in Howland's living room interrupted Ron Meldor's broadcast ten minutes before its close. The voice that stood for justice was cut off by a

gloved hand that clicked the button on the instant. Not the switch of Howland's radio, but one in a taxicab that was swinging a corner, nearly a block away.

"Hear them, boss?"

The anxious query came from the cab-driver and it brought an immediate response from the gloved passenger.

"I heard them, Shrevvy." The tone was both calculating and calm. "Third floor, northeast corner of the apartment house. Blank the lights and work around to the back. We'll see who comes out."

Someone was coming out as the cab glided silently and darkly to a coasting

stop. The somebody was a quick-moving man with his coat bundled tight and his hat pulled down over his eyes. He didn't bother to look around; instead, he made a quick turn into an alleyway and was instantly gone from sight.

Thus The Mask made his departure from a scene of crime.

A smooth operator, The Mask.

Smoother, however, was the figure that followed him. It came from the halted taxicab with a glide that was totally invisible. In the gloom behind the apartment building, there wasn't a chance of spotting the cloaked form of The Shadow.

The Shadow's only token of departure was a slight slam of the cab door that wasn't accidental. The sound was for the benefit of the driver, Shrevvy, who wouldn't otherwise have known that his chief had fared forth into the night. The slam also meant that Shrevvy was to use his own judgment.

In other words, Shrevvy wasn't to go cruising around in search of the fugitive whose trail The Shadow had taken, but he was to keep handily in this vicinity in case his cab would be needed. So Shrevvy tallied off a half-minute's leeway before he turned on the lights and started the cab in a very normal fashion.

By then Shrevvy couldn't have begun to find the trail. Even The Shadow was encountering difficulties.

The Mask was both slippery and swift. He knew his way through darkened alleys as though he had traced them previously. He couldn't have done better if he'd expected to have The Shadow on his trail. Into each alley where The Mask disappeared, The Shadow in following encountered some unexpected obstacle.

For example, the fence with the barbed-wire top. It marked a dead-stop in the very middle of what was hardly an alley at all, but rather a shoulder-wide space between two brick walls where the owners of two adjacent buildings had evidently disagreed over a property line.

Ordinarily The Shadow would have scaled an obstacle like the blocking fence, by matting the barbed-wire with his cloak, but he knew The Mask must have used some easier process, otherwise The Shadow would have overtaken him. It took The Shadow half a minute to find the weak spot of the wooden fence, a creaky board that worked in reverse like a panel in a Chinese puzzle and made the entire barrier pivot horizontally like a paddle-wheel.

By then, The Mask had gained another lead in this silent but steady stalk through peculiar by-ways. The Shadow's last glimpse of him came when the huddled man made a quick sidle across the street in back of the Alexandra Hotel, where ornate windows with heavy curtains showed dim cracks of light from lavish old-fashioned reception rooms.

There, before The Shadow could follow around another corner, a service door swung open and two brawny men in shirt-sleeves put in an appearance. They looked as if they belonged to the night shift, though there was no telling in what capacity. Down the corridor behind them was the entrance to a service elevator, beyond it the open door of a little office.

From the office, a radio was shouting full-blast in the familiar voice of Ron Meldor, completing his nightly tirade against crime. One of the shirt-sleeved men slid his arms into his coat and gave a thumb gesture.

"Turn it off, Kirby," he said. "The guy gets too loud. They'll be hollering again from the dining room."

"He's most through, Jeff." returned Kirby. "He always winds up that way just before the commercial. When that's over, he talks nice and quiet when he says good-night."

"Yeah," recalled Jeff with a nod. "Anyway, he makes sense. There's, too much crime, no matter what the cops say."

"Because there's too many guys the cops are too dumb to catch."

Stepping back behind the door, Kirby closed it, blotting out Meldor's voice with the word: "And so, Commissioner Weston, I demand that you -"

Meanwhile Jeff was buttoning his coat as he started across the street to a little lunch room. With the sidewalk dark again, The Shadow cut close to the door and thus behind Jeff's very back was on his way to the corner of the hotel. Turning there, he found himself in a blind alley that ended in a solid brick wall with a wooden door that bore a padlock.

There wasn't any trace of the man who answered what little description The

Shadow had gained of The Mask. In fact there wasn't a sign of anyone.

On the left was the blank wall of a windowless garage; on the right, the high basement windows of the hotel, all with heavy gratings. Licking a flashlight along them, The Shadow saw that those tall upright bars were frozen with the rust of years. The padlocked door promised better, since it might have

a trick board like the fence The Shadow had encountered earlier, so the cloaked

investigator turned his attention in that direction.

Not a thing proved wrong with the door. The logical conclusion therefore was that The Mask had continued past this blind alley. Nevertheless, The Shadow

wasn't always inclined to accept the logical; hence, he was turning from the door and about to center his attention on the cornice above the basement windows, when something brought him to rigid attention.

As The Shadow stiffened, his flashlight extinguished itself. With the padlocked door as his background, The Shadow stared toward the outer end of the

alley, where he had heard a scraping sound. He noted something huddled, which his photographic memory recorded as a large ash-can, just within the alley, but not suited as a hiding place - at least not from this side.

From the street end, it could be more convenient, as The Shadow had observed before entering the cul-de-sac. That was, somebody could be edging out

from the front of the garage to take bearings on the alley depths. No such observer could possibly have seen The Shadow, but there was something that he might have spotted, the twinkle of the narrow-focussed flashlight.

Just by way of test, The Shadow took a long reach, let the light blink from his fingertips; then snaked his hand back, with a body twirl that carried him a double arm's length from the spot where he had made the decoy flash.

It was good judgment, that prolonged twist. It made allowance for lack of accuracy on the part of the man who saw it, or any guess-work that he might have added to his calculation. One thing, the result wasn't delayed.

Something arrived through the dark with the speed of a homeward-flying bat. Its whirr seemed to literally carve the night and it finished with a splintery thud that sliced the thick wood of the padlocked door. It quivered there, eight inches from The Shadow's shoulder, a knife that showed about a thumb's width of a much longer blade. The rest of the steel was driven through the door.

The Shadow laid a gloved hand on the knife handle, but he didn't try to pluck the weapon. His hand was fisted and it clutched a .45 automatic. The power of the knife's arrival testified to the straight line it had followed and

The Shadow had a message to send back along that path. With the barrel of his automatic twinned to the knife handle, The Shadow gave the trigger a pull, as his arm followed a forward thrust.

That shove was necessary to gain elbow room and a body shift to take the recoil. As The Shadow fired, the ash-can clattered, heaved by the knife-hurler who was already starting his getaway. The Shadow didn't even glimpse the man's departure off beyond the garage, but he took up the trail with rapid strides.

Turning tables on The Shadow wasn't a trick for anyone to try, not even The Mask. The Shadow had a habit of reversing all such situations which he was now demonstrating. As he reached the mouth of the alley, he heard scurrying footsteps further down the street and was gauging them for his next target, when chance intervention came.

Jeff, the brawny who had gone to the lunch room, was coming back on the lope, to learn what the shooting was about. The service door clattered open and

Kirby sprang out, inspired with the same mission. The bright light from the open doorway showed them what it shouldn't have.

The pair saw The Shadow.

Explanations wouldn't do in such a situation. The Shadow neglected them, along with the man who had thrown the knife, and fled. The question of The Mask

was a score to be settled later; right now, The Shadow had his own reputation to

consider. Perhaps his health was also at stake considering the sincerity of the

surge that Jeff and Kirby were making, but The Shadow didn't even bother to learn how well they were equipped with weapons.

With one swift wheel, The Shadow faded from the lighted sidewalk into the darkness of the alley. Jeff and Kirby guessed which way he had gone, but they didn't guess what was coming. Plunging into the darkness, they expected to grab

a dodging figure; instead, they were met by a rolling obstacle.

The Shadow simply shoved the overturned ash-can, with plenty of push

behind it. Meeting his husky hecklers, it bowled their legs from under them. Grabbing at each other, Jeff and Kirby performed a pretzel sprawl in the alley, while The Shadow took the outlet. Around the corner came a cab that zig-zagged neatly to avoid the ash-can wobbling in front of it. That timely maneuver identified the driver.

A slam of the door and Shrevvy was hearing The Shadow's calm tone telling him to try another vicinity, now that this section was aroused. Starting a blind hunt for The Mask was useless under present circumstances.

Settling back into the rear seat, The Shadow removed his slouch hat and let his cloak slide back from his shoulders. Clicking the switch of the cab's radio he caught the familiar tone of Ron Meldor, Citizen of Justice, bidding the listeners of WVX good-night.

"And it behooves us, my fellow citizens" - Ron's voice was teeming with sincerity - "to do our part in proving that crime can not pay."

Shrevvy heard that admonition and the whispered laugh that followed it, uttered from the rear seat of the cab, but he noted a distinct lack of satisfaction in The Shadow's singular mirth.

The Shadow had done his part tonight, but it still remained for him to prove the point at issue. That would depend on his next meeting with The Mask.

CHAPTER III

POLICE COMMISSIONER WESTON glared around Howland's living room and finally settled his stare on Dobbs, the butler, who was propped in an easy chair with a bandage around his head. This was the visible result of the butler's head-on crash with the flying lamp from which Dobbs had suffered a slight memory lapse.

Also present was Rufus Howland, a burly, red-faced man who usually affected a bulldozing manner. Tonight, however, the loss of fifty thousand dollars had quelled his usual attitude and Howland, instead of trying to browbeat Dobbs, was taking the butler's part.

"Dobbs is entirely trustworthy, commissioner," assured Howland. "I hired him because of his reliability. I'm sure he couldn't have had a hand in the robbery."

Dobbs shook his bandaged head to substantiate Howland's testimony. Trying to speak, the butler found it difficult, so Howland motioned for him to rest a little longer. Going to a sideboard, the millionaire brought out a bottle of his favorite twenty-year brandy and poured the butler a drink.

All this was observed by a taciturn, poker-faced gentleman who answered to the name of Inspector Joe Cardona. Noting the steady eyes that stared from Cardona's swarthy countenance, Howland became a trifle restless.

"It wasn't my money," stated Howland, "but I intend to make it good. Not a penny will be lost by the charity fund. In fact, I'll double it. I'll give one hundred thousand dollars!"

The door opened at Howland's statement and Cardona turned quickly as though anticipating some new menace. Instead, a calm-faced gentleman entered and gave a nod all around. He was Lamont Cranston, close friend of the police commissioner, and something of an advisor in cases where crime struck into wealthy circles.

Recognizing Cranston, Howland was quick to repeat his generous offer concerning the charity fund. Coming from a millionaire, it didn't exactly call for cheers, but it relieved a certain tension which had begun with Dobbs and was beginning to apply to Howland himself. Cranston's arrival gave Commissioner

Weston a chance to tactfully admit the point.

"It's another big robbery, Cranston," stated the commissioner. "The sort of thing that adds fuel to those flames that Ron Meldor is spreading in his outrageous broadcasts."

There was a slight flicker to Cranston's sphinx-like expression, noted chiefly in the raising of his eyebrows.

"Outrageous, commissioner?"

"Well - yes!" His first word slow, Weston put sharp emphasis on the second. Then: "Meldor is an upstart, nothing more, capitalizing on statistics that he shapes to suit his own arguments. And who" - Weston's tone became bitterly sarcastic - "and just who do you think listens to his broadcasts?"

"You for one, commissioner."

Cranston's calm comment almost brought a smile from Cardona, which would have been the equivalent of a boisterous laugh from anyone else. Fortunately the ace inspector managed to retain his dead pan with a lip twitch that was too

brief for the commissioner to notice.

"Yes, I listen!" stormed Weston. "I listen because I know who else does. Every crook in town is tuning in on WVX between ten and ten thirty. Ron Meldor is telling them just how easy a racket crime can be!"

"Rather odd, commissioner," commented Cranston, "that if criminals are listening to those broadcasts there should have been so many crimes occurring during that very half hour. Let me see -"

Pausing, Cranston began to tabulate.

"Last week, there were two taxicab hold-ups, a pay-roll grab, a restaurant robbery -"

"And the knock-off of a gambling club," added Cardona. "It was the biggest of the lot."

Cranston nodded his thanks for the reminder. Then:

"This week there was an attempted warehouse robbery that for some reason was abandoned -"

"But there were a couple of others that went through," put in Cardona, "and there have been more stick-ups -"

"I am speaking of crimes in this particular vicinity," interposed Cranston. Then, turning to Weston: "Crimes all within sight of the Hotel Alexandra, committed between ten and ten thirty in the evening." Cranston's pause was emphatic to let its significance drive home. "I would presume," added

Cranston, "that such crimes apart from their profit motive, might be designed to heap ridicule upon Ron Meldor as much as yourself, commissioner."

"So they might!" stormed Weston. "Only Meldor is twisting it the other way

about. Thanks for the suggestion, Cranston. I'll have my say to Meldor when I see him."

"Of course there could be another aspect to these circumstances of crime -"

Weston waved his hands to interrupt Cranston's further suggestions. It was

Weston's fashion to be blunt when he felt that he had reached the point of something. He never realized that he might be blunting a point that could stand

further sharpening. That was partly because Weston had another habit of getting

back to business at hand whenever he suddenly thought of it. Here in Howland's apartment was evidence of robbery as yet unsolved, a thing which the commissioner just happened to remember.

Turning to Dobbs, Weston asked the vindicated butler what the robber

looked like. Slowly, Dobbs shook his head.

"He was turned away when I first saw him," testified Dobbs. "He was leaning to listen to the radio, because it was tuned low."

"Never mind the radio -"

"But it might be important," insisted Dobbs, whose wits were returning with his power of speech. "You see, the robber was listening to Ron Meldor, over Station WVX."

Weston gave an annoyed grunt, which was echoed by a slight chuckle from Cranston.

"We were wrong, commissioner," conceded Cranston. "Apparently this ingenious criminal still listens to his favorite commentator without interfering with his own work."

"Never mind such side issues, Cranston," snapped Weston. "We're interested in the burglar, not Ron Meldor. What we still need is a description of him."

"I can give you a bit of that, sir," supplied Dobbs, promptly. "I was well

out in the hallway when I first saw him; then he went over toward the window, lighting his cigarette."

"Didn't you see his face then?"

"No. He was turned toward the window. But he was putting the cigarette out when I entered."

"And then?"

"Well, that was when I got my only good look at him." Dobbs rubbed his bandage to clear his recollection. "Not at his face, you understand, because he

was on the other side of the lamp. But he was outlined against the wall, just as

plain as you're standing before me now, commissioner."

"Go on!" Weston's patience was at its limit. "Describe the man, Dobbs."

Puckers appeared under the edge of the butler's bandage. They smoothed as Dobbs was struck with a happy thought.

"Why, that's easy, commissioner!" exclaimed Dobbs. "He looked like - yes exactly like - well, like a great human shadow!"

Beaming happily, Dobbs expected to see smiles appear upon the faces about him, but the result was quite the opposite. Weston's eyes delivered a startled bulge that formed a natural accompaniment to his dropping jaw. Cardona's face, though fixed in its poker expression, showed a peculiar change of color that was difficult to define. Only Cranston's features remained unmoved, but that in

itself was a surprise to Dobbs.

Before Weston could find words, Cardona spoke up suddenly and gruffly.

"Don't let it worry you, commissioner. It's just something that couldn't happen."

"But it has happened!" blurted Weston. "You just heard the facts, inspector. He's turned to crime."

Blandly, Cranston inserted the query:

"Who has turned to crime, commissioner?"

Wheeling toward his friend, Weston stormed the answer as though Cranston himself might be the very person who stood accused:

"The Shadow!"

CHAPTER IV

COLD silence gripped the room at Weston's words, catching Dobbs, crime's only witness, in its freezing grip. The butler's smile remained, but it turned puzzled, giving him an expression as perplexed as that of his employer, Rufus Howland.

Only Lamont Cranston seemed indifferent to the mental chill. As casual as ever, he produced a cigarette from an engraved case, inserted it in a holder, and applied the flame from a lighter. Then, as the lighter clicked shut, Cranston announced:

"You may be right, commissioner."

This from Cranston was almost too much for Weston, who for years had felt that his calm-mannered friend had some contact with The Shadow, though the commissioner had never gone to the preposterous extreme of identifying the two as one and the same.

There was something about Cranston's lackadaisical manner that made it utterly impossible to picture him accomplishing the swift, kaleidoscopic actions of which The Shadow was capable. True, Weston had often seen Cranston rise in an emergency when speed was necessary, but only in brief, spasmodic fashion that in itself indicated him to be incapable of sustained rapidity.

At any rate, Commissioner Weston was literally flabbergasted by Cranston's admission that he might be right.

Inspector Cardona wasn't quite so sure.

Not sure on two counts: first, that The Shadow could have turned to crime; second, that Cranston couldn't be The Shadow.

Trained to police work almost from boyhood, Cardona couldn't picture any true crime hunter joining the ranks of the hunted. As for the matter of identity, Cardona was ready to concede that The Shadow might be almost anybody.

Oddly, that was the very tack that Cranston now took.

"You may be right, commissioner." As he repeated the phrase, Cranston strolled toward the far wall of the living room. "It could have been The Shadow

who opened this wall safe. As for The Shadow himself, he might be anybody."

Pausing, Cranston turned, as though gauging the exact spot for the action.

Then:

"And anybody might be mistaken for The Shadow!"

As he made the statement, Cranston proved it!

The living room had twin tables, one on each side of the wall safe. Until the butler's encounter with the unknown burglar, each of those tables had borne

an identical lamp. The escaping robber had thrown one at Dobbs, but the other lamp was still in the place where it belonged and it was beyond this second lamp that Cranston had paused to make his well-timed pivot.

Not only did the lamp shade cut off sight of his face; his tuxedo clad figure was difficult to distinguish because of the intervening glare. In turn, Cranston's tall form did something to the lamplight, particularly when he stooped.

Against the wall appeared a hovering shape, grotesquely human, but magnified to startling proportions. It was a monstrous shadow, terminating in a

silhouetted profile that blurred when Cranston turned his head. A further stoop

by Cranston and the whole shape loomed monstrously, for in coming closer to the

light, he was cutting off more of its area.

Viewed calmly, the illusion was surprising; it must have been stupendous to Dobbs when he had witnessed it under stress. Indeed the memory of those excited moments imbued the butler at present, for Dobbs was nodding at the huge

silhouette as though he recognized it.

"That was it!" blurted Dobbs. "That was the way he looked - the burglar - only he was over there!"

Dobbs was pointing toward the other table, so Cranston obligingly stepped away from the lamplight, his shadow fading into his physical form. Cranston's face was visible, but quite impassive as he commented to Weston:

"You see, commissioner, anybody might be mistaken for The Shadow, even myself. So let us say the same applies to the masked burglar who was here tonight."

The definition surprised Weston.

"The masked burglar?"

"Yes," returned Cranston. "He appears to be the same man who engineered those hold-ups. Didn't the victims testify that the man in question was masked?"

The question was put to Cardona, who gave an immediate nod.

"Some of them said they thought so" declared Cardona. "Anyway, none of them saw his face."

Cardona was stretching the masked business, hoping it would enable Cranston to lead the argument still further from The Shadow. It did.

"For a long while, commissioner" - Cranston's tone was reflective - "you were inclined to deny the existence of a person called The Shadow. Later, you accepted him as real, but only because you had no other choice. It simply happened that so many unusual events were attributable only to The Shadow that you had to admit there was someone deserving that title."

It was Weston's turn to nod, which he did, having discussed this very question often with his friend Cranston.

"We are now confronted with another case of unestablished identity," continued Cranston. "We must recognize the existence of a criminal who is repeatedly active in a certain area during a certain half hour. His ways are mysterious, yes, but to confuse him with The Shadow because of that one similarity would be playing right into his hands."

"Fortunately I have just demonstrated the cause of that error" - Cranston gestured his cigarette toward the wall where he had cast the mammoth shadow - "and so to avoid any further mistakes, we should establish this new and unseemly character for future reference."

"Apparently he favors a mask as a means of concealing his identity. Logically he will continue with that process since it has proven satisfactory in the past. So let us tag him with the term that most aptly describes him, since it involves a feature upon which he must consistently depend. Suppose we call this unknown criminal The Mask."

The term was indeed apt. It stuck from that moment in the minds of both Weston and Cardona. Noting their silent acquiescence, Cranston proceeded with his analysis.

"Who is The Mask?" Calmly, Cranston answered his own question in terms that he had used in connection with The Shadow. "Anybody might be The Mask. Even I might be, since I have not accounted for my whereabouts between the time of ten o'clock and ten thirty -"

Interrupting himself with a final puff at his cigarette, Cranston shook his head as he removed the short stump from the holder. He was looking at the cigarette as he lowered it toward an ash-tray on the table near which he was now standing, the table that no longer held a lamp.

"No, I could hardly qualify." The doubt in Cranston's tone carried a slight note of disappointment. "You see I smoke Crown Cigarettes, with plain ends, since I use a holder." Displaying the cigarette, Cranston tamped it in the ash-tray but left it burning slightly to prove it was his own. "But The Mask prefers a different brand" - Cranston was lifting a half-smoked cigarette from that ash-tray - "a kind called Talleyrands, with cork tips."

Weston stared, startled.

"What's that, Cranston?"

Striding across the room, Cardona was finding out what, by looking at the cigarette that Cranston handed him. It was Dobbs who helped relieve Weston's perplexity.

"That's right, commissioner!" exclaimed the bandaged butler. "The Mask left that cigarette in the ash-tray. I saw him!

"I remember him lighting it and tossing his match-pack on the table -"

"Nor do I patronize the Cafe Diavolo," Cranston was interrupting as he picked up the very match-pack mentioned. "I don't recall ever having been seen in the place. Have you, inspector?"

Cranston was handing the match-pack to Cardona, so he could study the name

'Cafe Diavolo' along with the appropriate red devil that formed part of the printed advertisement. Turning toward the light so he could squint at the address that was printed in smaller letters, Cardona replied:

"Never have. So you can't prove I'm The Mask, any more than I'm The Shadow. Say" - Cardona's head turned toward the window and he thumbed out into the darkness - "this Diavolo joint isn't far from here! Only about six blocks, over that way!"

Weston was approaching and gazing out into the night as though expecting to see a hoard of red-illuminated devils come bobbing from a distant roof top and go into an infernal dance. Cardona however wasn't inclined to await such unlikely pyrotechnics.

"What say we go over to the place?" asked Cardona. "Maybe we can follow up this lead, commissioner. We'll prove one thing, anyway, that we're right on the job and getting closer to The Mask. That's something Ron Meldor ought to know."

"You're right, inspector," agreed Weston, "and six blocks isn't far to go to spike that crack-pot's notions."

A dry comment came from Cranston.

"You can do it in three blocks, commissioner."

In answer to Weston's stare of sudden query, Cranston gestured from the window toward a very conspicuous sign that the Commissioner had overlooked in scanning the horizon for imaginary demons. The sign said:

HOTEL ALEXANDRA

"Meldor's talking grounds," reminded Cranston, "and he receives visitors after every broadcast. Why not attend tonight's reception, commissioner, and give Meldor advance notice of tomorrow's news before he can tell his friends how much he already knows about it?"

The hand-clap that descended on Cranston's shoulder marked Weston's approval of his friend's suggestion. But Cranston's eyes were staring beyond the lighted hotel sign toward the darkness shrouding the Cafe Diavolo.

A visit to that night-club could wait, but Cranston expected to go there later. Not that he hoped to see red devils; Cranston was thinking of a bad actor of a different breed. Recalling his recent experiences as The Shadow, Cranston remembered an unknown assailant who had fled from the alley behind the

Hotel Alexandra in the direction of the Cafe Diavolo.

Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow, was thinking in terms of The Mask
-
otherwise - anybody...

CHAPTER V

"LAMONT!"

Margo Lane whispered the name from between the mauve curtains of a reception room that flanked the ornate lobby of the much-dated Hotel Alexandra.

When Margo gave one of those stage whispers it demanded quick attention,

because

after a few repeats, everybody else within range was likely to hear it.

At present, Weston and Cardona were within range, but they were talking to

each other, which was why Margo took the risk. But Margo was weak in allowing for pauses and Cranston didn't want the name "Lamont" to be voiced during a lull. So he gave an easy, side-hand beckon that ended with his forefinger pointing toward the elevator.

Margo blinked; then frowned into the brunette bangs that fringed her stylish hair-do.

The blink meant that she couldn't understand why Lamont was inviting her to join such serious company as the police commissioner and his ace inspector. The frown was because Margo had something to tell Lamont without the others hearing it. However, with two strikes against her, Margo couldn't see the sense on being called out on a third. So she emerged from the curtains and overtook the group at the elevator.

It was quite a surprise to Weston when he turned and saw Cranston giving Margo a welcoming bow. As they stepped into the elevator, the commissioner injected an indirect criticism of Cranston's social life with the sharp query:

"Don't tell me you were bringing Miss Lane to Meldor's reception, Cranston?"

"Of course not," rejoined Cranston. "We were to meet on the Alexandra Roof

Garden. It's one of the few conservative night-spots left."

Margo really blinked at that one. She didn't even know the Alexandra had a

roof garden. She thought of the Hotel Alexandra as a great chunk of red brick sprouting brown and white striped awnings from the windows of its dozen floors.

At least the hotel was conservative, for it dated to the period when the architects stopped with the twelfth floor, rather than have rooms beginning with the number thirteen.

Of course a later generation of skyscraper designers had learned to simply

skip the thirteenth floor, but that had nothing to do with Margo's present worry. She wanted to tell Lamont the rumor about The Shadow, if he didn't already know it. She'd heard it by chance and had come here to flag Lamont, before he walked into it.

Meldor's suite was on the eleventh floor and Margo could hear the buzz from it as they turned the corner of the corridor. Lagging, she gripped Cranston's arm and he stepped back while Weston and Cardona continued on ahead.

"Meldor knows!" confided Margo. "It's gotten all over the hotel - maybe even to the roof garden, if there is one."

"There is," assured Cranston. "I noticed it mentioned on the bulletin board. The roof garden, I mean; the rumor wasn't posted."

"Can't you guess what it was?"

Cranston took in Margo's query with his eyes as well as ears. A momentary study of her expression told him.

"Something about The Shadow."

"I'll say!" acknowledged Margo. "He was rampaging out in the alley. Took a

pot shot at one of Meldor's bodyguards, bowled a pair of them with an ash-can and finished by pitching a knife right between the two. They think he was trying to get at Meldor!"

Cranston was gesturing Margo along as she finished her tabloid account.

He

wasn't surprised by these details covering the sequel to his trailing of The Mask. The brawny team of Kirby and Jeff couldn't have known that The Shadow had

been searching the blind alley for someone who hadn't stopped there, only to have a knife come whizzing from the outer darkness just to prove that alleys were bad places in which to linger.

The Shadow's shot had opened the festivities for Kirby and Jeff. They had magnified the rest from their own viewpoint, even mixing the future with the past. Just how far they'd gone out of line, The Shadow was soon to learn in the person of Lamont Cranston.

In his hotel suite the famed Ron Meldor was halting his one-man reception to stare at the last two visitors he ever expected in these preserves. Those two were Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona; hence Meldor hardly noticed

Cranston and Margo when they entered shortly afterward.

Taken at face value, the famed Ron Meldor wasn't much. He was gaunt of face, stooped and thin of frame, with his unbuttoned tuxedo jacket hanging from

his shoulders like a drape. When he opened his mouth, he started with his upper

lip, revealing a set of teeth that looked like something out of a novelty-catalog listing joker's supplies.

Not handsome, but useful, those teeth. Ron Meldor used them to bite off words without mincing them, as he demonstrated quite promptly.

"So, commissioner!" Ron's eyes sharpened as he spoke. "You've heard about it, so you're here. As typical as usual, providing protection when it is too late."

"You can't stop crime until you hear about it," stormed Weston, glaring angrily at the group surrounding Ron. "I can't see that you helped us any."

The commissioner's gaze was back on Ron. The commentator gave one of his sharp, annoying laughs and, turning to the rest of the group, he gestured as though to ask their opinion. They nodded, as good stooges should.

Cranston was looking over the crowd.

Among the group were, some of the personnel from Station WVX, including a harassed man who answered to the description of Louis Murthrie, who directed Ron's program. Murthrie at least did not appear to regard Ron Meldor as the demigod that the others considered him - and there was good reason.

Since Ron insisted upon broadcasting privately from this special hotel suite, Murthrie had to handle him over a hook-up to the studio which was on the

other side of town. Naturally that wasn't pleasant, since Murthrie had to time announcements, music and occasional guests to suit Ron's remote convenience.

Right now, Murthrie was in a steaming mood because somebody had suggested that Ron's broadcasts be dramatized to give the listening audience a graphic idea of how crimes actually happened while the police weren't around. This, of course, would add immensely to the director's complications, but nobody seemed to care, least of all Ron Meldor.

In fact, the unexpected arrival of Commissioner Weston stirred Ron's mind to the dramatic.

"Crime seems to be really heading my way, commissioner," observed Ron.

"Maybe it would sound well on the air to reenact what happened tonight.

Unfortunately there weren't any police sirens as a follow-up."

"We were on the scene as soon as the crime was reported," snapped Weston.

"But I can't see where it concerns you, Meldor."

"It was close enough, commissioner."

"Perhaps, if you consider three blocks close."

Ron gave a puzzled stare; then queried sharply:

"Are we talking about the same thing, commissioner?"

"I'm talking about the Howland robbery," retorted Weston. "Howland's apartment is just three blocks from here. You know, Rufus Howland, the philanthropist who has been helping the charity drive."

Sudden interest gleamed on Ron's gaunt face.

"You mean that Howland's place was robbed? Not of charity funds, by any chance?"

"Fifty thousand dollars worth," declared Weston, "but for your information, Meldor, I may state that we have a complete description of the criminal, along with certain of his habits."

These final details seemed to intrigue Ron, so Weston promptly specified them.

"The wanted man frequents the Cafe Diavolo", asserted Weston, "and his favorite brand of cigarettes are Talleyrands, with cork tips."

As though disdainful of persons with such delicate smoking habits, Ron produced a cigar from his pocket and bit off the end as a rabbit would snap a turnip. A dapper man with a little mustache provided a lighted match and Ron said indifferently: "Thanks, Barringham." Then, blowing a cloud of blue smoke, Ron asked in the manner of a technical expert:

"What else, commissioner?"

Cardona expected Weston to explode, but he didn't. Instead, the commissioner made brusque but concise reply. "The crime took place at quarter past ten," stated Weston, "about the middle of your broadcast, Meldor. Both location and time mark the criminal as the same man who perpetrated recent robberies."

"But what did he look like, commissioner?"

"Howland's butler failed to see the man's face. We assume therefore that the criminal was wearing a mask -"

"Only a mask?"

Ron's interruption was as pointed as a stab. It took Weston so suddenly that the commissioner's own face displayed a return of its former doubt.

Noting

it, Ron Meldor drove home his own chosen theory.

"Perhaps the criminal's face was hidden by a hat," suggested Ron. "A slouch hat with a turned-down brim, matching a black cloak that he wore with it. Because such a person tried to enter this hotel, obviously with intent to murder me!"

Ron's tone had reached the high, impressive pitch that he used across the air to keep his listeners agog.

"To murder me" - as he repeated the phrase, Ron beckoned to Barringham, and the dapper man tossed an object on the table in front of Weston - "with the

weapon that you see before you!"

Startled by the clatter, Weston frowned, staring at a long-bladed knife that had all the deadly appearance ascribed to it by Meldor.

Then, in a shout of frenzied accusation, Ron drove home the charge:

"And that man, commissioner, that assassin who was foiled only through my personal precautions, was none other than your unknown friend who claims to stand for law and justice, the fiend who calls himself The Shadow!"

CHAPTER VI

"FRIEND or fiend?"

The caption appeared under a life-sized photograph on the front page of the New York Classic, the most sensational tabloid newspaper in Manhattan. The picture represented a man wearing a tilted slouch hat that practically obscured

his features, though there was a faint curve just above the chin line to represent a mask, this being included in deference to the opinions of Police Commissioner Weston.

The picture did not bear the title of The Shadow, though of course it was implied. Actually it was a photograph of a reporter named Clyde Burke who had consented to pose for it. Clyde did this out of loyalty rather than choice, for

a reason which manifested itself later.

He was a serious-minded reporter, this Clyde Burke. Evidently he thought that the riddle of The Shadow and The Mask was something he should personally attempt to solve, now that he had doubled for both in a composite photograph. At any rate, when he left the Classic office at nine in the evening, Clyde went

directly to a night-spot called the Cafe Diavolo.

The place was located in a basement on a side street. Though unpretentious on the outside, its interior was tastefully decorated with very little emphasis on the devil motif. In fact the most noticeable ornament in the cafe was a fire department sign stating that the restaurant was unsafe for more than one hundred and twenty persons.

There were about two dozen tables that zigzagged off into alcoves and a quiet, almost deserted bar, sight of which prompted Clyde with the idea that he needed a drink. A squatly bartender looked Clyde over with a knowing nod as the reporter perched on a bar stool.

Evidently bartenders could recognize reporters as easily as reporters could recognize bartenders. Catching the idea, Clyde decided to exert the power of the press. Observing a rack of cigarettes behind the barkeep, Clyde leaned forward on his elbows and queried confidentially:

"Get many calls for Talleyrand cigarettes?"

The bartender didn't reply. He simply met Clyde's gaze straight on.

"I said Talleyrands," repeated Clyde. "The kind with cork tips. Twenty in a box and you get a pack of matches with them."

The bartender shrugged.

"I'm new here," he declared. "Besides, not many people smoke Talleyrands. Funny thing, though" - the bartender turned to begin polishing a glass - "somebody just asked for a box of Talleyrand Corks a few minutes ago."

In his enthusiasm, Clyde practically forgot that he was a poker-faced reporter. His query came eagerly:

"Who?"

"Party over by the stairs. Got his back turned and he's sort of hid behind

that palm plant. Maybe" - the barkeep gave a wise, side-eyed look - "if you asked him why he likes Talleyrands, he'd tell you."

"Thanks," said Clyde. "Maybe I'll do just that."

Leaving the bar, Clyde sauntered over toward the stairs muttering "- and maybe I won't -" under his breath. The leaves of the palms furnished more interference than he'd expected, so Clyde decided to go up the stairs and view the table from a downslant. He'd only taken a few steps when a quiet voice interrupted him.

"The upstairs dining room is closed," it said. "Why not stay down here, Burke, and join us?"

Coming down the steps and around the plant, Clyde Burke found himself face to face with Lamont Cranston, while from across the table Margo Lane was supplying a broad smile which included a cork-tipped Talleyrand in its midst.

"I ordered the cigarettes for Margo," explained Cranston. "I wouldn't risk

smoking that brand myself. I might be mistaken for The Mask."

"Or The Shadow," added Margo, "which might prove just as bad."

"Having recently posed as both, Burke should understand," remarked Cranston. "Or did each part nullify the other when you played them both

together?"

Clyde gave an unhappy grin.

"I thought you'd recognize the picture," he acknowledged. "Well, it had to be somebody, so I felt I could throw a little sentiment into it. If they want to make The Shadow out to be a phony, I'd just as soon be included in the deal."

There was appreciation in Cranston's gaze; one of long understanding. However, those impassive eyes of his were leaving Clyde to form his own conclusions. Supposedly a reporter on the Classic, Clyde Burke was actually an agent of The Shadow. In all of his years of service, he had never become convinced of his chief's identity.

True, Clyde had associated Cranston with The Shadow, but so had a lot of other people. The further such a quest was pressed, the less it produced; in fact, there were times when Cranston and The Shadow had been seen independently in places so far apart that it seemed certain the two persons must be different individuals.

There were whys and wherefores to that subject, which Clyde Burke, like other agents of The Shadow, had felt it his duty to ignore. But at present, the situation was producing an approach to this forbidden ground. The riddle of The

Mask was in itself a question of identity. To prove that such a malefactor existed was only half the problem; the other half was to convince a skeptical public stirred to feverish anxiety by Ron Meldor, that if The Mask did exist, he was not one and the same as The Shadow!

It seemed proper for Clyde to broach this dilemma openly, which he did.

"They don't take Commissioner Weston very seriously down at the Classic," Clyde told Cranston. "They say he never could make up his mind about The Shadow, so why should they listen to his blather about someone called The Mask?"

"A very sound argument," conceded Cranston. "I am glad to hear it, Burke."

"But, Lamont!" began Margo. "You just were saying -"

"I'm listening now, Margo," interrupted Cranston, quite politely. "We're getting short on time, so let's hear what else Burke has to tell us. He has the floor."

"Not exactly," returned Clyde. "I'd say Ron Meldor has it. At least he's taken over the air, which is what counts. I've seen an advance of his script for this evening in a press release from WVX. He's saying 'Find The Shadow' in just that many words."

"Suppose somebody did find The Shadow," suggested Margo, suddenly. "What if he actually went to jail, or - or -" There was hesitancy when Margo looked at Cranston, as though she had begun to weigh the uninviting difference between

a stone-walled jail cell and a plush-lined cafe. Then: "Or he might just isolate himself and prove that he was out of circulation."

"For what purpose?" queried Cranston.

"Why, then when new crimes happened," returned Margo, "people wouldn't blame The Shadow. They'd know it was The Mask!"

"Only The Mask would just quit operating," argued Clyde. "That would throw it right back on The Shadow."

"Or at least keep everything in doubt," inserted Cranston, "and there has been too much doubt already."

"But there wouldn't be any crimes!" argued Margo. "Not if The Mask knew he

couldn't blame them on The Shadow!"

Margo's bright notion brought a real smile from Cranston, who gave Clyde a nod:

"You tell her, Burke."

"If The Shadow shelved himself," analyzed Clyde, "The Mask wouldn't operate. But every other crook in town would. More stones would be upturned so that slimy things could crawl back into circulation - little snakes, big snakes -"

"I get it." Margo waved her hands in surrender. "In stopping one, The Shadow would release a thousand. But what's to be done about The Mask?"

Nobody seemed to know, not even Cranston, for he reverted to the subject of Ron Meldor's next broadcast.

"So Ron prepares his scripts beforehand," mused Cranston. "From his delivery, most of his talk sounds ad lib. What else did he put in that advance copy, Burke?"

"He threw a few jabs at the commissioner," recalled Clyde. "It appears that Weston is holding a private conference with persons who have met The Mask, to gain their reactions."

Cranston nodded. He'd heard about the conference, but from his indifference he wasn't going to attend it. However, he added a few facts that Clyde didn't know.

"Weston has been accumulating evidence," stated Cranston, "along the order of the cigarette and match-pack that were found at Howland's. It seems The Mask - or The Shadow - dropped a hat-check in a taxicab during a recent hold-up. It came from a night-club called the Bagatelle."

"So that's another of his haunts!" expressed Margo. "Like this place."

"There was also an odd glove," added Cranston, "and a pawn ticket that probably belonged to the unknown gentleman. A careless chap, The Mask. So careless" - Cranston was glancing at his watch - "that I'd rather like to meet him."

Margo's eyes were all query. Clyde was restraining his expression, but he was curious too.

"A crime a night," mused Cranston. "That seems to be the motto of The Mask. He's hitting close to home, not only to The Shadow, but to Ron Meldor."

"That's right," acknowledged Clyde. "His jobs, have all been in the vicinity."

"So suppose you cover this area, Burke," suggested Cranston, "as a good reporter should. First, you ought to take Margo somewhere" - he paused as though weighing the question - "and it strikes me that the Alexandra Roof Garden would be a good place."

"Why the Alexandra Roof?" demanded Margo. "Why shouldn't I stay right here?"

"At the notorious Cafe Diavolo?"

There was mock horror in Cranston's query. "You would stay here all alone, Margo, in The Mask's favorite haunt, smoking his own sacred brand of cigarettes?"

No" - Cranston shook his head - "I think the Alexandra Roof is better. It is quiet, conservative, convenient, and very close to what may happen."

Cranston didn't specify what might happen, but his summary intrigued Margo. As they left the Cafe Diavolo, Cranston remarked that he would see her later, so with Clyde as escort, Margo started toward the Hotel Alexandra, which bulked three blocks away.

Margo couldn't have gone twenty steps before she recalled something she'd

meant to ask Lamont. Turning to look for him, she promptly forgot the thing she'd just remembered. That wasn't surprising, considering what had happened almost under Margo's eyes.

Lamont Cranston had simply evaporated. In less than a dozen seconds, he was gone, with nowhere to account for it. He couldn't have turned back to the Cafe Diavolo for he'd walked to the corner with Margo and Clyde, before leaving them. But Lamont wasn't in sight anywhere along this lighted street.

Sometimes Lamont Cranston invoked mysterious measures of his own, almost as mysterious as the ways of The Shadow!

CHAPTER VII

BLAUDER'S JEWELRY STORE glittered by day, but was very dull by night. The difference lay in Blauder's display window, or rather what wasn't always in the window.

Except on Saturday evenings and this wasn't Saturday.

In the daytime, Blauder's window showed a great array of gems, mostly of garish and peculiar variety. For example, there were brilliant zircons, guaranteed to "look like diamonds" along with Spanish topaz, which happened to be the trade term for an excellent yellow quartz.

There were other jewels listed as rubicelle, olivine, and similar attractive names. Of course there were Balas rubies, which were merely spinels;

Brazilian emeralds, which were tourmalines under a more pleasant title; and specimens of a stone called a tiger's eye, which resembled but couldn't match the much fancier Cat's Eye which some gem collectors cherished.

At night, all these gee-gaws were put away and Blauder's window was rendered intact by a steel grill-work that was locked across it. In fact, at night it looked more like a jewelry store than in the daytime, since the window

was no longer filled with stuff that a real connoisseur of gems would shun.

The Shadow had viewed Blauder's in the daytime; now he was studying the place after dark.

Of course nobody would have known that The Shadow was around, not in his present setting. He was standing close beside an ornamental pillar that marked the front corner of the jewelry store and he had picked that particular pillar in relation to a street lamp. Properly deflected, the light didn't show The Shadow at all. As his name implied, he belonged to the shadows and used them whenever he found them.

Ordinarily even The Shadow would have rejected a store like Blauder's as a place where crime might be expected, but it happened to be the one and only jewelry store within sight of the Hotel Alexandra. If a gentleman termed The Mask intended to crack a jewelry store, Blauder's would be his only choice, provided that he intended to continue his campaign of spicing Ron Meldor's radio broadcasts by staging more crimes close at hand, whenever the commentator was on the air.

The area was suited to this; the time was almost at hand, as evidenced by a clock across the street.

But what about the place itself?

A whispered laugh came from the lips of the unseen figure that stood so close to the jewelry store window.

The tone was a token of The Shadow's most recent analysis. In a sense it asked another question:

What was a jewelry store doing here?

There wasn't any reason for it, least of all for a store like Blauder's.

Too far off the beaten track, a jewelry store would go broke trying to do business in this vicinity, but Blauder's had certainly been here a long time. If the place had dealt in the finest merchandise, a lot of people would have wondered, but since it handled cheaper merchandise, those same people didn't wonder.

The Shadow wasn't one of those people. He never ended an analysis half way.

Satisfied that a high-class jeweler wouldn't find this neighborhood attractive, The Shadow rejected the obvious conclusion that a cheaper trader would fare well. The more it's prospects were considered, the worse the location looked. Even more than a fancier jeweler, a cheap operator would need volume to stay in business. Slum shops belonged on lighted avenues, not on dull side streets away from throng centers.

Added up, there was something phony about Blauder's. The store looked like a front for some shady business. That in turn made it a logical target for crime, the sort that The Mask would probably like.

What The Shadow wanted now was a quick way into the jewelry store and to his practiced eye the place was just about as free of holes as a sieve. The grill-work across the empty display window, the heavy bars that protected the front door, looked as though their main purpose was to scare marauders. Discounting those two features, the rest of the building looked like any other ordinary building, so far as forcible entry might be concerned.

There were cellar windows with simple gratings that could be pried with the average crow-bar. The doors of a sidewalk elevator were fastened with an ordinary padlock which offered more of a stumbling hazard for pedestrians than it did a safeguard against burglars. The second floor had windows that weren't even barred, though whether they gave access to the jewelry store was still a question.

Such was The Shadow's summary of the building front. With a glide that dwindled him into the darkness, he entered an alley that ran alongside the building to see what opportunities it offered.

It offered plenty.

Within a few minutes The Shadow was inside the building without the bother of working down through the cellar or scaling to the second floor. His mode of entry was through a first floor window in back of the store proper and it brought him into what appeared to be an old store room.

There were two doors: one leading out to the back yard; the other offering a way into the jewelry shop, except that it was heavily locked. This was no deterrent to The Shadow, now that he was in a place where he could operate without interruption.

A tiny-beamed flashlight focussed itself upon the lock, while special picks began to probe with the delicacy of a surgeon's instruments. Finally, without the slightest click, the lock yielded; but even then, there was care in The Shadow's testing of the door itself.

He was taking a chance, The Shadow, but one that he could afford to risk. If the door happened to be wired for a burglar alarm, all hell might break loose should the barrier be opened carelessly. To anyone bent on robbery, this would of course be disastrous; but since The Shadow was here to stifle crime, he would at least be hampering it if the alarm did cut loose.

But The Shadow was hoping for more than a mere preventative.

This lone investigator sought to nip crime in the making as a means toward his own vindication. Only by meeting The Mask and exposing the actual identity of the unknown master criminal, could The Shadow preserve his own status as a crime hunter and the anonymity that went with it.

Hence The Shadow handled that door with a touch so precise that the slightest resistance would have evidenced itself. He'd tested various burglar alarms before, just to learn how criminals sometimes handled them. The Shadow's skill was such that he could almost sense the presence of an alarm.

Soon, a whispered laugh stirred the darkness. With it, the door swung wide under the pressure of a gloved hand. The Shadow had worked it far enough to learn that it wasn't wired. Closing the door softly behind him, The Shadow paused in a little passage where curtains marked the way into the jewelry shop.

Hand stretched forward, The Shadow was actually drawing those curtains aside when a voice stopped him.

A voice that came in a sharp accusing tone:

"And you, Shadow, the man who claims to stand for justice! What excuse can you give, now that you have turned to ways of crime? Why are you continuing the ill-chosen career that has now replaced your former urge for right?

"Even now I can see you stalking through the darkness. I can see the hand of The Shadow reaching for loot, seeking to rob where once it halted crime. Before morning - perhaps within an hour, the world will know that The Shadow, turned to crime, has perpetrated another outrage.

"I can picture The Shadow undeterred by this denouncement, laughing in mockery at these very words -"

Those very words were interrupted by a whispered laugh which was indeed The Shadow's. Stepping through the curtains, the cloaked invader turned in the direction of the voice and recognized that it was coming through the transom above a dim door that wore the word: "Office."

It wasn't the voice of an accuser stationed in that room. The tone was recognizable as the familiar blare of Ron Meldor, broadcasting over WVX. The jewelry store clock geared to naval observatory time, showed five minutes past ten.

Ron Meldor was at it again, piping away from his sealed suite in the Hotel Alexandra, this time denouncing The Shadow rather than the law!

CHAPTER VIII

"- AND where is our efficient police commissioner at this moment? I shall tell you! The time is precisely ten minutes after ten, but instead of personally taking charge of the precinct where crime has struck so often, the commissioner is holding what he regards as an important conference in another part of the city!"

Thus did the voice of WVX as personalized by Ron Meldor, strike off another item marking the law's inefficiency. Perhaps the fact that Ron had switched back to his earlier peeve, spurred The Shadow's present operation. At any rate there was nothing dilatory about The Shadow's tactics.

At a sizable safe that bore the name of Blauder, The Shadow was concentrating that tiny light of his upon the combination dial. With fingers as educated as The Mask's, with ears requiring no device to pick up clicks, The Shadow was making fast progress with his quest. Tonight, he expected to be ahead of The Mask.

"Remember the robbery at Howland's?" The voice from the office radio carried a sharp sneer. "You should remember it, Commissioner Weston, if you are listening. In that robbery, The Shadow demonstrated his skill as a safe-cracker!"

"Maybe there are other safes in the same vicinity. If so, I can picture The Shadow planning to crack one right now. Why not? If there is one area The Shadow would prefer, it lies within a radius of a mile from the Hotel Alexandra.

"I shall tell you why, commissioner. It is because you have refused to properly protect that area, on the ground that I am baiting you to do it. Even now, while I am warning against such crime, The Shadow may be opening a bank vault, or a safe in some jewelry store -"

Again, a whispered laugh interjected itself. The Shadow had called the turn this time. Tuned to the blatant words from WVX the safe came open!

Instantly, The Shadow's whisper faded. In risking what seemed crime, he was working toward another purpose. It was his idea to empty this nest of something more important than Blauder's second-rate jewels, something that The Shadow was sure that he would find here, namely cash.

The place was a perfect front for fencing stolen gems of a quality much higher than Blauder's window displayed. In recent robberies The Mask had acquired plenty of such jewels and could well have sold them to Blauder. Naturally, The Mask would not be planning to steal them back, so he would have waited until Blauder disposed of them, which was probable by this time.

So The Shadow was very interested in a special compartment right in the center of the pigeon-holes at the back of the safe. It would most likely be Blauder's cash box; in fact now The Shadow was positive of it.

The door of that little compartment was hanging open on one hinge, showing vacancy beyond.

Somebody had already rifled Blauder's cash box, beating The Shadow to his own game!

Nice going, this, but not for The Shadow.

In coming here so shortly after ten o'clock, The Shadow had hoped to be ahead of The Mask. He had counted on supplying that smart criminal with a real surprise. How easy it would have been to confront and trap The Mask when he saw that the cash was gone.

The Shadow had been playing it one ahead, only to learn that The Mask could indulge in the same subterfuge.

However if The Mask had hoped to surprise The Shadow, that part of the system didn't work.

It wasn't surprise that caused The Shadow's laugh to fade. The end of his mirth proved only that he had become suddenly alert. The Shadow wasted no time in probing the safe which he knew had lost what counted. Instead, he wheeled instantly away from the open door, gripping its edge as he turned. At the same time, his flashlight extinguished itself as he thrust it beneath his cloak, bringing out an automatic to replace it.

Crouched in absolute darkness The Shadow had a steel shield that he could use to instant advantage. That buffer was the open door of the safe and The Shadow was prepared to twist to either side of it, dependent on what sounds he heard from elsewhere in the store. If The Mask hoped to spring a trap, he was going to miss out, for at the slightest token of the criminal's presence, The Shadow could gain an intervening barricade.

No slinky sounds occurred, but if they had, The Shadow might not have heard them. The stentorian voice of WVX was drowning everything in its vociferous style.

Smart of The Mask to turn on Blauder's radio in the jeweler's own office and let Ron Meldor personally drown out any sounds of crime. It was certainly a case of reversing a spell-binder's clamor against himself, but how deep did the process go?

Did The Mask actually expect that this would trick The Shadow?

The answer was "No."

If The Mask had lurked here with the stolen cash, counting upon the radio's sounds to help him spring a trap, he would have had his real opportunity by this time, for he could have spotted the blinks of The Shadow's flashlight.

It was far more likely that The Mask had counted on the radio to cover such sounds as a hasty getaway, should he be forced to make one. Since The Shadow had seen no evidence of The Mask's earlier entry, it was likely that he had gotten into the store through Blauder's office. It followed therefore that he had taken the same route out.

That decided The Shadow's policy.

Swinging the safe door shut, The Shadow turned the dial; then, with long, speedy strides, he reached the door of the office and opened it. A few moments later, his flashlight was flicking around a small, square-shaped room furnished

in the shoddy style that Blauder probably felt fitted the cheap front that helped his illicit business.

There was a door in the far corner of the office. It was one step up and it stood ajar, because it had a broken hasp with a padlock dangling from it. The door couldn't quite close because of the treatment it had been given from the other side.

The Mask had jimmied it. That could be why he'd turned on the radio, on the possibility that more noise would be necessary. But now The Shadow was thanking The Mask for that bit of foresight. With noise to cover his departure,

The Mask might be taking his time; if so, The Shadow could overtake him.

Noting a trifling light from beyond the door crack, The Shadow extinguished his flashlight. Opening the door, he peered up the stairs and saw a lighted hallway at the top, evidently part of an apartment. Since the voice of Ron Meldor was in full blare, The Shadow stepped back and gradually tuned it down.

"- And would you like to know where our friend the commissioner is holding

his secret conference?" Meldor was saying. "Very well, I shall tell you, but first let me state who has been invited there. Among the guests are all the victims of recent hold-ups and robberies -"

The Shadow wasn't listening to what Meldor's voice said, but someone else was interested. With the gradual dwindling of the tone, The Shadow could hear creeping sounds along the hallway above. Apparently The Mask had lingered as The Shadow hoped. It was The Shadow this time who was furnishing the bait!

Why would The Mask return?

Perhaps this was actually a trap; or it might be that he wanted to learn who had entered. In any case, it would be to The Shadow's advantage to bring The Mask his way. The further The Mask came, the better, so The Shadow eased completely from the office and worked his way back to the rear curtains that led to the store room.

There, The Shadow waited, his keen ears barely catching the tone from the dwindled radio.

"- And in his conference, the commissioner has included certain persons who might expect a visit from the notorious criminal that the commissioner refuses to believe can be his friend The Shadow -"

It was very feeble, not much more than an echo, that tone from the radio in the office. The Shadow caught it, because he was listening for other sounds as well. Slight creaks, very slight, from the general vicinity of the office, seemed to chime with Ron's next flash of subdued information.

"- And so, in keeping with his policy of locking the barn door too late, the commissioner is reviewing past evidence, with no real thought to the future

-"

The Shadow was peering between the curtains, his automatic muzzle

following the line of his eyes, which were guiding over toward the office door.

It was then that the slightest of blinks caught his gaze and drew it elsewhere,
just as he heard a strangely familiar clang.

With that, the light suddenly increased, like a reflection from some cavernous depth. It came from in front of the very safe that The Shadow had so recently opened. Again, the door of the safe was wide, indicating that The Shadow's bait had far exceeded his expectations.

For in front of that opened safe, visible in the dull glare that he himself provided, was a stooping man with a bandana handkerchief stretched across his face. Amazing though it seemed, there was only one logical answer.

Tricked by The Shadow, the criminal called The Mask had returned to the very safe that he had rifled!

CHAPTER IX

CREEPING out from between the curtains, The Shadow was moving through the darkness in his usual swift but silent style. His gun muzzle seemed to probe the darkness straight ahead of him, guiding toward that crouching figure, prepared to lay itself upon The Mask's unprotected neck and therewith demand a show-down.

Even as he approached, The Shadow could see what The Mask was doing. From a pocket, the man with the hidden face was producing small objects that The Shadow could not see and was laying them within the door of the safe itself. One of The Mask's hands was gloved; the other was bare, but from it dangled the mate of the glove he wore.

Then, so quickly that the manoeuver thwarted The Shadow's approach, The Mask swung to his feet, dropping the odd glove as he used his other hand to slam the safe shut, twirling the dial with the same action. His hand, coming around with the flashlight, threw its glare full upon The Shadow.

Until that moment, The Mask's actions had made sense. Now through some curious whim, the criminal had sped his work and gained luck with it. He couldn't logically have suspected The Shadow's approach, but there was no time to analyze what was actually in his mind. The Mask had spotted The Shadow and wasn't surprised.

Things happened very fast.

Letting his flashlight fling in The Shadow's direction, The Mask made a long dive into darkness past the safe, just as a .45 automatic punched its flame in his direction. The Shadow didn't expect that shot to clip The Mask, not under these hurried circumstances, but he did count upon other results.

A missed shot could be very helpful by encouraging a return fire. The right thing was to be in the wrong place when such a stab came back, then to use it as a target for a gunspurt that would really count. So if anything, The Shadow's dive, off in an unexpected direction, outdid The Mask's.

In his dive, The Shadow struck a counter and with rare judgment smashed its glass with a swing of his automatic, at the same time taking a longer, sideward dive away from that direction. He expected a shot to follow and he waited for it as he landed silently in darkness.

What came first was the subdued tone of the radio from the office:

"- And so this evening, the commissioner is a guest in the swanky penthouse owned by Creighton Sloane, at Riverview Gardens. You may recall that Mr. Sloane was one of the early victims of the current crime wave -"

Perhaps The Mask was intrigued by the subdued but sarcastic tone of Ron Meldor. At least The Mask let the commentator get some weighty information across the radio. Then, as if suddenly annoyed by his own delay, The Mask let rip with gunfire; not just one shot, but three.

It wasn't the target that puzzled The Shadow. The Mask was shooting right

where he should have, toward the counter that The Shadow had purposely smashed.

The unexpected lay in the source from which those shots came. In the darkness, The Mask had apparently done quite as well as The Shadow.

Instead of blazing from somewhere in the store itself, the shots were fired from the door of the office. To double back in that direction, The Mask must have performed a turnabout as clever as The Shadow's, perhaps more!

Against the dim light from the office, light supplied from that other door

to the stairs, The Shadow caught just a momentary glimpse of the man who wore the bandana. Here, luck seemed with The Shadow, for he was at the only angle where he could have gained that view. With his fire, The Mask gave the door a sudden slam that indicated full intention of a rapid flight.

At least The Shadow could prove that he was faster than The Mask.

Along with the shots, The Shadow was starting toward the door. He didn't shoot as he went - it would have meant too hasty aim. He wanted to overtake The

Mask, perhaps coaxing him to further waste fire; then a settlement could be satisfactorily arranged at closer range. But The Mask, to all indications, was to prove himself a demon in the dark.

The Shadow hadn't even reached the door, before two new shots stabbed and this time they came his way. The Mask couldn't have chosen a better location from which to resume negotiations. The shots were fired from the very corner of

the jewelry counter that The Shadow had smashed in the middle of a zig-zag dive!

A fast worker, The Mask.

With a speed that matched The Shadow's, The Mask had reversed the situation almost completely. His one mistake was that of firing too soon. Maybe

he'd overestimated The Shadow's speed, but if he'd held his fire a few moments longer, The Shadow would have come right into its path.

To stop short of the office door, The Shadow took a wild spin in the darkness, knocking over a small counter that bore an empty cash register.

Along

with the clatter of machinery, The Shadow fired a diving shot that he followed with a long roll to a corner. The Mask stabbed back, his bullets coming wide and high. Three shots more, all wide and high, while The Mask was on the move.

In the darkness, The Mask was making for another corner of the store and The Shadow came to his feet to follow. He heard a clatter and fired two shots to probe the darkness. This time The Shadow's aim was high, for the stab that responded came from the floor itself. Hearing a sudden thud, The Shadow reached

the corner and flung a flashlight on the spot where The Mask had been.

The glow revealed a trap-door leading to the basement. The Mask had dropped right through it, letting it fall behind him. The Shadow wrenched it open as quickly as The Mask had closed it, but by then, the man with the bandana was racing through, to the front of the cellar, flinging boxes to block

The Shadow's path.

Before he could overtake the fugitive, The Shadow heard the rumble of an elevator and knew that The Mask was using it to reach the street. Since the elevator itself would block the exit, there was only one natural course to take. Up the ladder, back through the trap door, The Shadow cut through the rear store room and went out by the window that he had originally entered.

A terrific clangor accompanied The Shadow's race along the round-about route. Somewhere during his flight, The Mask, must have set off the alarm. Bells were blaring from Blauder's jewelry store, thoroughly stifling what was left of the subdued broadcast from Station WVX, which had about five minutes to

go, according to the big clock across the street.

Police sirens sounded from a few blocks away, indicating that the precinct patrol was on the job despite the fact that the commissioner had not ordained special precautions in this crime-laden neighborhood. Dodging trouble wasn't difficult for The Shadow, but on this occasion he saw a chance to disappear from circulation as rapidly as The Mask.

Looming only a block away was a perfect haven in the shape of the Hotel Alexandra. As he neared it, The Shadow whipped off his hat and cloak, bundling them neatly across his arm to give the impression of a light overcoat with a hat brim peering from beneath it. Then, approaching the hotel by a slightly longer route, The Shadow entered in the guise of the leisurely Mr. Cranston.

A radio in the lobby was voicing the usual sound-off given by Ron Meldor.

"- And so good-night again to all my listeners with the hope that their support can help crush crime. Do not be disturbed if tomorrow brings new word that crime struck tonight, perhaps even during my broadcast. Such is to be expected until the police accept the facts I have stated. When the law awakes, crime will end."

Passing the mauve curtains where he had met Margo the night before, the casual Mr. Cranston gave a friendly nod to Barringham, the dapper man who stayed in the lobby to make sure that no one disturbed the radio broadcasts of the famed Ron Meldor. Blinking a moment, Barringham recognized Cranston as a friend of the police commissioner and abruptly returned the nod.

Riding up to the Alexandra Roof, Lamont Cranston let his thin lips form an almost imperceptible smile, only a trifling relaxation of his inscrutable expression. Crime had paid tonight, despite Cranston's other self, The Shadow.

How long it would continue to pay was another question. Perhaps The Shadow had learned enough through his encounter with The Mask to put a crimp in crime's future dividends.

CHAPTER X

RIVERVIEW GARDENS was the pretentious name of an equally pretentious series of apartment buildings and most pretentious of all was the superb penthouse occupied by one Creighton Sloane, who had invited Commissioner Weston to hold his conference in these surroundings that were so admirably removed from interruption.

Under the head of interruptions, Weston had included Meldor's evening broadcast, so no one was thinking in terms of the Voice of WVX. The Hotel Alexandra was a good half hour's trip from these preserves and since Ron's broadcast ended at half past ten, Weston felt sure he could carry on the conference until eleven, even if Ron Meldor felt privileged to come over and crash the gate.

It was now quarter of eleven and Weston was summing up the evidence against The Mask.

"Do not be deceived by anything that Ron Meldor may tell you." Weston gave a careless, disdainful gesture toward the radio which had been silent all evening. "Crime is not so rampant as he claims. We have traced it back and our conclusion is that nearly all the recent robberies can be blamed upon one man, The Mask. I say The Mask" - Weston shot a defiant glare around the circle of a dozen persons - "and not The Shadow, as Meldor so inadvisedly claims."

Spreading police reports upon a large mahogany table, Weston tallied them with an opened map of Manhattan, which was marked with circles bearing dates.

"This was going on before Meldor began his broadcasts," asserted Weston. "Sudden crimes in various sectors of the city, but all bearing the same symptoms, chiefly that of a lone worker." He swung to a man with a broad, tallowy face. "You can testify to that, Sloane."

There was a nod from Creighton Sloane as the penthouse owner placed a heavy finger on a circle shown on the Manhattan map.

"It happened right there," boomed Sloane, in a deep tone. "Right in my Wall Street office. This fellow you call The Mask walked right in with a gun and made me hand over a fistful of securities. A big fistful, too, worth about fifty thousand dollars."

"And he was masked?" insisted Weston.

"As near as I could see, he was," returned Sloane, "but I was looking chiefly at his gun."

"But he dropped nothing that could give you any hint to his identity?"

"Not a thing." Sloane gave a grumble. "That seems to be a habit he's acquired recently, commissioner. I don't even think I'd recognize the man if he walked in here right now without his mask -"

Sloane broke off, because someone was walking in at that moment, a man who was having something of an argument with one of Sloane's servants. The servant was saying that the conference was not to be disturbed, but the visitor was arguing that far from disturbing it, he belonged here.

Weston stepped forward to meet the newcomer and found himself facing a tall, long-faced individual whose chin had a peculiar thrust out from his tuxedo collar. Sharp eyes scanned the commissioner from beneath heavy black brows and the man's narrow face suddenly broadened with a smile.

"You're the police commissioner, aren't you?"

Weston didn't like the oily tone, but he saw no reason to deny his identity, so he nodded.

"I'm Winslow Stamford," the tall man stated. "Here's my card. I was down at my office when I heard Ron Meldor make his broadcast. First time I knew about this get-together."

"You mean Meldor stated publicly that we were meeting here?"

"That's right," acknowledged Stamford, "so I thought I ought to come over and tell you what little I know about The Shadow."

"Do you mean The Shadow?" queried Weston, testily, "or The Mask?"

"Whoever it was that Meldor was talking about," returned Stamford, indifferently. "All I know is, I've met him."

"The Mask?"

"If that's what you call him, yes. He came into my office a couple of days after he robbed Mr. Sloane here. Only I wouldn't say he was wearing a mask. Looked more to me as if he just had his eyes hidden with a hat brim, like this."

Stamford was wearing a soft dark hat, which he pulled down over his eyes as he spoke. He looked straight at Sloane, who stared sharply for a few moments, then shook his head.

"Your face still shows," stated Sloane. "You couldn't see The Mask's face at all."

"How's this?"

With a forward thrust of his neck and an accompanying hunch of his shoulders, Stamford gave Sloane another imitation of The Mask. Sloane nodded.

"That's better," he said. "Only you still don't have it. Now when I encountered The Mask -"

"Enough of this!" interrupted Weston. "It is ten minutes of eleven and we may be hearing from Ron Meldor if he has the effrontery to come here. But tell me, Stamford" - the commissioner glanced at the card, then at the tall man - "since you're a business promoter, why should The Mask have tried to rob you? What kind of valuables would you keep in your office?"

"Securities," replied Stamford, removing his hat to reveal a baldish head.

"Good ones generally, but sometimes bad. This fellow you call Shadow Mask happened to pick an off day." Stamford paused to enjoy a brief chuckle. "He caught me right after I'd been hooked with some very phoney oil stock, so I let

him take it. Now he's stuck with it instead of me."

"Why didn't you report this to the police?" demanded Weston. "It might have helped us trace The Mask."

Stamford gave a shrug.

"It wouldn't have been good for my business," he returned. "Being a promoter, I'm supposed to be smart. I didn't want it to get around that I'd been trimmed in an oil deal. Only when I heard Meldor talk tonight, I realized it was time I told what little I knew. Besides, I wasn't getting anywhere with my own plan."

"Your own plan?"

"Yes, looking for the crook who robbed me. I think I'd know him if I saw him again. Say!" Stamford showed sudden interest in the exhibits that were lying on Sloane's table. "Maybe I've been doing better than I thought!"

The exhibits consisted of the various items that had been acquired following The Mask's more recent crimes. Instantly, Stamford began to classify them in no uncertain terms.

"So the crook smokes Talleyrands!" exclaimed the lean promoter. "That's what I thought - after I picked up this."

From his pocket, Stamford produced an empty cigarette box, rather the worse for wear, and handed it to the commissioner.

"It was lying near the elevator outside my office," explained Stamford, "the night the fellow robbed me. Look what's inside it, commissioner."

Weston looked and found a used match pack bearing the name of the Club Bagatelle.

"That's where I went first," continued Stamford. "I watched everybody who came into the place. I finally saw a chap who looked like the one I was after. What's more, he must have recognized me, for he left the place by the side door. So do you know what I did?"

Stamford paused, raised his head and gave one of his satisfied chuckles.

"The girl wasn't in the cloak room when I left," continued Stamford, answering his own question. "So I picked up the fellow's hat and brought it along with me."

"That accounts for the hat-check that The Mask dropped during a robbery!" exclaimed Weston, pointing to the item in question. Then, eagerly: "But tell me, Stamford, what did you do with the hat itself?"

Stamford didn't bother to chuckle a reply. For answer he displayed the hat

that he himself had been wearing and tossed it to Weston.

"There it is, commissioner," he declared. "I've been wearing it myself ever since, just as a souvenir of the occasion, rather hoping I'd meet the man who really owns it, so he could try to claim it."

Looking through the hat, Weston hoped to find initials in it, but there were none. What he did find was the label of the store that had sold it and that was a clue in itself. A moment later, Weston was pouncing on the glove that The Mask had dropped on another occasion. The button of the glove was stamped with the name of the same clothing store.

"We're getting somewhere now!" asserted Weston. "After we check at the store where these were bought, we'll know the name of the man we're after."

"Sorry, commissioner, but you won't." Stamford shook his head. "I've already shown them the hat and asked them whose it was. They didn't know. They sell a lot of hats at that store, commissioner, and probably a lot of gloves."

"At least we have this to go on." Weston picked up the match pack found at

Howland's, the one from the Cafe Diavolo. "This is the latest place that The

Mask used as a hang-out. Perhaps they'll remember him."

"I don't think so, commissioner," declared the thorough Mr. Stamford. "As soon as Ron Meldor began talking about crimes happening, in the vicinity of the

Hotel Alexandra, I looked around that neighborhood to see what I could find."

"Did you look in at the Cafe Diavolo?"

"Yes. It was the nearest thing to the Club Bagatelle. I even bought Talleyrands and asked who else had been buying them."

"Did they know?"

"They'd sold some, but they didn't recall any particular customer who preferred them. No, commissioner, I'm afraid you'll still have to start from scratch."

It was Sloane who didn't agree with Stamford's verdict. Thrusting himself forward, the millionaire demanded:

"Why don't you describe The Mask for us, Stamford? You saw him at the Club

Bagatelle because the evidence proves it. So what did he look like?"

Stroking his long chin, Stamford found words inadequate. While he was trying to recall a mental image, Sloane gave another suggestion.

"Look around," boomed the millionaire. "Maybe some of the faces here would

have a slight resemblance to the one you saw. How about it, Stamford?"

Looking slowly from face to face, Stamford kept slowly shaking his head until his eyes reached the door. There his gaze became steady and his sharp eyes widened. Some newcomers had just entered the penthouse and it was upon one

of them that Stamford's eyes had centered.

"There!" exclaimed Stamford. "Why, there's a man who almost fits the description. So closely" - he paused apologetically - "but I'm forgetting myself. This gentleman couldn't possibly be the man the law is after."

Stamford's final words were addressed to Sloane as though Stamford took it

that the new arrival was a regular visitor here. But Sloane's waxen face showed

no recognition other than a passing sort. The man to whom Stamford should have spoken was Commissioner Ralph Weston, for he knew this newcomer well.

Indeed, Weston's own face was a composite study of doubt, chagrin and a dash of amazement. The man upon whom Winslow Stamford had conferred the distinct dishonor of resembling a notorious criminal, was none other than Weston's most trusted friend, Lamont Cranston!

CHAPTER XI

IN his usual impassive way, Cranston brushed off Stamford's brief impeachment. In fact, Cranston's two companions, Margo Lane and Clyde Burke, were swept with complete admiration at the sangfroid he displayed.

Maybe it was just courtesy on Stamford's part to withdraw what had amounted to a direct accusation; if so, the average man would have boiled at the indictment and thereby forced the issue to be resumed. But Cranston was anything but average. When anyone minced words with him, Cranston always took them at the word which best suited him.

"Sorry," he said blandly, "but we must be talking about two other people. Never having met, I suppose that is the only answer."

Cranston was extending a cordial hand to Stamford as he spoke; but at the same time, Cranston's glance toward the exhibit table proved that he had arrived in time to learn what was going on. The clock in the penthouse living room now registered five minutes after eleven, showing that Cranston had found time to make the half hour trip from the Hotel Alexandra.

It happened that Cranston had left there shortly after ten thirty,

immediately upon reaching the Alexandra Roof where he had contacted Margo and asked her to come along. They had met Clyde arriving at the hotel with startling news of new crime in the neighborhood, but Cranston had suggested that the reporter keep it for Commissioner Weston.

At this moment, though, neither Margo nor Clyde were thinking in terms of the Blauder robbery. Just inside the doorway of Sloane's living room, they were undertoning comments of the moment.

"Talking about two other people," remarked Margo. "Did you get that, Clyde?"

"I got it, Margo," acknowledged Clyde. "I can guess who he meant by those two other people."

"The Shadow and The Mask -"

"That's right. Only it went over the heads of this crowd, including the commissioner."

"Trust Lamont to drop home a subtle one like that."

"It's passing the subtle stage, though." Clyde's tone was a bit grim. "If they keep bouncing this business of The Mask back on The Shadow -"

Margo nudged Clyde by way of interruption. Cranston, after a brief hobnob with Weston, was turning in their direction. And then:

"As I was saying, commissioner," declaimed Cranston, "Miss Lane and I were

at the Alexandra Roof, expecting to attend the usual reception that Ron Meldor gives after his broadcast. You remember, we met you there before -"

Weston filled Cranston's pause with a dour nod.

"But when we heard the broadcast - they always have it at the Alexandra Roof - we learned that you were over here."

"And so" - Cranston gave a polite nod - "we took the liberty of coming over."

"Get that," sidevoiced Clyde to Margo. "When we heard the broadcast. That doesn't mean just you, Margo!"

"I know," nodded Margo. "Lamont mentioned that while we were coming out of the elevator."

"But how did he know the broadcast was being heard on the Roof. Did you tell me?"

"He caught the last spasm of it. You know, where Ron Meldor winds up with a great shout and the announcer takes over."

"So that's how he knew -"

Another nudge interrupted Clyde. Margo was telling him that he was due for a little speech of his own.

"And as we were getting into our cab, commissioner," Cranston was saying, "who should come along but Burke. I'd almost forgotten him, it's been so long since I have seen him. You know Burke, don't you - Burke of the Classic?"

Weston knew Burke alright and practically snarled the fact. The commissioner had seen the front page photograph in this day's Classic, the picture which the newspaper had termed a 'composograph' and he had a good idea that Clyde's face had been the one under the tilted hat. So Weston gave a testy

nod which indicated that having remembered Clyde and admitted it, he didn't care

to have the acquaintance resumed for another seven years or so. But Cranston wasn't so inclined.

"Burke was on a special assignment tonight," remarked Cranston. "He wants to tell you about it." Then, halting a gesture which signified for Clyde to begin, Cranston added: "By the way, commissioner, I would have been here tonight if you had told me how important the meeting was."

"I did tell you, Cranston," returned Weston. "I said that all the victims of The Mask would be present."

"But I understood you to mean just past victims - not future."

"What do you mean?"

Weston's demand was almost savage, a protest against by-play. In the brief

pause, Margo whispered the query to Clyde:

"Just what does Lamont mean?"

"Plenty." Clyde was counting the persons present. "I think he's playing a long shot that is going to come home. Wait for the pay-off, Margo."

Cranston was speaking again, as he gestured to the group that half-filled Sloane's living room.

"There are too many people here," explained Cranston. "More people, I believe, than The Mask has robbed."

"Certainly," returned Weston. "Since The Mask has been confining his activities to the neighborhood around the Hotel Alexandra, I thought it a good idea to invite some business men from that section."

"You mean business men who might expect trouble from The Mask."

"Of course. Who else?"

"Then we agree, commissioner." Calmly, Cranston inserted a cigarette in his holder, letting everyone see without a statement of the fact, that he didn't smoke cork-tipped Talleyrands. "When I said future victims, I meant -"

Jangling bells were interrupting. The penthouse had two telephones and both were ringing at once. Sloane was answering one, his servant was taking the

other. Both calls were for the commissioner and Weston, anxious to get back to his discussion with Cranston, tried to speed things by handling both calls at once. His ears clamped between the receiving end of the two hand-telephones, Weston gave a hello that did for both mouthpieces.

What came back electrified him. The commissioner looked as jarred as if he

had received a double-short circuit. He couldn't find words to answer the two-way barrage that poured into his ears. From one receiver came the voice of Inspector Joe Cardona, from the other, that of the commentator, Ron Meldor.

Down went the telephones, missing their hooks, a detail which Sloane and his servant rectified. Then:

"There's been another robbery," began the commissioner. "Right around the corner from the Hotel Alexandra."

A sallow-faced man bobbed out of the general group that flanked the room. His face looked more than scared; it was actually hunted.

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "Don't say that, commissioner - don't tell me -" Cranston obliged with a calm interruption.

"Is your name Felix Blauder?"

The sallow man gave a quick, worried nod.

"You own a jewelry store near the Hotel Alexandra?"

"That's right." Blauder tried to calm himself, by tightening his lips.

"I'm a bit worried - over some money - over a pay-roll -"

Cranston's smile was slight but it made Blauder recoil. Blauder's afterthought, that 'pay-roll' gag, didn't quite wash with Cranston. The year's wages of the few clerks who were underpaid by Blauder wouldn't be enough to bother the man whose real racket was fencing jewelry. Blauder knew it and shied

from Cranston's silent impeachment, only to wonder if Cranston really knew.

Cranston had a way of making people wonder what he knew and how much of it. His smile was gone so suddenly that Blauder couldn't have sworn that he ever saw it. Turning to Clyde, Cranston said impassively:

"Then you tell him, Burke."

"It's tough luck, Mr. Blauder," declared Clyde, "but somebody cracked into

that store of yours and got away before the police could grab him. It happened just a little before ten thirty, while Meldor was still on the air. The burglar

alarm went off so loud you could hear it for a block -"

There wasn't any use in telling Blauder any more. The fallow man had done a complete collapse into the arms of Stamford, who was standing by. With a glance at crime's latest victim, Commissioner Weston took over in brisk style.

"You're right, Burke," the commissioner declared. "You have just reported what Cardona and Meldor were both telling me. We'd better go over there and see what we can learn. Maybe this time we can pick up better evidence leading to - The Mask."

It was obvious from his hesitation in stating the name of The Mask, that Weston's own doubts were growing to a point where he could no longer rationalize them. Lamont Cranston caught the reason for the pause which told too plainly what was in Weston's mind.

The police commissioner might very well have omitted mention of The Mask and called him The Shadow instead!

CHAPTER XIII

INSPECTOR CARDONA strode across the lighted floor of Blauder's Jewelry Store and turned to a silent audience. Cardona was completing what he termed a reconstruction of the case, a process that Commissioner Weston invariably approved.

How much the others approved it, Cardona didn't know, and to some extent he didn't care.

As usual, Lamont Cranston wore a masklike expression that showed no favors

either way. Cardona wasn't bothered, because he liked people to be inscrutable;

in fact, though he didn't know it, Joe had gained much of his own manner from Cranston. As for Margo Lane, she always seemed interested in a summary of crime.

It was sometimes tough-going with Clyde Burke. He was like all reporters, hard to please. So Cardona wrote him off as doubtful and took a look at the other two men present. One was Winslow Stamford who had come here with the commissioner and his long face had a skeptical expression that rather annoyed Cardona. The other was Ron Meldor, a bad bargain to begin with, and likely to prove even worse.

Arms folded, Meldor was leaning back with his chin high, his eyes looking downward. The pose took away his usual gaunt appearance and actually made him look imposing, though Cardona didn't care to admit it. Like Stamford, Meldor seemed to have the attitude that he expected no results from Cardona's summary,

but there was a certain difference in the comparative attitudes of the two.

Whereas Stamford was merely a skeptic, Meldor was a pronounced critic. Stamford would keep his opinions to himself; Meldor would broadcast them to an eager and opinionated public. Hence of the two, Cardona disliked Meldor the more. Still, there was nothing to do but proceed with the summary of crime.

"The Mask came in from the roof," began Joe, with an upward gesture.

"That's plain enough, because we found a trap-door jimmied upstairs. He came down here and opened the safe; then somebody interrupted him."

Staring straight at Meldor as he spoke, Cardona saw a look of query in the commentator's eyes. Joe waited for the question and it came. Meldor simply asked:

"Are you sure?"

"Look around if you don't believe me," retorted Cardona. "What's that show-case doing busted? Why was the padlock knocked off the door of the sidewalk elevator out front? A burglar wouldn't have to find two ways into a place, would he?"

"He might have made it look that way," observed Meldor, "just to confuse you, inspector, if you aren't confused already."

"I suppose The Mask got confused," snapped Cardona. "That's why he started breaking show-cases and shooting at himself. What was he doing, seeing things in the shadows?"

Cardona shouldn't have used that final phrase. It brought a cutting sneer from Meldor.

"Why not just say The Shadow?" queried Meldor. "That's what I'm going to say in tomorrow's broadcast, inspector. The Shadow turned to crime and is at it again - alone."

"Alone?" demanded Cardona. "Then what do you make of all this mess? If The Shadow came here - and maybe he did - it was because he was after The Mask."

"Or wanted it to look as though he met The Mask," supplied Meldor. "Have you thought of that, inspector? Remember, I have denounced The Shadow in my broadcasts; tonight my statements were particularly pointed. It is time that The Shadow, more than anyone else, should begin to create the general illusion that there is someone else, a criminal rival, termed The Mask."

Cardona turned an appealing look toward Weston and was practically staggered by the cold stare that the commissioner returned. Despite himself, Cardona was forced to the conviction that Meldor was beginning to sell Weston along with the rest of the public. Hopefully, Cardona swung to Cranston, only to find him as impassive as ever.

It was then that Cardona suddenly found a friend, a most unexpected one. Winslow Stamford stepped suddenly to the fore.

He did it in his usual fashion, did Stamford, with a forward thrust of his long neck, plus the bald head that gave him the manner of an eagle, thought it could have unkindly been likened to a vulture's style. The criticism that Stamford offered was directed at Meldor, much to Cardona's relief.

"As one of your ardent followers and admirers," began Stamford, "in other words, a member of your great listening audience -"

"Never mind that," interrupted Meldor. "Get to the point, Standish."

"Stamford is the name. Now if we knew each other better -"

"I'm sorry." Meldor was becoming testy. "My work demands too much of my time to allow for new friends" - he jabbed a sharp look at Stamford - "or mere acquaintances."

Stamford snorted.

"Too bad you don't broadcast from a regular studio," he remarked. "I would be there every evening, Meldor, to hang on your words and listen in complete admiration."

"That's just why I insist upon privacy," retorted Meldor. "My work is to reach the public at large, not a small group of curiosity seekers who have enough drag to pick up tickets to a free show."

Commissioner Weston decided to interrupt the budding argument. He did it, as sharply as the disputants.

"You're getting away from the point, both of you," snapped Weston. "If you have anything to say, please say it, and be done."

Cardona was about to agree with Weston when he noted Cranston. Though his face hadn't changed, Cranston's eyes were busy. They were taking in every shade

and flurry in this unexpected feud between the all-important Ron Meldor and the

mere nobody, Winslow Stamford. If Cranston found it interesting, Cardona decided that it must be, even though he didn't know why.

So Joe Cardona remained silent and watched what happened. The result was rather curious.

It wasn't good policy for Ron Meldor to accept abrupt orders from Commissioner Weston without some display of self-importance, so Ron did the expected. He simply folded his arms and went silent, retaining a smug smile on his uptilted face. Stamford, on the contrary, became apologetic, profusely so to Weston; then, as an afterthought, he became polite toward Ron.

"No harm meant, Meldor," said Stamford, suavely. "You're right and I'm wrong. You know your business but maybe I don't know mine" - he smiled a bit hopelessly - "what little business, I still have. Since we can't smoke a pipe of peace" - Stamford reached in his pocket - "let's have a couple of cigarettes instead."

Meldor shook his head as Stamford proffered a cigarette box. Nevertheless, the idea of a smoke pleased him so Meldor reached into his pocket for one of his customary cigars, only to stop short, staring at the cigarette box in Stamford's hand.

"Go ahead, Meldor, say it," chuckled Stamford. "Talleyrands with cork tips; they're the kind I prefer."

There was a quick dart from Ron's sharp eyes.

"The same kind The Shadow smokes!"

"That's right," agreed Stamford. "The Shadow's brand, or The Mask's - out of deference to Commissioner Weston. Maybe he's right in thinking there is someone called The Mask."

Ron's eyes continued their quick darts from Stamford's face to the cigarette box. Carelessly, Stamford took a cigarette and lighted it; then gave a gesture toward Weston.

"The commissioner will tell you why I smoke them," remarked Stamford. "I've been on the trail of Shadow Mask - or both of him. Thought it best to inquire for his - or their brand - wherever I went, which included the Cafe Diavolo.

"I'm telling you this, Meldor, just to prove that it's not a smart idea to depend too much on circumstantial evidence, like the kind found here tonight."

Meldor's lips tightened in restraining fashion. Holding back a verbal outburst, he simply said:

"That is just what I was telling Inspector Cardona. All this evidence of a gunfight could have been framed."

"And so could that stuff." Stamford gestured to some items that were lying on the broken counter. Turning to Cardona, he added: "They were found in Blauder's safe, weren't they?"

"That's right," affirmed Cardona. "The other glove belonging to The Mask, another stump of a Talleyrand cigarette - and this."

Cardona picked up the thing he called "this." It was a ten-trip commutation ticket between New York and a place called Midhaven, with eight of its trips punched.

"It's a good lead," argued Cardona. "It might have fallen out of The Mask's vest pocket."

"Or The Shadow's," put in Meldor.

"Or mine," added Stamford, "if I carried one in my vest pocket, which I don't. You see" - he drew a wallet from his pocket - "I happen to live in Midhaven; that is, I go out there week-ends. Only I carry my ten-tripper here."

With that, Stamford displayed his ten-trip commutation under the celluloid

compartment in his wallet. Again turning to the rather astonished Cardona, Stamford inquired:

"Find any fingerprints on that one, inspector?"

Stamford was gesturing to the commutation ticket found in Blauder's safe, while putting his own away. He received a head-shake from Cardona.

"Too bad," said Stamford. "I guess whoever owned it wears gloves, like I do." From his coat pocket, Stamford produced a pair of worn kid gloves and slid

them on his hands. "I always wear gloves" - Stamford smiled around the group - "and I haven't lost a pair in years. In fact, I don't think I'd ever drop them one by one.

"Funny that I wear gloves but not a hat?" Stamford put a note of query in his tone, then turned to Weston. "Except of course the hat that I picked up at the Club Bagatelle, and turned over to you, tonight. Maybe a hat would be helpful with this thin hair of mine."

Stamford paused, to give his baldish head a reflective stroke with the tips of his gloved fingers. Then:

"But that's just why I won't wear a hat," he added. "I don't want to lose what hair I still have. Ask any barber; he'll give you the same advice."

This last could have been meant directly for Commissioner Weston, whose own hair was by no means too plentiful. With that parting touch, Stamford bowed

a good-night and strolled from the jewelry store. Whether or not he was bound for Midhaven, he didn't say, though he probably still had time to catch the last train.

Ron Meldor gave a shrug as though Stamford's arguments hadn't particularly

impressed him. At last he muttered something about "coincidence" and stalked out

in his most important style. When Weston asked if Cardona had gathered all the evidence, the inspector nodded, so the rest of the group left too.

On the front sidewalk, Lamont Cranston pointed out something to Margo Lane. The something was the door of the sidewalk elevator, quite intact, except

that a broken padlock lay beside it.

"Notice it, Margo"

"Notice what?"

"That only the padlock is broken," replied Cranston, "with no damage to the hasps or staples - nor to those rather flimsy door hinges."

"But what does that mean?"

"Ask Burke," returned Cranston, gesturing to Clyde, who had paused beside them. "His reporter's eye should find the answer."

"It looks as though the padlock had been broken beforehand," analyzed Clyde, "more as a means of entry than an exit."

"That's right" acquiesced Cranston. "To come out, The Mask would have simply had to use the elevator and let it rip the works with its own power. Only don't mention it in your story, Burke."

"I get it!" exclaimed Margo. She had no need to restrain her tone, for Weston and Cardona had walked well ahead. "This probably was the way The Mask really entered!"

"It could have been, Margo."

"Then there were two persons in the store tonight -"

As Margo paused, Cranston acknowledged her statement with a calm but expressive nod, as though his mind had roved into the past to piece details founded on keen recollections.

What Cranston then said was cryptic, more fraught with meaning than his listeners supposed.

"That's right," affirmed Cranston. "The Shadow and The Mask - both of them."

CHAPTER XIII

THEY sat in the Cafe Diavolo eating beef and kidney pie which was the specialty of the house. Though they had met often and under many circumstances, it was the first time that they had ever met to discuss crime over a dinner table: Inspector Joe Cardona and Lamont Cranston, friend of the police commissioner.

"This is kind of irregular," said Cardona, uneasily. "You and the commissioner ought to be eating together at the Cobalt Club, with him asking your advice, and me listening in."

"The commissioner doesn't need my advice," reminded Cranston. "He seems to have formed his own opinions."

"Where The Shadow is concerned, yes," admitted Cardona. "The commissioner is beginning to think he's turned phony, because of all that stuff planted on Stamford."

"It was rather strong," conceded Cranston, "but it still doesn't point to The Shadow. I would prefer to blame The Mask, with certain reservations."

Cardona's face brightened.

"You still think there's somebody called the Mask?"

Cranston nodded.

"Alright," inquired Joe. "How do you deduce it?"

"I don't," replied Cranston. "Tell me, Cardona, did you ever use deduction to prove that The Shadow existed?"

"Of course."

Cranston shook his head.

"You never did," he stated. "Deduction is the process of reasoning from generalities to particulars. For instance, if you knew The Shadow existed to begin with, you would have a generality. You could then deduce The Shadow's presence by particulars; such as his voice, his quick way with a gun, his habit

of wearing cloak and hat. That would be deduction."

Cardona understood and nodded.

"But your experience of The Shadow has been in reverse," continued Cranston. "You've heard his voice, you've seen him in action. In fact, you probably have a whole catalog of particulars that concern The Shadow."

"I have," acknowledged Cardona. "A big catalog."

"Composed entirely of particulars," reminded Cranston, "from which you have formed the generality that The Shadow is an actual person."

"And I thought deduction was the smartest thing in crime detection!" expressed Cardona. "This process you're talking about has it licked seven ways.

What do you call it?"

"The correct term is induction," replied Cranston, "only it isn't new. Inductive reasoning isn't quite as obvious as the deductive process, that's all."

Leaning across the table, Cardona spoke confidentially between two munches of pie.

"I'll bet The Shadow has been using the inductive system all along when he cracks crimes. That's why he's always so far ahead."

Cranston smiled, a bit grimly, but his expression wasn't noticeable in the dim light of the cafe. He couldn't concede that The Shadow was very far ahead, as the score now stood. But The Shadow's cause still had healthy possibilities,

partly depending upon the cooperation of Inspector Cardona.

"Suppose we apply the inductive process to The Mask," suggested Cranston. "To do so, we must begin with definite particulars, not chance evidence, whether genuine or planted."

"Like cigarette butts," nodded Cardona. "Talleyrands with cork tips, for instance."

"Exactly."

Cranston beckoned to a waiter and called for cigarettes, mentioning that he wanted the usual brand. The waiter arrived with a pack of Talleyrand Corks, which rather startled Cardona, until Cranston commented with a smile:

"Deduction again, inspector. You are thinking that if The Mask smokes this brand, I might be The Mask."

"Well - yes. I could think it."

"Take it from the inductive standpoint. I order a pack of Talleyrands; that is a particular. Therefore, the generality is this: More people prefer the brand than you supposed."

"That's right," said Cardona with a grin, "but if you smoke Talleyrands -"

"Only you're still deductive," interrupted Cranston. "Because I buy a pack, you think I smoke them. To be inductive, consider other possibilities. Maybe I'm buying them for someone else."

"I didn't think of that."

"But it happens to be the right answer. Margo likes these cigarettes.

They

don't sell them at the Alexandra Roof, where I'm meeting her tonight. But they sell them here, so I'm buying a pack now."

Cardona decided to take notes. He was getting lessons that he hadn't read in any book. Sight of Cardona's note book inspired Cranston to resume his inductions regarding The Mask.

"Put this down," stated Cranston. "We know that a certain criminal is at large who operates swiftly and efficiently, always hiding his identity."

"Good," nodded Cardona. "That's The Mask."

"We call him The Mask because his face is hidden," agreed Cranston. "Yet none of his victims" - Cranston stressed the word "victims" - "seems to be sure

that he is actually masked. There we have a particular; that if masked, he hides

the fact. What is the generality?"

"That he doesn't want the mask to be seen -"

"And therefore?"

"Well, therefore, he might be mistaken for somebody who conceals his face but isn't masked."

"And who would that be?"

"The Shadow!"

Cardona's exclamation brought a nod from Cranston. The ace inspector was moving right along in his new process of crime analysis.

"The Mask wants us to deduce that The Shadow has turned to crime," specified Cranston. "Instead, we induce that The Mask wants us to think that The Shadow has turned to crime. We've stopped The Mask on that point. What next?"

"This business of The Mask confining himself to one area," declared Cardona. "He didn't begin it until Ron Meldor started cracking down on him. It looks like he's gunning for Meldor."

"Deduction again," remarked Cranston. "Inductively I would say that The Mask has another reason."

Cranston's eyes were steady across the table as though trying to drive home an unspoken thought. Cardona didn't catch it, because he was busily thumbing through his note book. Though his trend was still toward the

deductive, Cardona came up with some important facts.

"The Mask is a fast worker," argued Joe. "So I figured he might be finding his jobs soft. Take Howland for instance. A lot of smart guys might have spotted

that combination of his wall safe and passed it along."

Cranston's eyebrows lifted.

"Howland was mixed up with the black market," explained Cardona. "The dope just came in from the F.B.I.; they said this charity stuff he handles may be a blind."

"Most interesting." Cranston's tone showed that he meant it. Then: "Did you follow that lead with Blauder?"

"I did," declared Cardona, "and he's not a nice boy either. He's been fencing stolen gems."

Although he knew the fact already, Cranston waited, confident that he would hear more. Cardona's manner proved that he had dug up something very potent.

"There's a guy called Nicky Shamber," confided Cardona. "A smoothie who works around gambling clubs switching in topped dice. He's been seen around Blauder's and he's just the guy who could find ways to unload the hot ice."

"And know when there was plenty of cash in Blauder's safe, because he was instrumental in putting it there -"

"That's it. We're out to find Nicky if we can." Cardona thumbed through a few more pages of his notebook. "He has been hanging around the better spots, lately. For instance, the Alexandra Roof Garden. Funny isn't it, Nicky coming to the hotel where Ron Meldor spills those broadcasts denouncing crime? That's something Smarty Meldor hasn't wised to yet!"

Cranston accepted Cardona's finding silently, so Joe added more details:

"We've got to go easy with Nicky, though. He's dangerous in a pinch. Says no coppers will ever grab him alive and once he pretty near proved it. He was jumping in front of a subway train when we were after him for a purse snatch, only about six people hauled him back."

To complete his summary of Nicky, Cardona produced a rogues' gallery photo

taken when the crook had served time. Cranston recognized the picture as one that he had studied in his own collection, or rather The Shadow's.

"Anyway," concluded Cardona. "Howland's and Blauder's were a couple of nice knock-offs in this neighborhood so maybe that's why The Mask handled them.

Only we're not taking any chances any longer. The commissioner has quarantined this sector without saying so."

By "quarantined" Cardona meant that a police cordon had been thrown around

this area, ready to close in at an instant's notice. Patrol cars would be waiting in unsuspected spots to pick up any trail that could not be blocked off. At every corner surrounding the quarantined district, plain clothes men were already taking tabs on everybody who came in and out of crime's stamping ground.

It was time for Inspector Cardona to go on duty as head-man of the show, so he politely suggested that they leave the Cafe Diavolo. Cranston was agreeable and when they reached the street, Cardona added another item of information.

"The commissioner is going to be at the Alexandra Roof," stated Joe. "You'll probably see him when you meet Miss Lane there. So don't be surprised -"

"On the contrary, I will be surprised," interposed Cranston, as he shook hands with the inspector. "Then I can let him tell me personally about the quarantine. I wouldn't want him to think that someone else had told me."

Cardona gave an appreciative nod and they parted in front of the Cafe

Diavolo. Cardona was on his way to make the rounds of the cordon, whereas Cranston was scheduled for a mild evening at the Alexandra Roof.

At least it looked that way.

And since Cranston was within the cordon, The Shadow was there also. Should crime deal a new stroke tonight, The Shadow could meet it ahead of the police. There was just one moot question.

What about The Mask?

If that unknown criminal also happened to be within this area, there would be a good chance of ending his unruly career. With the police at hand in plenty it might be possible to expose The Mask at last.

Cranston's low-whispered laugh was hopeful. It meant The Shadow would be watching for The Mask to fare forth on another thrust of crime.

CHAPTER XIV

NINE forty-five.

In the ornate lobby of the Hotel Alexandra, Commissioner Weston was actually shaking hands with the man he didn't like, Ron Meldor. It was quite a surprise for Ron, but he accepted it graciously, until a sudden notion struck him.

"This isn't a truce, commissioner," declared Ron, frankly. "I'm going to broadcast exactly as I choose tonight, the same as usual."

"Of course, of course," agreed Weston. "I'll be listening up in the roof garden and I'll attend your reception later. That is, if I'm invited."

"It's always open house," assured Ron. "So I'll be expecting you, unless something I say offends you."

"I don't think it will," returned Weston. "You see, Meldor, we are becoming of one mind."

"On the question of The Shadow?"

"Precisely. I think you may be right, Meldor. Find The Shadow and we will probably find The Mask."

It was neatly put for Weston, who was usually more brusque than subtle. He

was allowing that Ron Meldor might be right about The Shadow turning to crime, but at the same time, the commissioner was holding certain reservations. However, Ron felt that Weston had conceded enough for the present and he gave an approving nod.

Then, turning to the dapper man with the little mustache, who so frequently accompanied him, Ron ordered:

"Bring my portfolio, Barringham. We shall accompany the commissioner in the elevator, as far as the eleventh floor. And remember, Barringham" - Ron gestured toward the mauve curtains of the reception room that flanked the lobby

- "I want you to stay down here until the broadcast ends. I know you would like to leave early, but you must wait that long at least."

Barringham nodded as he picked up the portfolio which was a large, flat affair with a handle. The three men entered the elevator and the door closed.

It was then that Margo Lane stepped from behind the mauve curtains, where she had been listening to the conversation. Margo was literally fuming over Weston's comments concerning The Shadow and wishing that she could find someone

to whom she could explode her sentiments, when a calm tone spoke from her very elbow:

"Don't let it trouble you, Margo. The commissioner still isn't quite convinced."

It was Cranston, stepping from a convenient phone booth. He'd overheard

the conversation too, but he'd completed a phone call beforehand. Apparently he considered that call important.

"Wait here for Burke," Cranston told Margo. "He will be along in about ten minutes to give you a photograph."

"A photograph? Of whom?"

"Of a wanted man named Nicky Shamber. A smoothie who can turn very, very tough. At present he's acquiring polish and his favorite stand is the Alexandra Roof."

"Then I'm to watch for him up there?"

"That's right," nodded Cranston. "You might as well go up and say hello to the commissioner, while you're waiting for me."

"What about Clyde Burke?"

"He'll be making the rounds of this area, Margo, on the strength of his reporter's card. It's a good passport - if you need it."

With that, Cranston strolled out through the front door with what appeared

to be a coat hanging over his arm, the mere brim of a hat projecting from beneath it. He was carrying the garments on the arm away from Margo, so she scarcely more than glimpsed them; but it struck her, after Lamont had gone, that those items might prove a much better passport than a mere reporter's card.

Ten o'clock arrived and with it Clyde Burke, bringing the rogues' gallery picture. Studying the sallow features of Nicky Shamber as she rode up in the elevator, Margo shivered at the hardness beneath their gloss. Putting the photo in her bag she mentally changed the subject.

Margo Lane began to wonder what Ron Meldor would have to say tonight.

ONE man wasn't wondering; namely, Ron Meldor. He had already said it, even though he was just about to go on the air. Having dismissed Barringham, Ron was

standing alone in the main room of his famous sealed suite, listening for the announcer's words: "Let's go, Ron!" to be piped through.

Standing in front of Ron was a microphone, but that wasn't all the apparatus he used. In a way, Ron was answering the query that Stamford had put to him, regarding Ron's peculiar dislike for a studio audience. There was a very visible reason why Ron Meldor preferred to broadcast all alone.

On the table beside the mike was a turntable; revolving upon it was a large phonograph record which had evidently come from Ron's portfolio, because the latter was lying open and showed a padded interior.

The announcer's voice piped suddenly:

"Let's go, Ron!"

Carefully, Ron Meldor set the needle on the record. Instantly, his own voice came in full volume, giving greetings to his listening audience. Stepping

away, Ron smiled, his gaunt face taking on a wicked gleam.

Here was drama! The famed utterances that Ron Meldor issued nightly were actually recordings of his own voice, prepared beforehand. Small wonder that Ron preferred the solitary haven of a locked hotel suite; if anyone else were present, his strange game would be known.

A very strange game it was.

"- And why do I, Ron Meldor, call myself the Citizen of Justice?" It was the record speaking, in Ron's own tone. "Because I truly believe that I alone can stop the reign of crime that has swept this great city -"

Maybe Ron was right, in a backhanded way. He was proving at least that he could play a part in halting crime, should he desist from his current operations. From deep in his portfolio, Ron was drawing out a bandana handkerchief with eyeslits; calmly, he slid the mask, already knotted, over his forehead, until his eyes found the slits.

Then, from the same portfolio, Ron brought a soft dark hat which he punched from its flattened shape. Pulling the hat down over his eyes, Ron looked in the mirror, adjusted the brim to hide the mask, then strode to the door of the suite. Opening that door just a crack, Ron peered along the corridor. Seeing no one, he ventured forth.

Ron Meldor, alias The Mask!

"- And who is the man responsible for these crimes?" The recorded voice was vociferous in its query. "I shall name him! He calls himself The Shadow -"

The accusation was chopped from Ron's own hearing as he closed the tight door of the suite. Stealing along the corridor, Ron reached a service elevator, stepped inside, and closed the door. A quick trip took him down to a floor marked with the letter "M." There, The Mask stepped out again.

This floor was the mezzanine; behind the balcony that skirted the lobby of the Alexandra were old parlors, no longer used. Through shrouded shapes of covered furniture, Ron reached the final salon in the group; there, he unlocked a door and descended a forgotten stairway.

At the bottom was another door that brought him into the dark reception room on lobby level, the one behind the mauve curtains where the dapper Barringham politely stood guard. Those curtains were closed, as they should be, and it was understandable now why Ron had admonished Barringham not to go off duty until the broadcast ended.

This was the private route by which Ron Meldor left and returned to his broadcasting suite while doubling as The Mask, a feat which he performed nightly. This answered a double riddle: First, why The Mask preferred to commit crimes in this area; second, why Ron Meldor insisted upon accusing The Shadow.

Of course there was an added spice: Ron's insistence that he personally was becoming crime's target. A nice alibi, this, to account for crime so close to hand, particularly if The Shadow ever did approach Ron's suite on the eleventh floor. If trapped, The Shadow would be blamed for all the impeachments

that Ron had heaped upon him, and any talk of The Mask would be forgotten.

Maybe these thoughts were in Ron's mind as he slid out to the ledge above the little alley where The Shadow had once encountered The Mask. Sneaking out from the alley, Ron passed the closed service door where Kirby and Jeff kept nightly vigil.

It was the business of those huskies to see that no one used that door during the half hour of Ron's broadcast. Without knowing it, they were working for The Mask, as much as for Ron Meldor!

Half a block from the hotel, Ron turned into an alley, using The Mask's slinky style. Looking back over his shoulder, he could see the hulk of the Alexandra, with huge awnings sprouting from its red brick walls, the dim lights

of the roof garden forming an open-work pattern above. Then, with a pass-key, he opened a basement door leading into an unoccupied laundry shop.

Through the cellar went The Mask, using a flashlight to pick his path. There were moments when he turned to throw back the gleam to make sure that no one was following him.

Once and only once, did Ron catch a responding glimmer that he mistook

for

a reflection of his own flashlight's beam, but he was wrong. That was the time when another hand was slow in muffling a tinier flashlight within the folds of a black cloak.

Close behind Ron Meldor, the man who preferred bandanas, was a silent-footed gentleman named Lamont Cranston, whose favorite attire consisted of a black cloak and a slouch hat to match.

Again, The Shadow was on the trail of The Mask, this time before the stroke of crime!

CHAPTER XV

"SO you're expecting Cranston, here?"

Commissioner Weston put the query sharply to Margo Lane, across one of the tables near the broad wall that formed a parapet around the Alexandra Roof Garden.

Margo nodded, a trifle worried.

"At what time?" demanded Weston.

"Why, I really don't know," began Margo. "He said something about going down to Meldor's reception, so he ought to be here before ten thirty."

"How much before ten thirty?"

Margo was catching the point of Weston's queries, though she didn't care to admit it. The commissioner was actually beginning to suspect his good friend

Cranston of having a hand in crime. Probably it was because Weston believed that

Cranston had some contact with The Shadow, whose good name was under heavy suspicion; but in fairness to the commissioner it might simply be that he mistrusted anyone who happened to be at large and unaccounted for between ten and ten thirty.

"Seven minutes past ten." Weston was checking by his watch. "It's time that he was showing up - if he intends to come." Weston's gaze turned toward the foyer of the roof garden. "Ah, there he is!"

Margo was turning to give a glad welcome to Lamont, when she saw that she had mistaken Weston's comment. The commissioner wasn't thinking in terms of Cranston, but of another man whose connection with recent events was very definite.

That man was Winslow Stamford.

His turtle neck thrust out ahead of him, a sharp stare coming from beneath

his beetly brows, Stamford was obviously looking for the commissioner.

Spotting

the right table, Stamford came directly over and sat down.

"Sorry I'm a few minutes late," Stamford greeted in his oily tone. "The train was late coming in from Midhaven. Heavy traffic, as usual." Glancing past

Weston, Stamford saw Margo and queried smoothly: "Why, hello, Miss Lane, where is Mr. Cranston?"

"He'll be along shortly," assured Margo. "I know he'll be glad to see you here."

Weston and Stamford exchanged very odd smiles, mutual only to a degree. Both were wondering about Cranston, as was Margo. If crime should occur right now, there would be a chance of attributing it to Cranston, and therefore to The Shadow. If crime didn't happen, it might mean that there was actually someone called The Mask, but that his operations were restricted. In that case the impeachment could fall personally on Stamford, since he was obviously out of circulation. There might be something to all the coincidental evidence found

on various scenes of crime.

Glancing at Stamford, Margo wondered whether the man was clever or simply brazen. If neither, he was probably innocent of any crime, and therefore honest in coming here to join the police commissioner. In any event, Margo decided that she oughtn't to keep staring at Stamford, so instead she looked off beyond the parapet.

All the while, the voice of Ron Meldor was blaring from the loud speaker in the roof garden, mouthing its usual denunciation of crime. The fanatical shouts were so distracting that Margo failed to concentrate on what she might have observed occurring on a roof top only a block away.

The person who did witness the occurrence was Clyde Burke. He was near that very corner, staring up at the top floor of an old four-story building. There, Clyde saw a creeping figure navigating the roof edge.

It couldn't be The Shadow. He would have blended better with the darkness and besides, this man wasn't cloaked. He wore a pulled-down hat-brim, but beneath it, his face looked muffled. Unquestionably the man was The Mask!

How The Mask had reached that summit was obvious. A fire escape ran up through the darkness against the building wall. Easily reached from a window ledge beside the steps of the building, the fire escape tempted Clyde. Without delay, he started the upward trail after The Mask.

Things were happening on the roof before Clyde reached it. Crossing cautiously, The Mask stepped past a chimney and paused beside a squatty, revolving ventilator about his own size. From the darkness he drew an old ladder, thrusting it out into space from the side wall of the roof.

It was a long ladder which would have overbalanced itself by its own weight, except that The Mask kept one side of the ladder under the mushroom-shaped ventilator while he handled the other side. As it was, the ladder tilted downward to some degree, but its far end finally settled on another roof.

Shifting the ladder forward, then to the side, The Mask planted his ends of the upright so that they wedged on each side of the ventilator. Thus steadied, the ladder formed an excellent bridge to that other roof, some thirty

feet away. Moving outward, The Mask began to crawl along the ladder.

Hardly had The Mask reached the other side before another figure appeared from beside the chimney, revealing itself as the cloaked shape of The Shadow. Pausing only until The Mask had sidled off beyond a cubicle that topped the other roof, The Shadow took the same route across the improvised bridge. As he started the crossing, The Shadow recognized The Mask's objective.

The building opposite was the Mutual Trust Company, the only bank in the general neighborhood of the Hotel Alexandra. It was a natural target for The Mask, but the most ambitious he had yet attacked. How The Mask expected to go down through the building and maneuver a robbery was quite a question, but there was one way to gain the answer; namely, by trailing The Mask all the way.

Nearing the center of the ladder, The Shadow paused to look below. Despite

the darkness, he saw why this space existed between the two roofs. The bank building had a short one-story extension in back of it, and from the slight glitter, The Shadow could tell that the low structure had a glass-paneled roof.

The extension represented the accounting room, where clerks needed daylight to operate their adding machines. Being part of the bank proper, it would naturally be equipped with suitable alarms; still, it seemed a more likely place of entry than the higher roof.

Still analyzing the situation, The Shadow knew there must be some reason why The Mask had chosen to do this job the hard way. That brought The Shadow's thoughts to The Mask himself. Looking across the higher roof, The Shadow saw a

huddled figure easing over the far edge. Remaining motionless until it disappeared, The Shadow recognized from its slide that The Mask must be using a rope to descend the wall on the other side, probably to an alleyway below.

This could mean that The Mask had detected some weak spot in the armor of the Mutual Trust Company; something better than the low glass-topped annex that lay thirty feet beneath The Shadow's present location. Nevertheless there must be another reason why The Mask had taken such a long route to reach his target.

The Shadow learned the reason three seconds later. So did Clyde Burke.

Having reached the top of the fire escape, Clyde was coming around the very chimney from which The Shadow had watched The Mask. Noting the squat ventilator with its bulging top, Clyde saw the motion of the slowly turning blades and shied away, thinking the thing was The Mask.

Then, recognizing his mistake, Clyde steadied and looked across the gap to the next building. He saw The Shadow, as a great, creeping blot on the center of what appeared to be a lattice-work bridge. Only then did Clyde realize that his chief had been invisibly preceding him on the trail of The Mask. Clyde turned away, intending to leave the whole job to The Shadow.

Right then the climax came. The Shadow was working across the three central rungs of The Mask's ladder. A hand on one rung, a knee on the one behind it, his foot a rung further back, The Shadow heard a triple crackle beneath him. All three rungs gave at once.

The Mask had passed them by spreadeagling along the uprights, putting no weight on the rungs themselves, because they were sawed half through at the junction points. Under The Shadow's weight they gave and a moment later he was plunging through.

The sound brought Clyde about in time to see The Shadow fling his arms over the uprights. It was then that the death trap demonstrated its second phase, as planned by the cunning foresight of The Mask. Though weakened, the rungs had played a part in strengthening the uprights; once the rungs were gone, those long thin shafts couldn't stand the strain of a jouncing weight.

With a splintering crash, the uprights gave and Clyde saw The Shadow's arms fling up from the center of the splitting ladder. Briefly, madly, gloved hands were climbing the remaining rungs toward the edge of the roof that The Shadow had originally left and Clyde thought that by some miracle his chief would clamber to safety.

Then, at the very moment when The Shadow's head and shoulders were bulging above the roof edge, the dangling half-ladder gave and slid into the depths. With it, Clyde saw a helpless figure pitch headlong across the brink and go plunging down into the same oblivion.

Moments seemed interminable until the final crash. It came with horrendous echoes, the smash of the glass roof, some thirty feet below. Hard on the crash a clangor began, the strident ringing of alarm bells, telling that someone had cracked into the well-protected premises of the Mutual Trust Company.

Fierce, raucous, hideous, those clamoring bells were like a knell provided by The Mask, in memory of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XVI

DROPPING lightly from the end of the rope, Ron Meldor, alias The Mask,

gave a low and unpleasant chuckle. From the building beside him, alarms were tingling with a mighty fervor, but this master of murderous artistry didn't care.

Ron was already on his way.

Robbery of the Mutual Trust wasn't part of The Mask's procedure, at least not tonight. The whole episode had been designed for what it turned out to be: a trap for The Shadow. Letting crime's arch-foe catapult himself to death was just about the neatest scheme Ron Meldor could possibly have devised.

Who should take credit, Ron Meldor or The Mask, was something that didn't matter, so long as no one discovered their single identity. In answer to the loud alarm from the bank building, a terrific tocsin that was clattering through the entire area, sirens were sounding from surrounding streets, proving that the police were converging on the scene. Even that didn't matter to Ron Meldor.

What really interested Ron was the loud-pitch of a radio voice, toning from the door of a cigar store as Ron scudded past. It was Ron's own voice:

"- And even now, crime may be striking, here within a few blocks of the oasis from which I give these broadcasts. And why not? What precautions have the police taken against it? What has Commissioner Weston done to curb his fiendish friend, The Shadow -"

Ron wasn't there to hear the rest. He had reached the doorway that would lead him through to the alley laundry and then back to the Hotel Alexandra. Ducking across the back street would be easy; at worst, he'd only have to pause

to let some police go dashing past, or wait until a patrol car zoomed through.

What mattered most to Ron was that he'd timed it well. A mere twelve minutes of his broadcast and the job was done. Three more and Ron would be back

in the sanctity of his sealed suite, where he could discard the personality of The Mask.

The Shadow was through.

THAT summed the opinion of Ron Meldor and there was another man who agreed: Clyde Burke.

The difference was that Clyde wasn't happy.

Peering down from the roof behind the bank building, Clyde didn't even hear the clarion alarm-bells or the responding wails of the sirens. He was listening for something else, some token, no matter how feeble, of his chief The Shadow.

Meanwhile Clyde was straining his eyes madly, hoping to probe the blackness of a jagged hole punched in the glass roof below. That was where The Shadow had crashed through, probably to meet a tiled floor beneath, and meet it

head on, judging from the toppling dive that Clyde had seen him take.

Nothing stirred in that deep darkness.

What next?

Desperate though he was, Clyde couldn't figure a possible way to reach those depths. The segments of the broken ladder had gone with The Shadow. Even if Clyde had known about the rope that The Mask had left dangling from the other building, it wouldn't have helped, for there was now no bridge by which Clyde could have reached that further roof.

Clyde's wits were going numb.

Given a few minutes more, his frantic thoughts would have frozen into a complete stupor. If Clyde couldn't shake some sense into himself, the police would soon be finding him here, staring dumbly down at nothing and muttering to himself.

Such was the condition that was creeping up on Clyde, when the whisper

intervened.

It came low, but sharp, almost in Clyde's ear:

"Burke!"

Clyde's head gave a sudden lift.

"Burke!" The tone was commanding. "Come along. I don't want you to be found here."

Something clamped Clyde's shoulder; it was a gloved hand! Turning, Clyde found himself staring toward a face he couldn't see, the visage of The Shadow, obscured by the brim of the familiar slouch hat!

For the moment, horror took over.

The sudden thought swept Clyde that this must be The Mask, masquerading as

The Shadow. How could it be The Shadow, when he had plunged to doom, before Clyde's very eyes? Manifold though The Shadow's methods were, this return to life seemed beyond all belief.

Yet it was real: The whisper told it.

This time the whisper was a subdued laugh yet so weird, so inimitable, that Clyde knew the mirth could only be The Shadow's. Drawn to his feet, Clyde saw a gloved hand gesture an explanation. The hand was pointing at nothing, but

that was part of the answer.

Clyde was staring at a space where the squatty ventilator should have been. Instead, the thing was gone, literally uprooted from the roof. It hadn't occurred to Clyde that the ends of the ladder had been braced at the sides of that bulging metal mushroom.

Flipped up when the center of the ladder broke, the ends had engaged the roundish ventilator cap, wedging itself more firmly. That accounted for The Shadow's rapid hand climb up the solid rungs, for the ladder hadn't begun to slide. But the leverage was still too great and the ventilator itself had yielded, just as The Shadow reached the roof.

Clyde should have guessed that once The Shadow's hands were at the roof edge, he'd be safe. But at that moment, the ventilator had broken free and Clyde's eyes, following the heave of the metal monstrosity, had mistaken it for

The Shadow.

It was the ventilator that had plunged under the ladder's catapulting fling, to smash the glass roof beneath. No wonder nothing had stirred, down where Clyde kept looking. All motion was still on the brink of the roof, where The Shadow, after ducking the flopping ventilator, had swung himself up to safety.

Now Clyde was participating in the sequel. The Shadow guided him to the fire escape that they had both used before. They descended it cautiously, to avoid noise, The Shadow blocking off sight of Clyde from any passing police who might happen to look up.

All the while the clanging alarm was drawing the police to their one focal spot, the Mutual Trust Building. Somehow, The Shadow would work a path through the converging clusters of men and patrol cars. Given a reasonable distance, he could let Clyde double back, to arrive on the scene in his usual capacity of a reporter.

It was too late for The Shadow to pick up the trail of The Mask.

Therefore

Clyde assumed - and correctly - that his chief would perform some other mission.

What The Shadow intended was to return to the Hotel Alexandra and arrive there in the guise of Lamont Cranston. Therefore, in a sense, The Shadow would still be trailing The Mask.

ALREADY, Ron Meldor was unlocking the door of his broadcasting suite. He was still wearing the bandana handkerchief, for if seen, he would prefer to be spotted as The Mask rather than Ron Meldor. As The Mask it would be easy to lead a merry chase, double back, and become Ron Meldor. After the broadcast, Ron could then express surprise and prepare a new script stating that The Mask had actually penetrated to Ron's own headquarters.

Only Ron didn't expect any such complications to happen. The corridor was empty as usual, so Ron simply opened the door and stepped inside the room, quickly closing the door again to cut off the blare of his recorded voice.

Even here, Ron could hear the clanging of the bank alarm, between the emphatic pauses of his voice. Taking off his hat, he flattened it; then whipped

away his mask and thrust both deep into his portfolio. Since he was no longer The Mask, Ron Meldor could now take over and personally voice the last fifteen minutes of his broadcast.

Hand on the phonograph needle, Ron was waiting to lift it at a timely moment.

"- And even now," the voice was speling, "The Shadow may be drawing the police on some mad and useless hunt. Whether cloaked or masked, whichever the commissioner prefers, The Shadow has become a monster of evil, who thinks nothing of alarming the entire public!"

This was the appropriate spot. All Ron had to do was lift the needle and speak into the mike himself, breaking his comments with the startling statement

that even now the clangor of alarm bells and the shriek of sirens was reaching him from the great outdoors.

Only Ron Meldor didn't.

Instead, as he leaned toward the mike, Ron let his hand lift from the needle. Face frozen, eyes bulging Ron mechanically sidestepped the microphone and moved slowly toward something that was lying on the floor. The recorded voice kept up its tirade in striking contrast to the present mood of amazement that had overwhelmed the real Roll Meldor.

It took a lot to jolt this man who called himself The Mask, but he was getting a full dose of the vicious mystery that he himself provided with such evil delight.

Ron Meldor liked crime and he'd gotten it, right in his own parlor.

Lying on the floor was the dead body of Barringham, Ron's faithful stooge.

Eyes upturned, the dapper man was staring at the ceiling with eyes that were very glassy. There wasn't any riddle as to the cause of Barringham's goggle-eyed demise. Up from the dead man's chest projected the handle of a knife, the twin of the long-bladed dirk that had whizzed past The Shadow, the night he had first trailed The Mask.

Somebody had presented this delightful souvenir to Ron Meldor, alias The Mask; and that same somebody had thrown Barringham in with it.

CHAPTER XVII

DISPOSING of the living Shadow was one thing; getting rid of dead Barringham another. On what he thought was his night of triumph, Ron Meldor was confronted by a problem that completely ruined the game he considered fulfilled.

It was indeed a mess.

Thoughts by the dozen raced through Ron's mind during those fleeting moments and they all added up to the same.

Crime had been done, The Shadow would be found and blamed, people would come teeming here to congratulate Ron Meldor. Along with Ron they would find

the dead man, Barringham.

What then?

Explanations of course, but what explanations? How could Ron account for murder during an uninterrupted broadcast? He couldn't have stood by and let someone else kill Barringham without shouting murder over the air.

The fishy side of Ron's famed broadcasts would make itself one hundred percent apparent. Indeed, Ron would have to admit it to alibi himself against a charge of murder. And to admit that he was recording his spiels beforehand and letting them go that way across the air, would mean the ruin of a standing alibi that covered previous crimes.

Whoever The Shadow was, he would become a public hero, while Ron Meldor would stand unmasked - as The Mask. Very paradoxical, but very, very evident.

Taut and erect, with his fists clenched tightly, Ron had become as stiff as Barringham's body. Then, a sharp laugh escaping the lips that quickly muffled it, Ron relaxed.

Hurrying into the other room, Ron softly closed the door, so as not to interrupt his own broadcast. Then, picking up the telephone, Ron spoke in a gruff, disguised voice:

"Give me Room 508 and do it quickly."

The operator put the call through promptly, but there was a delay at the other end. Finally, a cautious voice responded:

"Yeah? What is it?"

"This is Ron Meldor." The tone was now Ron's own. "Listen, Nicky -"

"Say," came the interruption. "You can't be Ron Meldor. He's on the air."

"I'll explain that later, Nicky. We can't waste time now. I'm in a jam; a bad one."

"Huh?" Something was dawning on Nicky. "Say, you mean you've been faking those broadcasts -"

"That's it," interrupted Ron. "Now look, you're in a jam, too. I've got an out for you, Nicky, and it means an out for me. Listen carefully, while I tell you -"

The shouts of Ron's recorded broadcast were coming muffled through the door; the fanfare of sirens were shrilling through the window. Cupping his lips at the telephone, Ron began giving brief but pointed instructions. Those finished, he went to a wall cabinet and brought out a razor, along with a tube of shaving cream. From a box in the other room, he produced a pair of pliers and a screw driver, tools belonging to the radio engineer.

Ron Meldor was planning a real out, not only for himself and a crook named Nicky Shamber, but for his unwelcome guest - Barringham.

QUITE oblivious to the drama taking place in a suite two floors below, Police Commissioner Weston sat at his table on the Alexandra Roof, gazing grimly between the potted cedars that flanked the stone parapet. Excitement was rife regarding the clanging alarm bell and the loud-wailing sirens, but Weston didn't make a move.

Nor did Winslow Stamford.

His long neck craned forward, Stamford was staring at Weston in his beetly style and he was wearing a smug grin that followed the exact contour of his heavy, rounded chin. For some reason Stamford was finding it very pleasant to hear the symptoms of crime in progress while in the presence of the police commissioner.

Margo Lane was finding it very unpleasant.

Wondering more and more about Lamont, Margo was trying not to understand

what was keeping him, but all the while she was becoming too sure. If ever Cranston needed an alibi it was now, when he wasn't getting one.

Margo felt positive that the grim expression on Weston's face meant the final severance of his friendship with Cranston and the potential consequences of such a break were disastrous.

If only Lamont would arrive!

Margo had been wishing that for ten straight minutes. Again, she threw a hopeless glance toward the foyer, hoping to see Lamont there. Instead, she caught a nod from a head-waiter, who was holding a telephone.

After a quick glance at Weston, who pretended not to notice, Margo hurried over to the telephone. The alarm bells had quit sounding in the night, the sirens seemed to be fading and rising in a circling fashion, as though the patrol cars had begun a useless search. What really disturbed Margo when she tried to hear across the telephone was the voice of Ron Meldor, audible again amid the excitement in the roof garden.

"- And in closing, listeners, let me warn you that no matter how quiet, how peaceful everything has seemed tonight, the vile octopus of crime may still

have been stealing its silent tentacles in among us to grip new prizes from under the snoring noses of our sleeping police -"

By the term "in closing" Ron meant that he had about three minutes more to go, for Margo's wrist watch showed ten twenty-five and the announcer took the two last minutes before half-past. Ron's broadcasts always were long-winded at the finish, but his listeners by then were too steamed up to notice it. As for Margo, she didn't care about the broadcast. She was hoping to recognize Lamont's voice over the telephone.

Cranston's quiet tone came through, calm as ever.

"Hello, Margo. How's everything on the roof?"

"Pretty bad," returned Margo. The radio wasn't so loud, now, for Ron's voice was becoming confidential. "With the welkin ringing and the sirens singing, the commissioner is beginning to wonder where you are. And by the way,

Lamont, where are you?"

"Downstairs, talking over the house phone. I just arrived back here. So it wouldn't be entirely tactful to join my good friend the commissioner right now?"

"Entirely the other way about. A gentleman named Stamford happened to have that very idea - but at the right time."

"You mean he's been with the commissioner all along?"

"Very nearly and particularly" - Margo threw emphasis on that - "particularly before bedlam burst, if you get what I mean."

"I anticipated it, Margo."

"Then you should know that the commissioner isn't your good friend any longer. You'll have a lot of squaring to do, Lamont, because matters are distinctly out of shape."

"I'll do that at Meldor's reception. By the way, you didn't see anything of Nicky, did you?"

"Nicky Shamber, of the bitter sweet portrait? Why, no. I've been looking for him -"

Margo broke off sharply. A clang from an elevator door had startled her. Turning involuntarily, she recognized the very man that Cranston had just inquired about. It was Nicky, sure enough, and he certainly wasn't in one of his better moods. Thrusting aside persons who happened to be blocking his path,

Nicky suddenly hauled a revolver from his pocket and gave it a savage brandish.

Thinking Nicky was aiming the gun her way, Margo repressed a scream and drew back into a corner with the telephone. Then Nicky was gesturing the gun at frightened waiters, while Margo could barely gasp: "It's - It's Nicky, with a gun!"

OVER the wire came Cranston's tone, carrying a confidence that Margo found contagious. Though he wasn't where he could deal with Nicky, Cranston was checking the situation with the precision of The Shadow. The telephone was his instrument of hearing what went on and though limited, it was reliable. Cranston wanted the same reliability from Margo, without the limitations.

"Steady, Margo," said Cranston, coolly. "He isn't threatening you."

"Why, no," returned Margo. "But how did you know?"

"By the sound of the excitement. It's moving further from the phone. Tell me all that's happening."

"Why, the waiters are ducking everywhere and Nicky is rampaging around, shouting that no coppers are going to take him alive."

Margo held the phone so it could pick up sounds; then inquired:

"Hear it?"

"Only faintly," responded Cranston. "I'd rather go by your description. Keep giving, play by play."

Margo gave.

The waiters were rushing Nicky with chairs and serving trays, only to scatter when he turned and waved his gun. Margo was describing it breathlessly,

all the while receiving encouraging replies from Cranston.

"Just keep watching, Margo. Take it like a slap-stick comedy."

Two shots burst from Nicky's gun, sending waiters under tables. Margo gave that detail, excitement in her voice.

"Nobody hurt, though," reassured Cranston, "or you would have said so. It sounds like an animated cartoon."

What followed really looked like something on a screen. Commissioner Weston was bounding from his table, drawing a revolver, with Stamford rising at his side, picking up a chair. When Nicky wheeled and blazed another pair of shots, Weston didn't wait, but spilled the table Nicky's way and ducked behind it. Stamford dropped, too, flinging the chair wildly, winging a waiter instead of Nicky.

"It really is funny," conceded Margo, with a nervous laugh. "Nicky is shooting it out with the commissioner, only they're both missing badly."

Nicky had already missed; now it was Weston's fire that was going wide. Again Nicky wheeled, blazing the last shots from his gun to scare off a new flood of attackers. Then, finding the weapon empty, he leaped to the stone parapet and began dumping the potted cedars. Weston was shoving forward, afraid

to shoot, because of people who were starting Nicky's way.

"They've boxed him now," reported Margo. "He's on the parapet, dodging back and forth with an empty gun. He's shouting something at the commissioner -"

Breaking off, Margo heard what Nicky shouted, as did everyone else in the roof garden.

"You'll never get me, commissioner!" bawled Nicky. "You'll never get Nicky

Shamber, not you or any of your stooges. I took an out before, but it didn't work. This time I'm taking an out that will!"

Half turned on the parapet, Nicky took a quick look down to the street; then, with a last short dart along the stone rail, he stopped suddenly, swung

about, and hurled his empty gun straight at Weston's face as the commissioner tried to shove through the crowd.

Others dodged at Nicky's gesture and before Weston could shake loose from them and aim, his chance was gone. What happened was reported perfectly by Margo, across the telephone to Cranston.

"Nicky is going to jump!" the girl exclaimed. "They can't stop him, they're all too far away. There he goes - he's gone!"

Margo's words ended almost in a scream, punctuated by two gun stabs that Weston fired at open space. With a sudden drop and a bold sideward flip, Nicky Shamber was gone across the parapet, down the sheer wall toward the side street, a dozen floors below!

CHAPTER XVIII

As calm, as calculating as ever, Lamont Cranston checked the exact moment of Nicky's suicide plunge. The time was thirty-two minutes, twenty-one seconds after ten, which meant, incidentally, that Ron Meldor was off the air.

Anything even the most trivial detail, might prove important in the cause Cranston must complete, to justify his own status and with it the reputation of

The Shadow.

The sudden appearance of Nicky Shamber fitted with the evening's sensational events. Nicky's behavior on the Alexandra Roof was in itself erratic enough to warrant immediate consideration.

But it wasn't consideration of Nicky's case that held Cranston close to the phone after Margo's fateful announcement of Nicky's leap. It was the sequel, Margo's sharp scream, that kept Cranston ticking off the seconds, a full dozen of them. Cranston's calm queries brought no response during that interval.

Then, at last Margo spoke, as though just learning that there were such things as words.

"He really went over, Lamont," gasped Margo. "It - well, it just left me jittery for a few seconds."

Cranston showed relief in the smile that Margo couldn't see. The second hand of his watch was kicking up past the forty mark, proving that Margo had been breathless longer than she thought.

"They're all excited up here on the roof -"

There was excitement in the lobby, too, though Margo didn't know it. Just as she was making her statement, a crash sounded, not within Margo's hearing, but Cranston's. It was the marquee over the side door of the Hotel Alexandra, an old-fashioned contrivance consisting of wrought iron, much putty, and patched-up chunks of glass.

Though it served as a shelter against rain, that flat canopy looked a wreck. Now it literally became one. Something hit the marquee so hard that the whole thing shattered. Through the windows of lobby, startled hotel guests saw a flying cloud of glass and metal going in all directions, while from the very center plopped a thing that was grotesquely human, to hit the sidewalk with a buckling thud.

Telephone bells were jangling in the lobby. Over the wire that Cranston was holding open came Margo's statement:

"They're calling downstairs, Lamont, to tell them what happened to Nicky."

"They already know," returned Cranston. "He just landed. Steady, Margo. I'll meet you at Meldor's reception, right away. It always starts immediately after the broadcast."

An elevator had already started for the eleventh floor, so Cranston had to take the next one. He met Margo coming down from the roof by a convenient stairway and as they turned the corner they saw the group from the previous

elevator.

These were guests who had started upstairs as soon as they saw that the clock said ten thirty and Ron Meldor was stepping out to receive them, his face a bit annoyed.

"You're all a little early," Ron began. Then, with a shrug, he added: "I forgot - I told Barringham he could leave early. Ordinarily he insists that people wait and give me time to tidy up. Anyway" - with a laugh, Ron gestured to a man who was coming out of the suite, carrying a tray - "the waiter has taken my supper dishes, so come right in."

The waiter was gone by then, without turning his face as he headed toward the service elevator. Briefly blocked by the throng, Cranston and Margo followed the others into the suite. There, since the crowd appeared to be large, Ron opened the door to the adjoining room, so that they could spread out.

Cranston glanced at his watch. The time was now exactly ten thirty-seven, a trifle less than five minutes after Margo had screamed across the phone.

Oddly, none of the people here knew of the roof garden tragedy, since they had been on their way up in the elevator when the body struck the marquee. What

they were talking about was the attempted robbery at the Mutual Trust.

Rumors were wild and uncertain; all anybody knew was that the police had shown in full force as soon as the alarm sounded. Then, before guesses could be

hazarded, Commissioner Weston arrived to bring a first-hand account of Nicky's suicide.

Ron Meldor stood awed when he heard the news. He stared back and forth from Weston to Winslow Stamford, who was standing with the commissioner. There was something smug about Stamford's smile that Margo Lane noticed and didn't like. Plucking Cranston's sleeve, the girl undertoned:

"He's seen you, Lamont."

"Who?" queried Cranston. "Meldor?"

"No. Stamford. He knows the commissioner has been wondering why you weren't around and he's going to press the issue."

"You mean he will denounce me as The Mask?"

"More probably as The Shadow."

"Why, Margo?"

It was difficult for Margo to put the case from what she considered Stamford's viewpoint, since she disliked the smug man so intensely, but she did her best.

"Well, if you were Stamford" - that seemed a good way of impersonalizing it - "you wouldn't like it, would you Lamont, if somebody planted a whole string of evidence to make you out a crook?"

Very seriously, Cranston shook his head.

"So neither would Stamford," continued Margo. "Somebody made him out to be a fall guy, so he's looking for a scapegoat of his own. You are the best choice.

After all, you can't account for your whereabouts between ten and ten thirty tonight, but Stamford can."

"Hold it, Margo. Here comes Stamford."

Cranston was right. Stamford was approaching with extended hand. The man from Midhaven was really genial as he said:

"Congratulate me, Cranston. My innocence is proven. At least it will be after Inspector Cardona reports."

Cranston's face showed a trace of puzzlement.

"When he reports about the robbery, I mean," continued Stamford. "Didn't you hear the alarm bells and the sirens? Some crime was in progress this

evening and I was with the commissioner all the while."

"Only I wasn't."

Stamford blinked; then laughed as though Cranston had delivered a real jest. Clapping his hand on Cranston's shoulder, Stamford added with further affability:

"Why, old man, you rate tops with the commissioner. Miss Lane will tell you he was a bit testy because you were late tonight, but this Nicky business jolted everything else from his mind. By the way, what do you suppose is wrong with Ron Meldor?"

Cranston stared briefly, then shook his head.

"Nothing much," he decided. "He looks his usual contented self this evening."

"I'll say," agreed Margo. "He reminds me of the cat that swallowed the canary."

It wasn't a bad analogy, though Margo didn't realize it. As a man who was receiving guests in a room which had recently boasted an unwanted corpse, Ron had good reason to feel self-assured. If anything, his expression was far more smug than Stamford's, which might be why the latter didn't understand it.

Further comments were interrupted by the arrival of Inspector Cardona, bringing a double report. Joe's first statement concerned the attempted robbery

at the Mutual Trust, where daring crooks had tried to crack their way in through

a rear section of the building which they probably thought was not equipped with an alarm.

Having tossed a ventilator to smash the glass roof, they had become stampeded when the alarms cut loose. They had tossed their ladder down into the

debris and escaped by a rope on the other side of the bank building.

Unfortunately, the police had been unable to apprehend the criminals, nor even to sight them.

Weston's query came sharply:

"You mean you saw no one, inspector?"

"No one, commissioner."

"Neither The Shadow - nor The Mask?"

"The only crook I saw in this vicinity," affirmed Cardona, "was Nicky Shamber."

"So!" exclaimed Weston. "You saw him before he rushed up to the roof garden!"

"I saw him afterward," returned Cardona, bluntly. "Downstairs when I was coming in to report on the attempted robbery. The door man told me who he was, and what had happened, so I went through Nicky's pockets and found enough stuff

to prove who he was. It was about the only way, commissioner, because Nicky was pretty well mashed."

"Not when I saw him," reminded Weston. "I was shooting it out with him when he jumped. Nicky was well identified while still alive. I hope we have no more visitors like him."

"You won't," assured Cardona. "I've thrown a cordon around this hotel to make sure just who goes in or out."

Clyde Burke had come in with Cardona. Casually, Cranston was drawing the reporter aside.

"Check downstairs, Burke," said Cranston. "Find out if any calls were made

from this suite between ten and ten thirty."

"But that's when Meldor was on the air -"

"I know," interposed Cranston, "and that's why I want you to check."

The fact that no police had spotted anyone resembling The Shadow was

worrying Winslow Stamford. He was over talking with the commissioner, breaking in on the latter's conversation with Ron Meldor. Cardona was turning toward the

door, pulling a report sheet from his pocket, when Cranston stopped him.

"Those wouldn't concern Nicky Shamber, would they, inspector?"

"A good guess," acknowledged Cardona. "Recent stuff about the guy. No good

now, because he's dead."

"Would you mind if I looked them over?"

"All you like, Mr. Cranston." Passing over the report sheet, Cardona became confidential. "Only I wouldn't stay around too long if I were you. The commissioner isn't happy."

Cranston gave a knowing nod.

"You'll pass me through the cordon?"

"Any time and with pleasure."

A phone bell was ringing and Margo answered it on the hunch it was Clyde. The hunch proved right and Margo called Cranston over. She was close enough to catch his undertoned conversation.

"All right, Burke..." Cranston seemed quite satisfied. "I think I'll take a room here for the night... Yes, meet me in the lobby. I want to talk to you... That number again? I see, 508... I'll remember it when I register..."

Commissioner Weston was calling for Inspector Cardona. Turning, Margo saw that Weston was frothing over something and she drew closer to find out what. Evidently Cardona started an objection, for Weston became louder.

"I want no argument, Cardona!" declared the commissioner. "I've begun to mistrust Cranston. He's not to leave this room, because he's to be held for questioning. Understand?"

"All right, commissioner."

Even as Cardona spoke, Margo turned, hoping she could dash over in time to

warn Lamont, but such heroics were unnecessary. Cranston had finished his phone

call quite abruptly and hadn't stayed to discuss anything with anyone.

All that Margo saw of Cranston was a fleeting streak of blackness fading from the floor of the corridor outside the open door. Like the shadow that it was, it trailed into nothingness, like The Shadow that it represented!

CHAPTER XIX

IT was only midnight, an early hour for Manhattan, but Margo Lane could stand the gaiety of the Alexandra Roof no longer. There, everyone had become convivial, now that the menace of crime had been lifted. Ron Meldor was drinking with Winslow Stamford, while Commissioner Weston in his most benign mood, was chatting affably with Margo.

He was just dumb enough, Weston - or he thought that Margo was just dumb enough - to believe that the Cranston incident had passed unnoticed. Yet right now a man-hunt was on for Lamont Cranston, on the ground that he could reveal some important facts regarding crime.

True, Weston might prove a bit indulgent, once Cranston was on the carpet.

He would probably make a bargain if Cranston would give him data on The Shadow upon whose shoulders crime's burden had been heaped.

Such a bargain, Margo was sure, would prove very distasteful to Lamont, just as she disliked the fact that Weston was right now hoping that Margo could

lead him to Cranston who in turn would open the trail to The Shadow.

Meanwhile the man-hunt was secretly proceeding under the management of Inspector Joe Cardona, that sterling official who right now was proving his solid quality by scattering searchers all over town to look in the most

unlikely places where the commissioner's former friend Cranston might be found - or otherwise.

At least Margo had won Weston's confidence to the point where he was giving her leeway. On that account, she felt she could undertake something that

she'd wanted to try for the past hour. Finding that the roof garden was becoming

chill, Margo decided that she would get her wrap from the cloak room and Weston

showed no suspicion of the suggestion. But Margo went right on past the cloak room and down to the lobby in an elevator.

There, she didn't even step from the car. Sure that she wasn't being followed, Margo went up to the fifth floor to find the room that Cranston had mentioned over the telephone to Clyde. Stopping at 508 Margo knocked cautiously at the door.

A voice responded in a whisper:

"What is it"

"Something important." Margo's tone was equally confidential. "It's about the commissioner. Let me in and I'll tell you."

The door opened and Margo stepped into a room that was illuminated by a single floor lamp. She couldn't see the face of the man who closed the door until he turned. Then, with the name "Lamont" almost on her lips, Margo froze.

The man was Nicky Shamber!

"A dame, huh?" queried Nicky. "Say, though - that's smart of Meldor to have you working with him. What's this new dope, though, about the commissioner?"

Margo tried to say something but just couldn't. After about three seconds of watching, Nicky let his face cloud.

"A plant, huh?" he demanded. "So you're wise. Say - who was it sent you here?"

By way of answer, Margo reached for the door-knob. Nicky intercepted the grab and Margo tried to get to another door on the far side of the room, only to be blocked off again. Half way, she reeled to a stop beside the window, but before she could open it and try to scream, Nicky was choking her, then twisting her, so that Margo's head was back, with her arms helplessly behind her.

"Too bad I chucked that Roscoe," growled Nicky. "Still, it would make too much noise. I'll find a better way of croaking you, sister. Who's going to know

who did it? I'm supposed to be dead!"

Slowly, professionally, Nicky was tightening his clutch on Margo's throat,

amusing himself all the while by stating a few potent facts.

"Nobody can be really wise to Meldor," argued Nicky. "Even I wasn't, while

he was keeping me here. Reforming me, Meldor called it; that's why I gave him the dope on Howland's safe combination and Blauder's, both of them being phonies.

"Meldor said The Mask would probably be going after them, if there really was a guy called The Mask. It still might be The Shadow, but that don't matter.

It turned out tonight that Meldor was handling those jobs himself, more power to him!"

There was plenty of power to Nicky, as he was demonstrating with his hands. That slow-choking policy was efficient, matched only by a similar process that was happening at the window, where the sash was rising smoothly, steadily, almost in time to Nicky's clutch.

Margo didn't appreciate any of it. All she could see was increasing

blackness that suddenly swept about her with an enveloping force, which she thought - and hoped - would end the torture by leaving her senseless. Instead, that seeming illusion did away with Nicky's clutch.

Landing on the floor, her legs sprawled on the chair that she encountered, Margo saw Nicky slugging wildly at something that must have lunged in from the window, for it was open wide. What Margo had seen was The Shadow, fully cloaked, but now the scene had changed. The Shadow was using his cloak to smother Nicky, as good a way of silencing an antagonist as choking him.

The cloak fell away suddenly and to Margo it seemed merely that her vision was clearing. For now into the light came Cranston, shoving the gasping Nicky in front of him, finally thrusting the undead crook into a chair.

Margo's voice was back:

"Lamont! But how -"

"Let's say why, Margo," suggested Cranston. "In brief, why did you come to 508?"

"Because I heard you tell Clyde -"

"You heard me repeat what he told me. I took a room here, yes, but it is directly under this one. I am in 408. That's how I happened to hear the scuffle

and came up sooner than I planned."

"Then you knew Nicky was here?"

"Of course. You see, Nicky likes to violate laws." Looking at Nicky, Cranston shook his head. "This time the law he broke was that of the speed of falling bodies. It should have taken him about four seconds to fall from the roof garden to the marquee. Instead, he required about twenty."

Nicky was shaking his head, but only to get back his breath. Looking up from his chair he snarled, more feebly than nastily.

"Judging from the place he picked to jump," continued Cranston, "I assume he stopped off to see Ron Meldor on the way. But we can discuss that later. Where is Winslow Stamford at present, Margo."

"He's up on the roof garden."

"With Meldor, I hope?"

"With Meldor."

"Very good," decided Cranston. "It won't be necessary for Nicky to call Meldor. He will come here after he sees Stamford leave."

"But Stamford isn't leaving -"

"He will be," interposed Cranston, "after you call him, Margo. Just tell Stamford you want him to help you find me. There's the phone, Margo."

It was somewhat complicated, but the part about calling Stamford at least made sense, considering the friendly attitude he had shown toward Cranston. So Margo went to the telephone, called the roof garden and soon had Stamford on the wire.

Putting it very prettily, Margo asked Stamford's aid in the search for poor Lamont and he laconically replied that he would be right down. Meanwhile, poor Lamont was having troubles of another sort, as Margo vaguely grasped from scuffling sounds behind her. Hanging up the telephone, she turned to see Nicky grappling with Cranston over by the window.

It had been a losing fight for Nicky, this foolish attempt at a comeback. Cranston proved that when he delivered a clean knock-out blow to Nicky's already wobbling chin. Back went Nicky's head, his body following it, and to Margo's horror, the punch carried the stunned crook right out the window. Turning, Cranston smiled and beckoned.

"Look down there, Margo."

When Margo looked, she received a new surprise. She knew then why Cranston

had taken the room directly under Nicky's. All the rooms on this side of the

hotel had huge, old-fashioned awnings, kept in place by strong but adjustable rods.

What Cranston had done with the awning of his room was swing it downward, so the awning, though extended, was inverted. Viewed from above, it looked like

a great padded scoop, its angle pointing directly into the broad window.

"That's the way Meldor must have fixed his awning," explained Cranston. "Nicky dropped, and shot right into the window, the way he did just now. Suppose you try it, Margo."

Before Margo could protest, Cranston was helping her right out through the window; there, she made a sudden grasp for the sill, only to receive a neat push that sent her head-long back into the waiting net. For a moment, Margo saw her own heels kicking up above her, then like a shunting car, she was switched into

the room below to land on a mass of pillows provided for her landing.

As she somehow found her hands and knees, Margo looked up dizzily to see Clyde Burke, already binding the limp form of Nicky to a chair. Clyde took Margo's arrival as something quite matter-of-fact.

"Help me with these knots," he suggested. "Don't worry about the chief. He'll be along later; he always comes through, you know."

In the room above, Lamont Cranston again was donning the attire of The Shadow, ready to end the singular riddle of The Mask!

CHAPTER XX

WINSLOW STAMFORD knocked and found the door open, so he walked right in. The door closed almost automatically but this time its bolt was thrown home. When Stamford turned, he was treated to a shock surpassing Margo's.

What he saw, Stamford said:

"The Shadow!"

"Correct, Stamford." The tone came in a low whisper, resembling no other voice that Stamford had ever heard. "I have been waiting for another meeting with you."

"But how did you reach here ahead of me?"

"I get around swiftly, Stamford, particularly in this hotel."

The Shadow was approaching slowly, steadily, one gloved hand drawing gradually from beneath his cloak. At sight of that, Stamford whipped his own hand toward his pocket, only to have The Shadow clamp his wrist. A moment later, they were grappling furiously.

Quick treatments were The Shadow's specialty. He gave Stamford the same sort that Nicky had taken. A whirl of the cloak that sent the slouch hat spinning, but Stamford never saw the face beneath, because the cloak was covering Stamford's own head. Fighting against the smothering folds, Stamford tried to continue the struggle, and The Shadow let him.

All the while, however, The Shadow, now plainly Cranston though Stamford couldn't see him, was working the struggle over toward the window. At the same time, The Shadow was listening intently for a tell-tale pass-key in the lock. When he caught it, his action was amazingly swift.

One hard punch sent Stamford reeling, cloak and all. With a backward twist, Cranston vaulted the window sill and took the awning chute route to the room below. Hurling away the cloak, Stamford flung it to the chair where the hat had fallen and reeled to a darkened corner to recuperate. He didn't know the door was opening, nor did he see the man who entered.

What the arrival saw was the hat and cloak. On the instant, he became alert, his hand going to his gun pocket. The man was Ron Meldor and he showed all the quickness that had characterized The Mask; in fact, to some degree, his

speed resembled The Shadow's.

So did Winslow Stamford now meet those qualifications. He came lunging from his corner, drawing his own gun. They halted, face to face, Meldor and Stamford, half across the intervening chair, with the tell-tale hat and cloak lying between them.

DOWN in the room below, Cranston was telling Margo the history of The Mask

as he had pieced it, while Clyde was jiggling the receiver of the telephone.

"The Mask was always consistent," explained Cranston, "except when he suddenly changed his methods for no good reason. Remember that at first he roved, leaving no traces at all? Then suddenly he concentrated his work and constantly dropped clues?"

Margo nodded; then said:

"But that was when Meldor began his broadcasts."

"Before they were really necessary," stated Cranston. "The Mask was still untraced; it was foolish for Meldor to make things harder for himself."

"Then why did he?"

"He didn't. He simply moved in on another man's game. Our friend Stamford was the original Mask and still thinks he has the copyright. How are you coming with that call, Burke?"

Clyde gave a satisfied nod.

"I'll have Cardona on the wire in a moment. He's down in the lobby."

"Tell him he's really needed in 508," said Cranston. Then, to Margo: "Meldor must have had a line on Stamford, so he was dropping clues to put him out of circulation. That's why Stamford made his bold appearance, to spike the issue before it went too far."

Pausing, Cranston gave a reflective smile. He recalled that night in back of this very hotel, when The Mask had disappeared in one direction and had thrown a knife from the other. As The Shadow, Cranston hadn't then been entirely sure that there were two Masks, but he'd established it perfectly that

night at Blauder's.

"Yes, there were two Masks at Blauder's." Cranston spoke as though analyzing the case as an outsider. "One, Stamford, lingered to hear what the other, Meldor, was saying on the radio. That's how Stamford really happened to arrive at the commissioner's conference."

"But he didn't have time," began Margo. "It would have taken him thirty minutes. We went right over, but we didn't arrive until after eleven."

"Stamford had an early start," stated Cranston. "He was away while the other Mask, Meldor, was still having trouble, such as getting himself pursued. It was Meldor who set off the alarms."

Margo began to calculate.

"Two Masks at Blauder's -"

"Yes," nodded Cranston. "The Mask fired too many shots for a single gun."

"Then each knows there is another Mask -"

"No." Wisely, Cranston shook his head. "They have never met while bound on

crime. There was always an in-between man, The Shadow!"

"Then each thinks the other is The Shadow!"

This time Cranston's nod was steady. It gave the key to the final game that he was at this moment playing, a game that was really coming through, since Clyde had just contacted Cardona and was giving him the needed tip.

UPSTAIRS, two men of crime were clamping the chair arms, each holding a drawn gun, neither willing to give the other an ounce of leeway.

"So you tried to get rid of me tonight, Meldor," sneered Stamford. "Only

I

was too smart to go trailing you over to the Mutual Trust."

"I'm not sure you didn't," retorted Meldor. "Only I must say you ducked that trap very neatly. But enough of compliments. Didn't you try to nail me with a knife, one night out back?"

"Why not? It looked like the best way to expose you. Then I switched to a better plan. I decided to beat you to a job."

"At Blauder's, yes," admitted Meldor, "but I planted evidence against you when I found the empty safe."

"And I spiked that evidence. What was more" - Stamford became triumphant

-

"I analyzed your constant disappearance in the same neighborhood. That's how I learned who you were. Neat tonight, wasn't it, the way I planted Barringham right in your suite, using that extra pass key you gave him once?"

"Only Barringham wasn't there, was he?" jeered Meldor. "Not when you showed up with the commissioner."

A retort was on Stamford's lips, but he withheld it. Instead, he said coolly:

"Crime has taken you somewhat out of character, hasn't it, Meldor? After all, you always did mouth things about justice as though you meant them."

"Just part of the blind, Stamford. Anyway, who are you to talk? Murdering Barringham was unnecessary, something far away from your usual code."

Those statements, properly interpreted, proved the very point that Cranston had just told Margo; that Meldor and Stamford each held the fixed idea

that the other was The Shadow, gone wrong. It explained their urge to help the police commissioner, for each in separately playing a role that could give him the general title of The Mask, was anxious to put an end to The Shadow.

Whether The Shadow stood for right or wrong meant nothing. He was interfering with The Mask, either way. And The Mask - both men who fitted the description - could not be sure of the future while The Shadow was around.

It wasn't odd that in their verbal battle Stamford and Meldor had failed to guess that they were in a sense the same person talking about someone else. For on the chair between them lay the regalia of The Shadow, left there purposely by its owner. Stamford, who didn't know the window trick, thought that Meldor had been the original man in the cloak. Meldor, coming in after the

trick was done, had found only Stamford with The Shadow's habiliments at hand.

And now the game was really ended.

At the sudden click of a pass-key in the door lock, the two rivals wheeled. Each halted momentarily, suspecting the other of a trick. Each was expecting the other to snatch up the hat and cloak, as a means of disguise.

Each saw the other's face and recognized that it was tense. Hearing the gruff voice of Cardona, with its "Open in the name of the law," the pair forgot

their rivalry. As though teamed to the action, Stamford and Meldor each pulled a

bandana mask from his pocket and drew it over his own eyes.

That broke the brief pact.

Whether either or both realized the full game and was seized with a hatred

for the other man, they never told. Perhaps each thought that for The Shadow to

try to pass as The Mask in this pinch where crooks should stick together, was a

violation of crimedom's first law.

Whatever the case, Inspector Cardona, lunging into room 508, saw two masked men each wheel on the other and let rip with their revolvers. At that close range, there could be only one result. The Mask took it.

Both Masks.

From the window came a whispered laugh, telling that The Shadow had been ready there, if needed. Then Cranston's head and shoulders slid down beyond the sill, before they were even noticed. An automatic in his hand, he landed back in 408 by way of the awning chute.

With only one floor to go, Cranston reached the room above before Commissioner Weston could be summoned from the roof garden. With Cardona giving what explanations he could, Cranston simply nodded and picked up The Shadow's hat and cloak with the question:

"Then these don't belong?"

"Not to these phonies," returned Cardona, gesturing to the floor. "They belong to somebody else. Better get them away before they confuse the commissioner."

Actually, Weston was confused enough when he arrived at the unmasking of Ron Meldor and Winslow Stamford, now partners in death. To help Cardona's explanations, Clyde Burke appeared to chime in facts and suggestions that Joe didn't know. Indeed, Clyde was proving himself quite capable in putting things together and he provided the final touch by taking the commissioner down to 408 to meet Nicky.

Clyde didn't take credit for Nicky's capture nor the discovery of the inverted awning system. He'd simply stumbled across both, very luckily. But at least they helped to solve the remaining riddle.

Margo Lane and Lamont Cranston were discussing that point as they rode in Shrevvy's cab. Relieved from the strain of recent adventures, Margo laughed lightly as she said:

"I suppose Clyde will scoop the town with his story of The Shadow and The Mask."

The title was too long for Cranston. He preferred that it be shortened and that the part omitted be reserved for the archives of that mysterious personage whose name would not appear in the public press.

The Shadow's name was vindicated, so Cranston had instructed Clyde to give others, especially Joe Cardona, full credit for the solving of this maze of crime. Hence Cranston shook his head as he abbreviated Margo's title.

"Not The Shadow and The Mask," said Cranston. "Just the story of The Mask - both of them."

THE END