



RETURN OF THE SHADOW

Walter B. Gibson

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The Shadow

In a black-walled room where a bluish light shone down upon the surface of a polished table, two long-fingered hands were moving in and out of the glow like detached creatures, operating of their own accord. These were the hands of The Shadow and this room was his hidden sanctum, where he received reports from his agents and planned his campaigns against crime.

On the third finger of The Shadow's left hand there shone a large, strange gem, resplendent with a fiery sparkle that was ever-changing in the bluish light. That stone was The Shadow's token, a rare, unmatched fire-opal, called a girasol that reflected the hypnotic glow of its owner's burning eyes.

A tiny light glimmered in the dark beyond the bluish ray. The Shadow pressed a hidden switch and a quiet voice came over an amplifier:

"Burbank speaking."

"Report..."

ONE

FROM the little knoll above the cloverleaf, Harry Vincent studied the upper Hudson River as it wound through the massive highlands. Far below, the blue sheen of the vast waterway made a striking contrast to the verdant foliage of early springtime and the darker patches of evergreens upon the steep, gray granite slopes. Beyond the cloverleaf, the river was spanned by the Twin Peaks Bridge, so named because of the rugged pointed mountains that bulked at each end, dwarfing the toy-like towers of the suspension bridge.

But Harry was not interested in scenery as he scanned the Hudson with a pair of powerful binoculars. His job was to check on odd activities along the river and report them to his chief, a mysterious crime fighter known as The Shadow. Harry had chosen this vantage spot on the west side of the river as the best observation place available. He had also picked an off hour on an off day during the off season as a time when any unusual happening would be most noticeable.

Harry Vincent lowered his binoculars and glanced toward the cloverleaf just below. There, a bright red convertible was swinging idly around the circle. The car had a wheelbase longer than an average limousine; and Harry's open-topped car, parked at the foot of the knoll, looked puny in contrast as the elegant red job rolled past it. Even more eye-catching than the red car itself was the blonde who drove it. Her wind-swept hair was silvery in the sunlight; her chin had a saucy upturn as she looked toward Harry through a pair of dark-tinted sunglasses that added a touch of mystery to her charm.

In the car with the blonde lovely was a stolid, square-faced man of perhaps forty, whose expression was slightly quizzical as he followed the girl's upward gaze. Then, apparently indifferent to a touring sightseer like Harry, the stolid man looked ahead and gave a sweeping gesture to the turn the girl was to take. A few moments later, the blonde swung the car into a road leading to the Twin Peaks Inn, about a half-mile to the south. With a sudden spurt, the convertible became a red streak that was swallowed by the green clumps of budding forsythia that lined the road bank.

So that was that and rather nice at that, from Harry's brief glimpse; but immediately following the rapid departure of the blonde in the red car, Harry was conscious of a new and closer approach from an opposite direction. He swung about, binoculars still in hand, to face a man who had all but stolen up behind him, from a pathway forming part of the Appalachian Trail, which came past the ski jump not far from the Twin Peaks Inn.

The man was tall, lanky and probably in his early thirties. His face, though thin and decidedly long-jawed, was rather handsome, due to his affable smile. He was wearing khaki shorts, a short-sleeved khaki shirt and he carried a khaki knapsack. His face, like his bare arms and legs, was decidedly tanned, evidently from a sojourn in more southern climes, for the season here was too early for either tan or hikers.

"Do you know where I can pick up the A.T. across the river?"

"The A.T.?" Harry gave a well-feigned frown as though totally unfamiliar with the term.

"The Appalachian Trail," defined the hiker. "The footpath that follows the mountain ridges. I happen to be following it."

"I wouldn't know," rejoined Harry, "but they might tell you down at the Twin Peaks Inn." He gestured to his car. "I'm driving down there now, so hop in and I'll take you along."

The hiker accepted. During the few minutes' drive, Harry maneuvered a casual side-glance, noting that the hiker had a blunt profile and that his shocky hair showed reddish in the sunlight. But Harry avoided further conversation. There wasn't much reason to be sightseeing up here this early in the season and still less for a hiker to be on the trail, particularly alone. In that mood, Harry decided that the less said, the better.

They pulled in at the Twin Peaks Inn, which stood on an artificial plateau surrounded by acres of parking lots, all utterly empty and deserted. A few cars were parked beside the huge sprawling inn, which was heavily patronized over weekends in the summer and during the winter ski season; but not at this time. Among the cars was the big red convertible, so Harry parked in back of it and strolled into the inn with the hiker. A lone clerk was behind a desk and souvenir counter in the corner of a vast community room where rustic chairs and benches were grouped about a gigantic fireplace; but there was no sign of the blonde, her companion, nor anyone else.

The clerk gave the hiker a map showing local trails. The hiker bought some picture postcards, addressed them and asked:

"When will these go out? Tonight?"

"I don't think so," replied the clerk. "I believe they made the last pickup. You'd better check the time on the mailbox by the door."

The hiker went over to the corner and Harry, who was looking over the rack of postcards, had a chance to notice those that the hiker had written and left lying on the desk. They were overlapping and the upper card was addressed to Miss Mildred Joslyn, Henniker, New York. Its message simply stated: "Hope this reaches you before you leave. I am hiking up to Herb's place, so a letter will reach me there... Don."

Evidently Don's full name was Donald G. Morland, for Harry could see that signature on the portion of the lower card that poked from beneath the upper. But Harry didn't risk moving it. Instead, he chose some cards of his own and was buying them from the clerk when Don Morland returned and told the man behind the desk:

"You were right, the last mail has gone out." Don picked up his two cards. "Would they go out from Colonial Town if I mailed them from there?"

"They should," responded the clerk. "That's over on the Northern Turnpike and the mail trucks come down by that route."

"Good enough," Don decided. "It can't be much more than an hour's hike, so I should make it easily before dark."

With that, Don shouldered his pack and started off, without giving Harry a chance to offer him a lift back to the cloverleaf. That was just as well, for Harry knew that hikers could be an independent lot, particularly the lone type like Don Morland, if that really was his name. Don might even have hoped that Harry would express some interest in hiking, so that in his turn Don could inquire what Harry was doing in these parts.

So Harry simply watched the lanky hiker disappear along a path that formed a shortcut to the Twin Peaks Bridge. By then, an expensive gray sedan was wheeling up to the inn. It parked behind Harry's car and a short, self-important man stepped out. Something in the upthrust of the man's jaw was familiar to Harry, as was the sharp stare of his narrowed eyes.

The man gave a contemptuous look at the fancy red convertible as he passed it. Next, he gave Harry a passing appraisal as he stalked importantly into the inn. His face was much younger than his manner indicated; and oddly, that made it seem all the more familiar to Harry. That was explained when the newcomer stopped at the desk and demanded imperiously:

"Do you have a message for Mr. Shallick?"

"Yes, sir," returned the clerk, with a quick bow. "Mr. Winstead said to tell you that they are waiting for you in the cocktail lounge."

No wonder Harry Vincent had recognized that upthrust, sharp-eyed face. It belonged to Craig Shallick, a younger member of a family with large financial holdings and political ambitions. Other Shallicks were wealthier than Craig, but he had been getting front-page newspaper stories and TV interviews which had greatly increased his popularity and made his face familiar to many, including Harry Vincent.

Lately, though, Craig Shallick had suffered something of a setback. His wife, Irene, who was the vivacious, party-loving type, didn't go along with Craig's political aspirations. Her excursions into cafe society had caused newspaper columnists to more than hint that the present separation of Craig and Irene Shallick would soon culminate in divorce.

Craig Shallick stalked through a side door that bore the sign COCKTAIL LOUNGE and Harry Vincent followed. There, at a table, sat the blonde of the red convertible, with her stolid male companion, who rose to shake hands with Shallick. Harry, taking one of the many empty window tables, heard their exchange of greetings. The stolid man said, "Hello, Craig," and received a brusque reply:

"Hello, Pete. What is this supposed to be, some sort of an attempted reconciliation between Irene and myself?"

From that, Harry gathered that the stolid man's full name was Peter Winstead and that the blonde with him must be Craig's estranged wife, Irene. The contemptuous glance that Craig had given his wife's gaudy convertible was outmatched by the look that Irene had reserved for her husband in person. Without her sunglasses, as she was now, Irene would have been very sweet indeed, except for the spiteful, almost vicious pout of her lips and the glare of her half-closed eyes. Even to the upthrust of her chin, Irene seemed to copy her husband's pompous manner, perhaps as a form of defense that she had unknowingly cultivated during their brief years of unblissful matrimony.

"It might be called a reconciliation," returned Winstead, in a calm tone, "but I'd rather class it as business. Sit down, have a drink and let's talk."

Craig Shallick obliged. Harry Vincent ordered a drink at his own table and while he waited for a sleepy waitress to bring it, he caught snatches of conversation from the neighboring table. From it, he gathered that Irene's uncle, Gregg Austin, was annoyed at the divorce talk and was threatening to cut off Irene's share of her father's estate, if Irene finally broke with Craig Shallick. Peter Winstead, who handled various financial transactions for Gregg Austin, was trying to soothe matters.

"We're going over to see Gregg Austin now," explained Winstead, "and then off to a dinner party with the usual crowd. It would help if you stopped by to say hello to Uncle Gregg and then went along with us. Make it look as if you want to patch things up and maybe spike this divorce talk."

Before Craig could voice an objection, Irene added in a tone that was truly bittersweet:

"If you don't play along, darling, you will be a long, long time getting that divorce; perhaps never. I don't want your money beyond a reasonable settlement, but I'm not going to lose out on what's rightfully coming to me, just because you won't humor Uncle Gregg."

Craig Shallick shrugged as though accepting the inevitable.

"Go on over to Austin's," he said. "I'll join you there and do my bit. The sooner we get over all this nonsense, the better."

"Good enough," decided Winstead. "I'll phone and make a dinner reservation for one more. We wouldn't want it to get back to Gregg Austin that you didn't go along on the party."

Winstead and Irene left the cocktail lounge and Harry nursed his drink, waiting for Craig to follow. From the window, Harry saw the red car swing up the road toward the bridge. Craig probably noted it, too, for he left the lounge soon after and possibly made some phone calls, because another long interval passed before Harry saw Craig's car heading toward the bridge.

By then, the sun was disappearing over West Peak and it was time for Harry Vincent to be on his way. He drove up to the bridge, paid his toll and continued across, turning right to follow the Thunder Cliff Highway south to the town of Vanderkill. When he reached the overlook, Harry swung into a broad parking space that was well protected by a high stone wall. There, Harry alighted and took a last look through the binoculars.

The highway itself was dark when Harry climbed back into his car, so he turned on the headlights and continued his winding journey along the curves that clung to the cliff edge. Twenty miles an hour was a high speed for the horseshoe bends that swung in and out of the folding hills, but Harry cut down to fifteen or less when he hooked around a hairpin turn. He came to one where the guardrail showed against a fringe of tree boughs, indicating that the ground sloped precipitously just beyond, forming one of the barren granite cliffs from which the highway gained its name.

There, Harry blared a warning with his horn, confident that it would bring an answering blast from anyone coming the other way. Instead, he was met by a terrific roar accompanied by a blinding glare that drowned the gleam of his own headlights as a huge truck shot from a parking space at the inside of the turn, launching its crushing bulk full upon him.

Caught squarely in the path of that surging tonnage, Harry Vincent and his car seemed doomed for a plunge over the rail and into the depths below!

TWO

IN THAT FRANTIC instant, Harry Vincent took the longest and wildest of chances. Instead of trying to stop or even veer away from the onrushing truck, he gunned his car full speed straight ahead, intending to hit the guardrail at an angle. That, at least, would carry him past the truck, which was swinging in upon him.

The guardrail consisted of two stout horizontal cables, held by steel uprights imbedded deep in the rock, strong enough to buffer the impact of Harry's light car. But there was more to consider than just the car; Harry himself, for one thing. In a quick flash, Harry recalled that he hadn't fastened his seatbelt for the simple reason that he'd planned to stay at low speed along this precarious highway.

This was the last sort of emergency that Harry could have anticipated. It also threatened to be the last that he would ever encounter. There wasn't much sense in taking a bounce off the guardrail only to get mashed behind the steering wheel. But Harry, thinking with split-second precision, saw a way to counteract that.

The car's lurch carried it clear of the truck, and Harry offset his lack of a seatbelt by bracing his hands hard against the wheel and driving the brake pedal to the floor just as his hurtling car hit the rail. That double stiffening of legs and forearms shoved his body deep into the seat, ready to withstand the shock. But there was none.

Instead of a harsh twang from the cables and the terrible jolt that Harry expected, the car sailed into space. The whole guardrail had given, literally flattening beneath the impact. For a moment, the headlights

pointed straight outward, hanging in mid-air. Then, they dipped downward, gleaming between the trees and showing the Hudson's surface for one twinkling instant, seemingly miles below.

Then, amid the crash of saplings the car hit nose first upon the cliff brow. It twisted crazily toward the left, threatening to pin Harry beneath it as he tried to shove open the door beside him. There wasn't a chance for him to extricate himself; and somewhat mercifully, his head glanced one of the tree boughs, blacking out Harry's senses as the car teetered above him, sparing him the sight of the new horror that was due.

On the road, the truck had halted half around the hairpin turn. Two men, springing to the ground, reached the flattened rail in time to see the wheels of Harry's car spinning almost straight up in the air, as the doomed vehicle made its sideways somersault. Then, wheels first, its metal bulk vanished against the sunset-reddened sky beyond the brow. Brief seconds later, the listening pair heard a muffled crash from a hundred feet or more below the edge.

Below, a hundred-car freight train was racing southward along the outer track that flanked the river bank and it seemed that the twisted mass of Harry's car was going to land squarely among a lot of shiny, brand-new models that were being carried piggy-back on railway flat cars. Instead, it struck another bulge of rock that jounced it clear over the speeding train and out into the river, where the jumbled wreckage sank, leaving no trace of an occupant.

On the highway, hundreds of feet above, the two truck-men were already swiftly obliterating all traces of their murderous handiwork. From the back of the truck, they had brought a big hook and had thrown it over the flattened guardrail. Now, they were using a motorized winch to haul the rail back up into place, posts, cables and all, so that the embankment looked exactly as it had before Harry's car crashed through.

It was the whine of the winch that brought Harry Vincent back to consciousness. He was lying on what he thought must be the river bank, for he last recalled being trapped in the car just as it careened for its plunge from the cliff. Now, he realized that he was still where all that had started, on the brow of the cliff itself, staring up at the rim of the banked-up highway.

Then, before Harry could begin to wonder how he had landed where he was, he heard the answer. It came in a whispered tone:

"Steady, Vincent. They are about to leave. Get ready to follow."

It was The Shadow!

Looking up, Harry saw the familiar figure of his chief, a cloaked shape with a slouch hat above, silhouetted against the crimson sky above the distant mountains. That was The Shadow's favorite attire when he set out on special forays. It enabled him to blend with blackness when stalking or eluding enemies. Right now, the formula was working both ways. The truck-men, looking down at a sharp angle, had failed to see The Shadow crouched in the slight gully just short of the cliff brow. Now, in his turn, The Shadow was ready to trail them unseen; or at least he could be doing so, without Harry as a handicap.

Harry had been expecting to meet The Shadow but not under such startling circumstances as these. Knowing the ways of his chief, Harry realized that The Shadow, driving north along the Thunder Cliff Highway, must have seen the lurking truck and suspected some vicious purpose. Once past the turn, The Shadow must have parked his own car somewhere; then doubled back on foot to investigate the truck. While working his way outside the guardrail, The Shadow had been analyzing the setup just as Harry had come along and driven squarely into it.

Those frantic moments were now straightening themselves in Harry's mind. Too late to stop the truck's murderous assault, The Shadow had dropped away as Harry's car crashed the rail. Harry could remember getting the door open and trying to twist free from behind the wheel; now, he realized that The Shadow must have reached him and yanked him clear just as the car jounced over the brink. From here, The Shadow had rolled Harry to the safety of the gully; and right now, as The Shadow's hand moved upward, Harry could see the outline of an automatic in his chief's gloved fist, ready for a pot shot if one of the truck-men showed himself.

But the pair didn't linger up above. They were anxious to get away before other cars came along. They had covered the secret of the tampered guardrail and were confident that their victim couldn't have lived to tell it. They had already released the hook and had drawn it up on the winch; now the roar of the truck's motor told that they were getting underway.

That was a cue for The Shadow's next move. He hauled Harry to his feet, guided him up the embankment and along the outside of the rail, steadying him when he stumbled. The truck, by then, was well around the hairpin turn and heading north. As The Shadow pushed Harry up to the roadway, its lights appeared suddenly, deep in the horseshoe bend ahead. The range, however, was too long for The Shadow to blast a tire with a shot from an automatic; and there was too much likelihood that a bullet would be deflected by a rock or tree.

With the way things were working out, Harry realized that The Shadow was playing the smarter policy of not letting the truckers guess that their game was known, or even that anyone was on their trail. Alone, The Shadow might have closed that trail rapidly, but with Harry still faltering along, valuable time was lost. A hundred yards past the hairpin turn, The Shadow finally guided Harry into an opening among the trees at the inner side of the road. It was a little clearing that had once housed a work shack; there, The Shadow's dark, sleek sedan was parked and waiting.

With Harry in the seat beside him, The Shadow was soon in pursuit of the mysterious truck, but with the start that it had gained, the chance of overtaking it was slim. Still, The Shadow was doing his utmost to lessen the margin, from the skilled way he handled the car around the bends. Now, they were meeting cars coming in the other direction and Harry, still not over his recent shock, shied instinctively each time the glare of headlights met his eyes.

But none of these cars were trying murderous tricks and the whole thing became quite fantastic to Harry when he recalled how a short time before he had been driving south along this very highway in a car that was now at the bottom of the Hudson River. Now he was making a return trip, with, of all things, his binoculars still dangling from the strap around his neck. Harry still couldn't fathom what had led up to all this and whether or not he was in any way responsible. But The Shadow, in his thorough, calculating way, was already working on the problem, as was evidenced when he intoned:

"Report."

Report, Harry did. He told how in three days of driving around this area, he hadn't spotted anything unusual until late this afternoon. Even then, the incidents had seemed slight, almost inconsequential. But they were the sort of data that The Shadow wanted. Harry could tell that by the way his chief accepted them in silence, as Harry told of his observations from the cloverleaf; the arrival of the red convertible; the brief meeting with the trail hiker, Don Morland; the eavesdropping that Harry had done when Craig Shallick joined his wife Irene and their mutual friend, Peter Winstead, at the table in the cocktail lounge.

By the time Harry had finished, the sky was totally dark and as they passed the overlook, twinkling lights were visible from across the river. The Twin Peaks Bridge, too, was illuminated, and suddenly flashed into sight; but the river lights were too far down to be glimpsed, except at intervals. As the car passed the

end of the brightly glowing bridge, Harry looked to his left and saw that his companion was no longer disguised as The Shadow.

Along the way, he had dropped his slouch hat in the back seat and had let the black cloak slip down from his shoulders. Now, he was his other self, Lamont Cranston, a man whose immobile features were strangely hawklike and whose eyes showed a steady, impassive gaze that contrasted with the glint of The Shadow's. It was Cranston, now, who analyzed Harry's report.

"Our purpose is to find a lead to the strange occurrences in this area," stated Cranston in a calm, methodical tone. "Certain key men in international affairs have been acting oddly enough to indicate that they are under undue pressure or that impostors have taken their places. The only clue is that in each case, the person involved was in this area just before the change was noted."

Harry nodded that he was familiar with that much of the case.

"Any attempt to trace the actions of such people," continued Cranston, "would only excite suspicion on the part of those who are covering up. It is smarter to force the opposition to show its hand; to find out if a cabal or criminal mechanism is at work, capable of accomplishing its aims through threat, imposture, or even murder. You have just proven that it does exist."

"Do you mean that the persons who disappeared were brushed off the road like I was, so that substitutes could supplant them?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it. There is no evidence of missing cars in their cases; also, any abducted persons may be needed for some purpose later. You happened to be an outsider who moved into the situation; therefore, you were expendable."

"Could they have mistaken my car for someone else's?"

"Hardly. While coming north, I passed both of the cars you mentioned - the red convertible and the dark sedan - before I saw the parked truck. In any case, you have given us a very valuable lead. Apparently someone thought you had found out something, which may be better than if you actually had."

They were now a few miles north of the bridgehead, where the terrain was still rugged, but the highway less precarious as it cut more into the folds of the hills than along the river edge. Harry noted that Cranston's keen eyes were ferreting every possible side road, in case the truck had taken one. So far, there had been none, other than slight turnouts which Cranston ignored. But about four and a half miles north of the bridge they struck the first really good prospect. Off to the right - away from the river - an arrow pointed with the legend: RAGGED GAP ROAD.

The Shadow took the road, which wound up among the lower hills. He was checking driveways and turnouts now; and Harry realized that his chief's purpose, rather than trying to overtake the truck, was to look for places where it could have gone, or even better, where it might have come from, before starting its murderous foray. Any clue to the truck could lead to the men behind it.

There were houses at intervals along the road, but mostly of the summer type and therefore not yet occupied. The road itself was dirt, but in good repair, until in less than a mile they came to a barrier reading: ROAD CLOSED - BRIDGE OUT.

The car halted at a slight angle and as Harry was staring at the sign, a figure, shaped like an enormous bat, edged into the headlights' glare. Startled, Harry glanced beside him and saw that Cranston was gone. He had switched to his cloaked garb of The Shadow, to be ready for any eventuality while he examined the roadblock. Then, he was back at the wheel again, backing the car around and starting down the road

to the Thunder Cliff Highway.

"That barricade hasn't been moved for at least a week. The truck couldn't have gone in or out of there today," The Shadow said.

On the highway again, another mile and a half north brought them to a driveway leading to the left, marked HUDSON VIEW TAVERN. Cranston swung in there, looped around the big brick mansion past parking spaces where cars were already congregated for the dinner hour, then swung out again. No chance of a hiding place for a truck in there.

Another eight miles of winding road continued northward, precarious in spots and twisty enough to keep their speed down around twenty miles. That suited Cranston, as it enabled him to check more side roads, all of which proved to be just short deadends. But when he reached the little village of Rockwood, at the end of the eight miles, there was no use trying to track the truck further.

There, roads diverged. One went down to Rockwood Landing and backtracked southward. Another continued north along the river, past Castle Point. A third veered northeast among the hills to meet the Northern Turnpike at Hickory Corners, ten miles away. That was the route The Shadow chose and it proved fairly twisty, for it followed one of the many brooks that tumbled from the highlands down into the Hudson.

So it took about twenty minutes to reach the Corners, which consisted of an old country store closed for the night, a church with an ancient graveyard, a beaten-down old barn and a few hickory trees, descendants of a once-proud grove. There, Cranston paused in the glare of a blinker light and studied a road map.

"It's sixteen miles south to Colonial Town," he stated. "We can stop there and check on that hiker, Don Morland. We can also look up Gregg Austin in the phone book, because ten miles more will bring us to the junction of the Northern Turnpike and Thunder Cliff Highway, just north of Vanderkill. I know that Gregg Austin lives somewhere near there, because he and I happen to have some mutual friends." Cranston supplied a dry chuckle; then added: "So we can top off our eventful evening by dropping in to see him."

Cranston swung on to the turnpike and soon was crowding the forty-five mile an hour speed limit as he headed south. It was good, though, that he had spoken as Cranston and not as The Shadow; otherwise The Shadow for once would have been wrong.

Lamont Cranston and Harry Vincent weren't going to top off their evening by dropping in on Gregg Austin. They were just going to begin it.

THREE

WHILE THE SHADOW was taking up the roundabout trail of the vanished truck, Gregg Austin was receiving visitors at his pretentious home on Pleasant Valley Road, a mile east of the Northern Turnpike. It wasn't unusual for people to drop in on him at odd hours because Gregg Austin combined business with pleasure, the simple reason being that his only pleasure in life was business.

The house was the old Austin mansion and Gregg had taken it along with most of the land in Pleasant Valley as his share of the family wealth, letting his brother Lawrence - Irene's father - control their industrial holdings. Gregg Austin, owning so much real estate, had gone into the business, not just as an agent, but as a buyer, seller, landlord, developer and specialist in foreclosures. So it was difficult to tell the sheep from the goats among the visitors, or to distinguish Gregg's straw men from his more solid customers.

The Austin house was a combination of stone and clapboard set back a hundred feet from a slight bend in the tree-lined road, with a sloping woodland another hundred feet behind it. In the dusk, the deep-set windows made the house look like a huddled monster with glowing eyes; but inside, all was different. To the right of the front door, a broad double doorway opened into a large living room where paneled walls, old-fashioned easy chairs and a fireplace with a crackling fire created a truly homelike effect.

Behind that, reached by doors from both the living room and the hallway, was a smaller room that Austin used as his office. It was furnished with heavy, wide-built chairs and a big, flat-topped desk, the only modern touch being the filing cabinets that Austin had added to take care of his constantly increasing records. The office had a third door opening out onto a porch overlooking a wide side yard, where a row of cedar trees cut off the view of an old abandoned stone quarry.

To the left of the front door was a dining room; in back of that, a pantry and a kitchen with a back door. Straight ahead was a stairway to the second and third floors, which were occupied by Gregg Austin, and an old retainer named Chester who had been with the family for three generations.

There were also guest rooms, chiefly for the accommodation of Austin relatives who seldom cared to accept the begrudging hospitality of their cousin Gregg, whom they heartily despised. The one exception was Gregg's niece, Irene, who came and went as she wanted, figuring this was as much her home as her Uncle Gregg's. Since her break-off with her husband, Craig Shallick, Irene stayed at a hotel when in New York, but she had come to prefer the country around Vanderkill, because she was fond of horses and a boyfriend named Rick Langdon.

Those two passions were furthered by the fact that Irene had met Rick at the Palomino Dude Ranch a few miles up the Pleasant Valley from the Austin homestead. Rick, a personable local boy, had really made good, so far as Irene was concerned, though Uncle Gregg didn't go along with that opinion. Indeed, Rick's injection into Irene's life was largely responsible for Austin's ultimatum regarding Irene's reconciliation with Shallick. Right now, Austin was expressing that sentiment to his last business caller of the day, who happened to be Mark Wade, owner of the Palomino Dude Ranch.

They were a striking contrast, Austin and Wade, as they sat at the big desk in the office. Both were men in their mid-fifties, but no one ever would have guessed it. Austin looked much older as he sat behind his desk, a dryish, withery figure, lost like a ratty peanut in a shell represented by his big chair. Austin was, nevertheless, a dynamo of nervous energy and he liked to punctuate his sharp remarks with a shake of his tight, scrawny fist.

Wade, youthful in manner, was burly of build and broad of both face and beam. He fully occupied a chair the same size as the one that to Austin was over-commodious. Wade's face wore an unchanging smile that featured a gold-toothed gleam; he also wore an oversized Stetson, which at present occupied a front corner of Austin's desk, and he sported a shoestring necktie, a ruffled shirt and gold-braided Mexican jacket which gave him enough of a look of the Old West to brand him as the proprietor of an Eastern dude ranch.

At present, Gregg Austin and Mark Wade were much in accord as they vociferated on a subject which both regarded as their pet peeve: Rick Langdon.

"That whippersnapper?" defined Austin. "Tell me, Wade, why did you tolerate young Langdon around the dude ranch in the first place?"

"For the same reason other people did," returned Wade. "He runs around with the country club set and he talked as though he could bring some business to the ranch. After all, Rick comes from a good family _"

"Comes from!" interposed Austin with a snort that reminded Wade of one of his horses. "You've put it aptly, Wade. But coming from a good family won't give him the privilege of joining my family and ruining what's left of it."

Wade accepted that tirade with his fixed smile. About all that remained of the Austin family was Irene, and in Wade's opinion, she had been pretty well ruined already, but he didn't say that to her Uncle Gregg.

"Anyway, you have a point," continued Austin, sourly. "Langdon gets a job selling cars - that's how Irene bought that big red bathtub of hers - and then he switched to stocks, then insurance, and so on. Then he wanted me to let him sell real estate. Now, we're back to our own point, Wade. Real estate."

"If you mean the ranch," returned Wade, "I'm sure that a loan of ten thousand would fix things nicely. Fifteen thousand would be better -"

"Another loan! Why, that's impossible!"

"It's impossible to run the ranch without money."

"You always say that, Wade." Austin took some papers from the desk and began sorting them, mumbling, "Deeds - agreements - leases. Ah, yes, notes." Then, "First you bought the ranch, but you couldn't make a go until you bought more horses. Then you had to hire more men. Next you needed more pasture land, then you had to lease more bridle trails. Always more loans!"

"And always I was paying them off, remember?"

"Well, yes." Austin's tone was reluctant as he thumbed through a small sheaf of papers. "But tell me, Wade, what new guarantee can you give of paying off all that you already owe me?"

"Well, for one thing, I have this contract -"

As Wade brought the contract from his pocket, Austin, whose hearing was as acute as his eyes were sharp, gave a quick glance to the doorway from the living room, which had been ajar. Wade, following Austin's gaze, saw that the door had opened wider and that a figure was framed there. Both recognized the smiling young man in sports attire, who was leaning his right shoulder against the doorway to allow space to extend his left elbow. He spoke cheerily:

"Hi, there, Unk!"

"You are getting a bit previous, Langdon," snapped Austin. "I am not your uncle yet - nor do I expect to be, ever."

"It won't be very long now," returned Rick. "You're looking pretty good, Unk. You ought to last until then. Of course, you never can tell."

"I know that. Have you talked over plans with Irene, lately?"

"Why, no." Langdon's face darkened in a type of angry mood he displayed too often. When the cloud passed, he said, "What's the gag, Unk?"

"Ask Irene when she gets here," returned Austin, with one of his rare smiles. "Now, if you don't mind waiting in the living room, Mr. Wade and I can finish our business. And close the door when you go."

"No, no," put in Wade, rising from his chair and gesturing toward the desk. "We can discuss things later,

Mr. Austin. After all, it is nothing very important."

Austin took Wade's cue and nodded his agreement. But Rick Langdon, despite his boyish banter, was quick to catch on. He saw Gregg Austin quickly lay what appeared to be a batch of notes behind the rancher's hat that Mark Wade purposely left lying on the desk. Then, while Austin was putting other papers in the drawer, Rick began strolling forward, only to be met halfway by Wade, who came up quickly from his chair and thrust himself in Rick's path.

By then, Rick had drawn a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and was flipping it toward Wade as he nonchalantly remarked:

"Get with a real cigarette, cowboy."

Never lessening his smile, Wade accepted the cigarette. He clapped Rick on the back, turning him toward the living room as they lighted their cigarettes. Gregg Austin followed them in his stooped fashion and stood in the living room warming his hands at the fireplace and chuckling to himself. Rick put a query to Wade:

"Where is Mrs. Wade? Aren't the two of you coming over to the dinner at the Hudson View Tavern?"

"Martha went ahead with the Dietrichs," replied Wade. "I'm driving over in my ranch wagon."

"I saw it out front," nodded Rick. "When you go out, take a look at my new compact. I'm selling those jobs now. If Irene wants to try it out, we can drive over in it. But she will probably prefer her convertible, so I'll go along in that. Either way - any way - just so I'm with Irene."

A deeper chuckle came from the fireplace. Rick threw a surly glance at Austin, whose chuckle was answered by the roar of a motor coming into the front drive, a sound that was chopped off abruptly. Rick knew both the car and its impetuous driver. He turned with an expectant look as Irene stalked in the front door, followed by Pete Winstead. When Rick saw that Irene's companion was simply the family attorney, he gave a short laugh, but it proved short-lived when Rick noted Irene's mood. She didn't even glance in Rick's direction; instead, she screamed for Chester, who showed up promptly, carrying a large tray complete with cocktail glasses and shaker.

"At least you've got some sense, Chester," stormed Irene, "having the drinks ready."

"I always do, when you are coming, Mrs. Shallick -"

"It's still Miss Austin to you, Chester, and make mine double."

Austin chuckled and again there was the sound of a motor in the large front drive, but this time the process was reversed. The throb of the car's quiet engine came first; then Austin's croaky laugh. Irene finished her second double and snapped at Chester, "I want another drink!" Rick, about to protest as a proper boyfriend should, suddenly halted as he followed Irene's gaze.

In stepped Craig Shallick, with his customary all-important, self-sufficient air, just as though he had returned from a successful press conference. The millionaire politico gave a nod to Austin and quietly greeted:

"Good evening, Uncle Gregg."

"Good evening, nephew."

Following that pleasant response, Gregg Austin introduced Craig Shallick all around. There were no

handshakes, as everyone was holding a cigarette and a martini glass; but when Austin suggested that Chester pour a drink for Mr. Shallick, there was a prompt head-shake from Craig.

"No thanks, Uncle Gregg," he said with a glance at Rick Langdon, who was beginning to match Irene's drinks. "I'll be driving Irene back over the Thunder Cliff Highway in my car. It wouldn't be smart to take a drink before that. The road is treacherous."

"I've just started my drink," stated Winstead, laying his glass aside. "So I'll drive ahead in Irene's car. The keys are still in it. You had better bring Irene along right away, Craig. There will be drinks waiting for all of us at the other end."

Practically between them, Winstead and Shallick took Irene out through the front door. Chester obligingly turned on a big light that revealed a front driveway as wide as a young parking lot. In its blaze, the others saw Winstead and Shallick tumble Irene, helpless but argumentative, into the front seat of Craig's sleek sedan. Winstead climbed into the fancy red convertible, hit the starter and shot out into the road, where he turned left, heading for the Thunder Cliff Highway. A minute or so later, Shallick managed to quiet Irene. With no more protests, he started off in the same direction.

Chester turned off the outside light and began cleaning up. He looked into the office, saw Wade's big hat on the desk, so he brought it out to the front hall and laid it on a table near the door. Next, he took some cocktail glasses into the pantry and came back for more. Mark Wade, very smiling and very knowing, laid his half-finished drink on Chester's tray and said:

"I'd better get started, too. As Shallick says, that's a very twisty road. I might stop back to see you later, Mr. Austin; if I see a light in your office window, I'll drop in. Otherwise, it will be tomorrow."

"I'll be going along, too." Rick slapped his oversized glass on Chester's tray, breaking the stem as he thumped it. He was deft enough, though, to hold it without spilling the little that remained of his double drink, which he poured into Wade's partly empty glass. Then, to Austin, Rick snapped:

"I don't know when I'll be seeing you again, Unk. If ever."

Wade overheard that as he was going out the front door, but he simply continued on to his ranch wagon, which he had parked close to the front of the house to allow room for later arrivals. Rick stalked out a few moments later and went around to the side of the house where he had left his new compact, thinking he wasn't going to be using it.

Inside, Chester had taken his last trayload to the pantry and Gregg Austin, now entirely alone, went into his rear office and closed the door behind him. There, he opened a desk drawer and thumbed through a bundle of cash that he kept there, something that he always did first. Next, he started looking through the papers on his desk. When alone, Austin quickly absorbed himself so completely in his affairs that it was difficult to rouse him. Only when visitors were present was he alert to the slightest interruption; for then he was always in a suspicious mood.

So in the brief minutes that followed, Austin was still clucking his satisfaction so repeatedly that he failed to hear a slight click that marked the opening of a door and the stealthy footfalls that followed. Not until a figure loomed over the desk in front of him did Austin look up; then he froze in horror. Glaring at him was a face that already registered a vicious triumph, as well it might, for the hand below it was leveling a .38 revolver between Austin's eyes. His withery face frantic, Austin came to his feet, pawing the air ahead of him as he pleaded:

"No - no! Don't - don't shoot!"

Those words were his death warrant. Now, the gun was aiming, not at Austin's head, but at his heart. The assassin's hand thrust forward; the gun coughed once - twice - then again. The shots were muffled by their proximity to the victim's body and they took immediate effect. Gregg Austin jolted backward into his chair; then sprawled forward, motionless, across the desk, where the blood from his shirt front began to stain the marble top.

But the slayer did not wait to view that sight. Hands that were quick and efficient plucked money from the drawer and some papers from the desk without touching any of the others. Next, the killer was opening and closing a door, as softly as before, leaving no trace of this murderous visit except for the three slugs that were imbedded in the silent body of Gregg Austin.

The telephone on the desk began to jangle in the silence.

FOUR

VALLEY 6-3440 did not answer.

Lamont Cranston let it ring a dozen times; then hung up. That was the number listed for Gregg Austin on Pleasant Valley Road and Cranston was calling from Putnam's Retreat, a roadside restaurant that formed the one bright spot in Colonial Town, just ten miles above Vanderkill on the Northern Turnpike.

So while Cranston was phoning from a booth in the dining room, Harry Vincent was putting some questions to the barkeep. Cranston, strolling by on his way outside, overheard the barkeep echo Harry's query:

"A trail hiker? You expect to find one this early in the season?"

"You know how eager the boys are to hit the A.T.," returned Harry. "This fellow Don is that way. He wears khaki shorts, khaki shirt, no hat -"

"I know the type, but to see one now - well, I'd be less surprised if Smokey the Bear walked in here in person. And he wears a hat."

"I thought maybe Don would stop to mail some post cards."

"So why should he stop in here for that? The post office is right by the trail. He could have mailed his cards there and hiked on to the next shelter."

The bartender turned to attend to the dozen-odd customers, none of whom seemed to notice Harry. They were more interested in watching a game between two players at a money-in-the-slot pool table that occupied the center of the room. So Harry went outside and joined Cranston in the car, where his chief told him to take the wheel. They rolled past the post office, which was closed, but showed lights in the window, indicating that mail was still to be picked up and sorted from the big box that stood out front. That was when Cranston remarked:

"There was no answer from Gregg Austin's number."

"But they were all on their way there!" exclaimed Harry. "Shallick, his wife Irene and that lawyer, Winstead. They talked about a dinner date, though, so they could have left by now. Maybe Gregg Austin went with them."

"I doubt it. Austin definitely intended to be at home this evening. I phoned him to tell him I would be stopping by."

"Then you already know Gregg Austin?"

"I never even met him," returned Cranston, blandly, "but Police Commissioner Weston is coming from New York to talk with Austin about those odd disappearances. The commissioner wanted me to sit in on the conference."

That cleared some of the mystery for Harry Vincent, enough to deepen the rest. Harry felt that, like The Shadow, he was becoming a key figure in something very big. While Harry drove, Cranston studied the long, sweeping curves of the turnpike, where the headlights revealed ever-changing landmarks. Occasionally, Cranston told Harry to reduce speed; and his longest glance was toward a side road to the right, which was marked Ragged Gap Road, with a modern highway sign, No Outlet.

That was the eastern end of the blocked-off road that they had explored over on the Thunder Cliff Highway. Cranston noted the mileage as just five miles south of Colonial Town. Another five miles brought them to the edge of Vanderkill, where Cranston told Harry to turn off just beyond an overpass. Harry did so, descending a curved ramp, coming around under the turnpike, headed east.

"This is Pleasant Valley Road," defined Cranston. "Watch for the first large house. It may be Austin's."

Within a mile, the road curved right, passing a quarry where gray walls rose like gaunt ghosts from the gaping blackness below. Next, a row of trees cut straight in from the road; after that, there was a large house with ample grounds. At Cranston's order, Harry braked the car and used the backup lights to reverse into the quarry. There, he turned off all the lights and the car was completely shrouded by the row of cedar trees when the door closed on Cranston's side and Harry found himself waiting alone.

Lamont Cranston had assumed the cloaked guise of The Shadow. Out of the car, he skirted the trees and glided unseen to the house, which had regained its ominous look after Chester had switched off the outside lights. The Shadow chose the side porch as the best mode of entry; he eased open the door and glanced into the lighted office. Moments later, he was inside, closing the door behind him. Then, The Shadow, master crime investigator, was studying the dead form of Gregg Austin, sprawled on the desk in a grotesque pose that in itself spelled murder.

The Shadow moved from one spot to another, as though planning to photograph the body, which he could have done if he had brought Harry's camera. But The Shadow's memory was photographic in itself. Not a detail escaped the keen eyes that peered from beneath the brim of the black slouch hat. From directly opposite the body, The Shadow reenacted the death scene as perfectly as if he had witnessed it, gauging everything from the angle of Austin's sprawl.

The next question was: How long had Gregg Austin been dead?

Checking his watch, The Shadow tabbed it as exactly half an hour since he had made the unanswered phone call from Colonial Town. So Austin had been dead at least that long, unless the killer had been holding him at gunpoint. Waiting for the phone bell to stop ringing.

While pondering on that, The Shadow had a chance to analyze it in actuality. As he stood in the murderer's position, the phone bell began to ring again. Calmly, The Shadow waited it out. It stopped after about a dozen jangles, as The Shadow's own call had; but after a brief pause, it began anew. That pause was about long enough for someone to hang up and dial again, to make sure he had the right number. Possibly it was Commissioner Weston calling Gregg Austin to confirm their appointment. In any case, The Shadow did not answer it. He would have let it ring itself out again, but for another interruption.

The Shadow's keen ear caught a click above the jangle. It came from the hallway door and with one

swift sweep, The Shadow was around the desk and at the door to the porch, this time taking the short way, just as Chester stepped in from the front hallway and halted aghast at the sight of Austin's body. For the moment, Chester did not see The Shadow, who had a brief opportunity to study the servant's face and note the full horror registered there. Chester, thinking the ringing phone might have to do with his master's death, snatched it up and hoarsed a "Hello!" into the mouthpiece. Someone hung up at the other end, for all Chester heard was the dial tone. Puzzled, Chester raised his head and stared straight at the porch door. It was closing of its own accord and through the opening he saw what he mistook for the outdoor darkness.

What Chester actually saw was the cloaked form of The Shadow, blending with the blackness of night. Chester felt sure, though, that someone had gone out and on quick impulse, he dropped the phone and hurried to the front hall where he clicked on the outside lights that turned the whole yard into a brilliant yellow blaze. The Shadow was caught in the full glare, but not unprepared. Already, he was speeding across the side yard and the sudden light spurred his pace. His cloaked figure reached the screen of cedars and became part of their shadowy substance by the time Chester returned to the porch door to look vainly for the vanished intruder.

Then, Chester was at the phone, wildly calling the police, while The Shadow, finding a handy opening among the tree trunks, slipped through and rejoined Harry in the car. The thick cedar hedge cut off practically all the glare, so Harry's first knowledge of The Shadow's return was when a whispered voice spoke from beside him, telling him to get the car started. But oddly, The Shadow ordered Harry to turn to the right, past Austin's brilliantly lighted lawn, instead of returning to the turnpike.

However, that strategy proved its worth a few miles further on, when The Shadow pointed out a narrow lane that he must have noted and remembered from a detailed road map. Harry took it and soon they were zigzagging up a wooded slope, while sounds of sirens from the valley told that police cars were converging on Austin's from all directions in response to Chester's alarm.

One hour later, County Detective Fred Frisbee stood in the Austin living room, summing up the known facts in the murder of Gregg Austin. Frisbee had gained a lucky break in this case, for he had been on his way to Vanderkill on a routine job when word of the slaying was phoned to his car by short wave, so he had reached the scene within minutes after Chester's call, arriving almost as soon as the nearest township police.

Now, with Frisbee in charge, a dozen assorted police cars filled the still brightly-lighted yard. Inside the house, state police technicians and other investigators were still combing the death room for clues. Everything from the telephone to desk drawers and doorknobs had been dusted for fingerprints. Photographs had been shot from every angle, including close-ups of Austin's shirt front, showing the proximity of the gun that had caused his death. The medical examiner had completed his preliminary report and the wheels of justice were ready to roll at full speed, with Frisbee at the helm.

A blunt-spoken man, booming of tone and big of build, Frisbee had something of a dramatic flare and right now, he had a good audience. One of the official cars out front belonged to Police Commissioner Ralph Weston of New York City, who had arrived in the early stages of the investigation, expecting to find Gregg Austin alive. Soon afterward, another car had been admitted through the cordon. It was driven by Lamont Cranston, a friend whom Weston had expected to meet here. With him, Cranston had a companion named Harry Vincent.

Despite his confident air, Frisbee was inwardly worried, for his investigation so far hinged solely upon the testimony of Chester, the servant who had found the body. Frisbee, having no suspects, was practically grilling Chester instead.

"According to your statement," Frisbee told Chester, "there were five persons here with Gregg Austin when he was last seen alive. All left for a dinner party at the Hudson View Tavern, going by way of the Thunder Cliff Highway."

"That I couldn't say, sir," returned Chester, in a strained tone. "I've seldom been over there, but I suppose that is the way they would go."

"It is the only way they would go," asserted Frisbee, "and because of all the sharp turns, no one could pass another on the road, unless one car pulled out purposely to let the next by. Therefore, Chester, it is important that you remember the time which each person left."

"Mr. Winstead was the first to leave," Chester told Frisbee. "He took the red car, the one belonging to Miss Irene. He left at just seven o'clock."

"And how," demanded Frisbee, "would you know the exact time?"

"Because I was watching the time at Mr. Austin's order. He said he wanted everyone to start leaving by seven o'clock and I was just about to announce it, when Mr. Winstead decided to go. Then, Miss Irene - that is, Mrs. Shallick - left with Mr. Shallick in his car, only a few minutes later."

"You are sure of that?"

"Positively. I turned on the big front light to help them on their way. Then, Mr. Wade, the ranch owner, started out, saying he might be back later, or possibly tomorrow. Young Rick Langdon said he would be going, too."

"And which was the first to leave?"

"Mr. Wade, though I can't say he drove away first, because I had turned off the front light. His big rancher's hat was on the table by the door, where I had placed it, and I'm quite sure it was still there when Mr. Langdon went out. But it was gone when I came back from the pantry, so Mr. Wade must have come back to get it. I've never seen him without that hat."

"So both Wade and Langdon were gone - by when?" Frisbee paused, while Chester hesitated. "Come, Chester, give us the time as well as you can."

"I would say they were gone by ten minutes after seven."

"And then?"

"I gathered up the rest of the glasses and took them to the pantry. Mr. Austin had gone into his office by then. Only five minutes later, I was going upstairs, when I heard the phone bell ringing in the office. Then it stopped."

"And this, you say, was at seven-fifteen?"

Chester gave an assured nod. "Just about seven-fifteen, sir."

That gave Detective Frisbee the very chance he wanted. He had worked the old trick of building up a witness's confidence in order to deflate him. Frisbee turned to his audience, which included state troopers, township police and of course both Commissioner Weston and his friend Lamont Cranston. Then, with a depreciating gesture toward Chester, Frisbee denounced:

"What a false front this witness has been putting up! He wants us to think he is a human clock, a man with

a perfect sense of time. So he says 'just about' seven-fifteen. If he happens to be so good, why didn't he say 'exactly' seven-fifteen?"

While Chester winced under that barb, Cranston responded calmly:

"He should have said that, because it was exactly seven-fifteen."

Frisbee did a double-take. Coming from Cranston, who until now had seemed more skeptical even than Weston, this seemed unbelievable.

"I happen to know the exact time," continued Cranston, "because I made that call. I was on my way out from New York to meet Commissioner Weston here and I wanted to confirm it with Mr. Austin. When he didn't answer, I looked at my watch and saw that it was only seven-fifteen. So I supposed that he had gone out to dinner, but would be back when we arrived. We then drove on, Vincent and I."

To Harry Vincent, the only observer present who was fully in the know, Cranston had scored a ten strike. Besides confirming Chester's statement, he had squared himself with an alibi for later on, as Frisbee, never asking Cranston from where he had made the call, assumed that it must have been from near New York City, a full hour's drive away. Frisbee was not only mollified, he was overwhelmed by this new evidence. Weston was happy because his friend Cranston - in what the commissioner thought was a purely amateurish way - had injected new life into the investigation.

"When the phone rang later," stated Chester, "I ignored it as usual. But when it stopped and started again, I thought Mr. Austin might have left the office. I went in and found the body, but when I answered the phone, someone hung up."

"So you called us," approved Frisbee. "Your call came in at seven-forty-five, so we can add that to the time sheet, Chester. Anything else?"

"Only that I thought I saw the porch door close. But when I turned on the outside lights, there was no one in sight. But I'm sure I heard a car go by."

Frisbee turned to a state trooper with the query:

"How many cars were stopped inside the cordon?"

"Three. A lot of teenagers in one. A farmer and his family in another. The third was a doctor returning to Vanderkill after calling on a patient."

Frisbee shook his head. None of those fitted. He decided to go over to the Hudson View Tavern and quiz the other persons who had been at Austin's earlier. Weston invited Frisbee to go in his limousine and the county detective accepted, so the big car started at the head of a caravan, with Cranston and Harry as added passengers. As they were pulling from the driveway, Frisbee looked back at the Austin house in all its brilliance, with the side yard as plain as it would have been in daytime.

"According to the medical report," mused Frisbee, "Austin could have been dead a half hour before Chester found the body. Still, a killer might have stayed around or even returned to the scene of his crime. If there was somebody there, though, it's too bad Chester couldn't grab him. I only wish I had him close enough for me to lay my hands on him right now!"

Somebody 'had' been around when Chester found the body; and though it wasn't the killer, Frisbee could have fulfilled his wish right there, in Weston's limousine. However, Lamont Cranston did not intend to tell him so. With investigators like Fred Frisbee, it was better to let them find out things for themselves; and often, the less they learned, the better.

That, The Shadow knew.

FIVE

AS AN INVESTIGATOR, Fred Frisbee had a mind that was strictly one-tracked, which was ideal for the job immediately ahead. As they rode along Pleasant Valley Road, Frisbee pointed out a center line that allowed no passing, emphasizing that the people who left Austin's must have stayed in single file.

The Limousine went beneath the underpass of Northern Turnpike, which Frisbee said marked the city limit of Vanderkill. After another tenth of a mile, it passed a service station where the Pleasant Valley Road ran into the Thunder Cliff Highway, which stemmed off from Northern Turnpike. The service station, closed during the winter, had not yet reopened for the coming season, but its wide driveway was kept open so that motorists could use the outdoor telephone booth or the automatic milk vending machine that stood beyond the gasoline pumps.

On Thunder Cliff Highway, Weston's big car made nearly forty miles an hour as it followed the sweeping curves that took it across Pleasant Creek and northward along the Hudson, but it was still only a two-lane highway and Frisbee kept pointing out the double line that allowed no passing. Then the car was climbing, taking sharp turns and corkscrew bends where twenty miles an hour was top speed, with Frisbee stressing all the more that cars using this highway would necessarily have to go one-by-one.

"Tell me, Frisbee," came Cranston's quiet query, "do they allow trucks on this highway?"

"With due restrictions, yes," returned Frisbee. "All public trucks, and private trucks as well, up to a specified size, or weight, can use Thunder Cliff Highway if they are engaged in hauling material for construction jobs or making definite deliveries."

"You mean construction jobs along the highway itself?"

"No, indeed. Much of this land is privately owned, especially above Twin Peaks Bridge, so this highway is the only way for some people to get in and out. So the Highway Commission is very liberal in granting permits. But trucks have nothing to do with our present investigation."

Cranston could have debated that point, but didn't. The car passed the high overlook and zigzagged down toward the twinkling lights of Twin Peaks Bridge. As they passed the end of the bridge, Frisbee, who was clocking the mileage, announced:

"We have made twelve miles in thirty minutes. A good average for this part of the highway. We should do the next six miles in ten minutes."

This they did, almost on the button, pulling up beside the Hudson View Tavern approximately forty minutes after leaving the Austin house. It was now late in the evening and the dinner trade had thinned, in fact almost all the cars that Cranston and Harry had seen there earlier were gone by now. But the place did quite a bit of late business and the proprietor, Leo Sumner, appeared at the doorway to give the new arrivals an enthusiastic greeting, until he saw that most of them were in police cars. Sumner was relieved, though, when he recognized Frisbee and learned that this was not a raid, but a mere murder investigation.

Immediately, the proprietor became cooperative, as did the hired help. Upon learning who the suspects were, Sumner stated that the party was just finishing dinner on the northwest veranda, which was enclosed as a private dining room. Frisbee decided not to disturb them until they were through; and that brought a grateful remark from Sumner:

"You are being very considerate, Mr. Frisbee."

"I'm not considerate," snapped Frisbee. "I'm efficient. I'd roust them out of there in two shakes if it would help the investigation. But I'd rather get your end first to be that much ahead. So come through fast, Sumner, because I want to look in on the group before I spring the fireworks."

"Mr. Winstead drove up first," declared Sumner, "in that big red convertible" - he indicated Irene's car across the parking area - "and he apologized for being ten minutes late -"

"You mean Winstead arrived at seven-forty?" interposed Frisbee, poising a pencil above a notebook.

"That's right," continued Sumner, "and I specially checked the time because he said the rest would be along within the next quarter hour, which I said would be fine."

"And were they?"

"Well, just about. The Shallicks arrived at seven forty-five." Sumner paused while Frisbee made a note of that. "I went inside with them, but I began to worry when it was almost eight o'clock and there were still two more to come. So I went out front again, just as Mark Wade pulled in and parked his ranch wagon."

"And Wade arrived ahead of young Langdon?"

"Definitely, yes. I was asking Wade how business was and he was asking me the same, when Rick's new compact came scooting in like a jack rabbit. They can really get around, those jobs."

Frisbee marked down seven-fifty-eight as the time of Wade's arrival and put down eight-two for Rick. He quizzed the man at the parking lot, who confirmed the order in which the cars arrived, but was hazy as to the exact time. The cashier and cloak room girl confirmed Sumner, however. They had been watching the clock, too.

The enclosed veranda extended beyond a little-used alcove at the rear of the main dining room. Sumner seated the investigators at window tables there and was careful not to turn on the table lamps. So the investigators had the benefit of what was practically a one-way glass, through which they could view the dinner party without being seen.

Harry pointed out certain people for Cranston. There was Winstead, seated at one end of the long table and keeping up most of the conversation while the party lingered over dessert and cordials. Craig Shallick and his wife Irene were putting on the lovey-dovey act that Gregg Austin had demanded, though Shallick was obviously bored and Irene was melancholy. Rick Langdon was easy to identify by the moody glower on his face as he tried unsuccessfully to catch Irene's gaze. Mark Wade was conspicuous in his fancy Mexican jacket, but his fixed smile was false, for Wade was obviously worried over something.

The rest of the party included Wade's wife, a heavysset, talkative woman, her friends the Dietrichs and two other couples whose names Sumner knew and mentioned. Frisbee, his bluff face wearing the confident air of a hunter about to take a shot at a sitting duck, arose and undertoned:

"Get the tab settled, Sumner. Then we can move in and separate the sheep from the goats."

Sumner went to the veranda to collect the dinner checks, while Frisbee and the rest waited inside the door. At that slightly crucial moment, an elderly man came stalking from the dining room, a vague smile upon his quivering lips, a gleam of recognition in his restless, blinking eyes as he exclaimed:

"Commissioner Weston, of all people! Fancy you this far up the Hudson! Don't tell me your city intends to swallow up our happy hillsides. Why -"

The man's loud chortle threatened to reach the veranda, where mere mention of the commissioner's name could upset the complacency of the dinner party and Frisbee's calculated plans as well. Cranston, however, provided a timely interruption. The man's back was toward him, so Cranston laid a friendly hand across his shoulders, drawing him away. Calmly, Cranston said:

"The commissioner is busy for the moment. Suppose we step over here, while I introduce myself -"

The elderly man was turning and for the first time, Cranston gained a full look at his oddly beaming, somewhat senile face. Harry expected to see his chief quiet this garrulous character in no time, but the effect was just the opposite. The man's vacant stare lighted, his eyes blinked happily.

"Lamont Cranston?" he exclaimed. "What are you doing in the Hudson highlands? Why, you should be among the snow-clad Himalayas in far-away Tibet. We should be dining in state in the palace of the Grand Lama, you and I, not meeting in some woebegone tavern that has known better days, like ourselves."

Cranston didn't go along with the final statement, for he was doing quite well nowadays. But for once he was in a state that Harry Vincent had never before noted. Lamont Cranston was utterly nonplussed. Otherwise, he wouldn't have listened to all that verbal outpouring without interrupting it. His interruption came now:

"My old friend Rufus Palford, back with us and alive again!"

"Of course I'm alive," cackled Palford. "Who said I was dead? I've been intending to look you up at the Cobalt Club in New York. You and the commissioner still belong there, don't you?"

"Of course. But it has been years since we first saw you, when you were starting a trip to climb Mount Everest. You went over it the wrong way."

"I know." Palford's gaze steadied and his lips tightened. "So I arrived in Tibet at the wrong time. The land has changed since you and I were there together. But I am back again, glad to be with you and our good friend, Commissioner Weston."

Palford's voice was rising again as he turned, expecting to see Weston beside them. For the first time, Palford realized that during the course of handshakes and congratulations, Cranston had maneuvered him well out through the main dining room almost to the front door, so far away from the veranda that Palford's high-pitched tone could not possibly be heard there.

"You must come and see me, Cranston. I own Folly Castle, down on the bank of the Hudson, and I am living there. You will like the place and I know we shall have much to talk about."

With that, Palford bowed out to a car that was waiting for him. By then, Frisbee had burst in upon the dinner party with the grim announcement that Gregg Austin had been murdered. Already he was separating the sheep from the goats as he said he would. He told all those who had arrived early that they were sheep and could go home quietly and unmolested; but those who had come from Austin's were goats and would have to return there.

Frisbee implied, however, that such persons as Winstead, Shallick and Irene were merely relevant witnesses, while Mark Wade and Rick Langdon rated as outright suspects. Cranston did not approve of Frisbee's blunt action. In fact, Cranston said as much to Harry Vincent as they stood out front, waiting

for Weston's chauffeur to bring the limousine around.

"Sheep from the goats!" There was sarcasm in Cranston's tone. "There are two that Frisbee should have eliminated as sheep from the very start."

"You mean Shallick and Irene?"

"Right. They are simply pawns in this game. But the others, like Wade's wife and the couples who came early, might know about plans that were made beforehand, or they could have heard certain comments made during dinner, or any of a dozen other things. They are the persons that Frisbee should have quizzed first, but it is too late for that now."

There was a pause, then Cranston's tone was rueful as he added:

"I wanted to watch those faces on the veranda when Frisbee sprang the news that Gregg Austin had been murdered. If Frisbee had been smart, he would have shot a flashbulb picture of the group, right then. I supposed at least that he would build up to it, but instead he broke it wide open with a grand hurrah. Too bad that Palford interrupted things when he did."

"Do you think that had anything to do with the case, chief?"

"It could have. But I am always meeting old friends in the oddest of places" - Cranston's tone went whimsical - "such as the palace of the Grand Lama in Lhasa or an old tavern overlooking the Hudson River. But this case has many angles, Vincent, and therefore many hands must be involved, as we already know. If it is linked with something bigger - such as the disappearance of key persons and the substitution of imposters - there are that many more elements to be considered. The right way to crack it is to work from the fringes to the core; from the outside in, rather than the inside out."

The arrival of Weston's car put an end to Cranston's dissertation. But all during the ride back along Thunder Cliff Highway, Harry Vincent kept weighing what his chief had said. Of one thing Harry was certain. However far Fred Frisbee might get with his investigation of the Austin murder, the county detective would be paving the way for Lamont Cranston - otherwise The Shadow - to go him not just one point better, but a dozen better.

SIX

AT AUSTIN'S, Frisbee staged a neat show for the audience he had brought back there. He had old Chester put on a one-man act, from the ringing of the phone bell through the finding of the body and his call to the police. As Austin's body had been removed to the morgue, the victim was represented by a local patrolman who was sprawled across the desk when Chester opened the door dramatically and looked into the office.

That brought a horrified shriek from Irene, but the men in the group were unimpressed. At the time the body was found, they had all been over at the Hudson View Tavern, or just about arriving there. But Frisbee had allowed for that. He invited the group into the living room; there, working from facts given him by Chester, Frisbee demanded:

"Which of you was the first to leave here?"

"I was," returned Winstead, "but the Shallicks both came out with me. I drove over the Thunder Cliff Highway and they arrived at the Hudson View about five minutes after I did."

Frisbee swung to Shallick: "How closely did you follow Winstead?"

"Within a few minutes," returned Shallick. "He was driving Irene's car and he was out of sight by the time we started in mine."

"Then you think that he drove faster than you did?"

"What I really think," snapped Shallick, "is that you are putting me in a position which can damage me politically, if you persist in it."

That rather wilted Frisbee, who spoke quite apologetically:

"You are not a suspect, Mr. Shallick. I am only trying to piece together this story -"

"And my husband has been telling you," put in Irene, "and I can back him up. Craig drove carefully, as he always does, so naturally Pete Winstead reached the Hudson View ahead of us. Is there anything more you need to know?"

"Why, no," returned Frisbee. "I guess you've told me all you can."

"Then we'll be going, my husband and I," decided Irene. Turning to Winstead, she added, "Keep my car until tomorrow, Pete. I'm going in Craig's."

Apparently, Irene didn't intend to lose her grip on the Shallick millions until she found out just how the Austin fortune really stood. She left, without even a parting glance at Rick Langdon, who became Frisbee's next target along with Mark Wade. Abruptly, Frisbee told them:

"You two were the last to leave, so that classes you as suspects. Before I question you further, let me warn you that whatever you say may be used against you."

That brought a sharp snort from Rick Langdon.

"What you should say, Mr. Frisbee," declared Rick, "is that whatever I say will be used against Mark Wade."

"Why, you -" Wade was about to add some choice expletives, then thought better of it. "Why, you whippersnapper! That's what Austin called you, just before you came barging into his office as if you owned it."

"You mean when I looked in," corrected Rick, "and heard Mr. Austin ask when you were going to pay off all those notes you owed him."

"Those were canceled notes that I had already paid off. I still owe money, yes, on back rent and other expenses that I plan to meet -"

"So you wanted to borrow more money. You can't deny that, Wade."

"Deny it? Why should I? Naturally, I wanted to borrow more money from Austin. You heard me mention a contract, didn't you? Here it is." Wade brought a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to Frisbee. "A contract to put on a weekly rodeo in Vanderkill during the coming season. The profits will pay off all that I wanted to borrow from Austin and a whole lot more."

Wade's smile was a gleam of triumph now. He turned to Rick and demanded bluntly:

"Why should I want anything to happen to Gregg Austin? I needed him, but you didn't. You were through here, boy, when your girl walked out on you, and what's more, you knew it. Why, the last thing you told poor Gregg Austin was that you wouldn't be seeing him again - not ever."

"That wasn't it," retorted Rick. "You're putting words into my mouth. I said I didn't know when I'd be seeing him again - if ever. Maybe that gave you some ideas that you thought you could blame on me."

Wade started to reply, then tightened his smile and remained silent. Rick clammed, too, for both were suddenly aware that they were falling into Frisbee's trap. Bluntly, Frisbee took over with the query:

"Which of you was the last to leave here?"

"Wade was," spoke up Rick, quickly. "He went out the door ahead of me, but I saw him go back into the house to get his hat. I was just starting my car out from the side yard, so I don't know how long he took."

"I took about a quarter minute," returned Wade, "and I'm sure I left here before you did. If I didn't, how did I get to the Hudson View Tavern ahead of you? I was chatting with Sumner when you came bouncing in. Remember?"

Rick remembered and gave a wince, but instead of replying to Wade, he turned directly to Frisbee and stated:

"I stopped to make a phone call outside that closed service station where the Valley Road runs into Thunder Cliff Highway."

"I know the place," nodded Frisbee. "Who was the call to?"

"A girl named Nancy Harkness. I figured if Irene wanted to go to the dinner with some other man, I could take along another girl. I talked to Nancy ten minutes or more, but I couldn't argue her into it. I guess that's when Wade drove past. I was too busy phoning to watch the road."

"Let me have the girl's number."

Rick gave it and Frisbee delegated a local officer to phone the number, which he did, but received no answer.

"Apparently, your substitute girl friend had another date," Frisbee commented bluntly.

"I know she had," returned Rick. "She was going over to the Brookside Drive-in to see a double monster program. She would have ducked that date quick enough, but she claimed she just wouldn't have time to get dressed for dinner at a place like the Hudson View. So that's how it stood."

"So you drove there alone, using Thunder Cliff Highway?"

"That's right. How else would I have gone there?"

Frisbee didn't answer Rick's somewhat surly question. Instead, the blunt-spoken county detective called a recess in the investigation. He turned back and forth from Wade to Rick as he told them:

"Fortunately for both of you, there was a time lapse after you left, making it possible that some unknown person could have entered this house. So I regard you as simply material witnesses, to be on call for further questioning at any time. That is all I have to say, except goodnight."

Rather amazed, the two suspects walked out as the Shallicks had. There was a slight formality, to which Shallick and Irene had submitted also; hence neither Wade nor Rick objected. A state police investigator wanted their fingerprints, in order to eliminate them from any strange prints that might show up around the Austin premises. After that, Chester turned on the outside lights and everybody watched the two men

drive away in their respective cars.

Neat business on Frisbee's part. It was, in a way, a reenactment of the earlier departure which both suspects had disputed. Wade's clumsy, outmoded ranch wagon clattered out of the Austin driveway and went lumbering up Pleasant Valley Road, practically shouting its need for new shock absorbers. Rick's brand-new, yellow-green compact made a quick dart in the opposite direction and streaked from sight past the end of the cedar row that hid the unsightly quarry, as if Rick still hoped to reach the drive-in theater and pick up where the monsters had left off.

Frisbee turned to the group and said in an ironical tone:

"There go the last of our material witnesses." He smiled grimly, as he faced Peter Winstead. "What do you think, as Material Witness Number One?"

"I think," said Winstead, "that we had better wait until tomorrow. That will give me time to go over Austin's records and see how much was owing to him, as well as who owed it."

"You mean others may be involved beside Wade and Langdon?"

"Very possibly. Gregg Austin was both shrewd and secretive, as a good businessman should be. I learned that from the times he called me in for advice on certain deals. But usually Gregg handled things his own way."

Actually, Winstead was suggesting the very process that Cranston had mentioned to Harry, that of working from the outside in. Frisbee, quite impressed with the idea, turned to Weston with the query:

"What do you think of that, Commissioner?"

"I agree with Winstead," returned Weston. "I came here hoping to talk to Gregg Austin about some odd disappearances that have been traced to this area. Whether that links to the murder, I do not know, but I am sure that only Austin could have given me the facts. So I am going back to New York, but I'm hoping that Cranston can stay here a few days at least."

"I have no other choice," put in Cranston, calmly. "Frisbee may need me to testify regarding that phone call I made here at seven-fifteen."

"Very well," decided Weston. "If anything should turn up regarding those disappearances, I would appreciate it, Frisbee, if you would let Cranston sit in on the discussion and report back to me."

Frisbee agreed to that willingly. Further investigation was deferred to the next day. After Weston left in his limousine, Cranston called the motel where Harry was stopping and reserved another room for himself. Shortly afterward, they left in Cranston's car.

By noon the next day, the investigation had shown good progress. Autopsy reports, as well as ballistic tests, indicated that Gregg Austin had been slain by two bullets fired at close range from a .38 revolver and that death had been almost instantaneous. Fingerprints found in the hallway, living room and office had been checked against those of persons present the previous evening and no strange prints had been discovered. Photographs had been taken of the tires on every car that had been at Austin's and those had been compared with tire tracks in the yard. No strange treads were among them.

Winstead, in going over Austin's records, had found nothing to show against Mark Wade except that he had been paying double for rights to bridle paths and pasture land which Austin either owned or rented. Hence, Austin had profited on those deals as well as others where he had talked Wade into buying property and had later bought it over for himself, at cost or less. That brought the comment from

Frisbee:

"So Wade was practically one of Austin's straw men."

"Better call him a hay man," corrected Winstead. "His trouble was feeding the horses on the dude ranch. That's why he always needed ready cash."

"Who else did Austin have under his thumb like that?"

"Nobody, lately," returned Winstead, "because property value has been going up and an owner can hang on to most of it by selling off a small part."

"And that," decided Frisbee, "brings us back to Wade or Langdon."

Frisbee spread a county map on the dining room table and called a conference around it, specially including Lamont Cranston and Harry Vincent, as they had been with him during the trip over Thunder Cliff Highway in Weston's car. Frisbee handed each person a typewritten copy of a time chart he had made.

"Note first," said Frisbee, "that Winstead took from seven o'clock to seven-forty to get from Austin's to the Hudson View, which was exactly our own running time. Craig and Irene Shallick took only a few minutes longer. But now comes the discrepancy. Mark Wade, who claims he left at ten minutes past seven, did not get there until almost eight o'clock. He took nearly fifty minutes."

"That wagon of his is old" reminded Cranston, "and badly suited to that highway. If he pushed it too fast, he would have trouble on the turns."

"But if he did manage it," argued Frisbee, "we could set his starting time as late as seven-twenty, which is five minutes after Austin was murdered."

"Rick Langdon took even longer," put in Winstead. "What about him?"

"We must allow for his phone call," replied Frisbee. "I have talked with Nancy Harkness and she says that Rick did phone her around quarter past seven. His dime ran out and he had to put in a couple of nickels for overtime. If he stayed at Austin's until after seven-fifteen and talked to Nancy on the phone until after seven-thirty, he would have had to make the trip in half an hour flat. Could he have done it?"

"In that new compact, yes," decided Cranston. "It is built to take hairpin turns. It is also overpowered, which would give it the needed pickup."

"In either case," put in Winstead, "whether it is Wade or Rick, I would say that you are cutting the time element pretty thin, Frisbee."

Winstead was studying the big map as he spoke; now, he began to trace it with his forefinger. Harry, sidling a glance at Cranston, saw a gleam in his chief's close-watching eye. Harry knew then that Winstead was bringing up a factor that Cranston must have already considered, but preferred to have someone else introduce.

"Look at this shortcut!" Winstead exclaimed. "Why, it's only five miles straight up the Northern Turnpike to Ragged Gap Road. From there it is only four miles over through the Gap to Thunder Cliff Highway, with another mile or so to the Hudson View Tavern, just a little more than ten miles in all."

"And how long," asked Frisbee, "would that trip take you?"

"Seven minutes on the turnpike," Winstead calculated, "and eight to ten more over Ragged Gap Road. Add another two minutes to that and you are still under twenty, which is only half the time it takes around by the Thunder Cliff."

"Have you ever driven over Ragged Gap Road?" queried Frisbee.

"Why, yes," nodded Winstead. "Sometimes I went with Gregg Austin to see the Norvel brothers, Lou and Hank. Austin wanted to buy their farm, which is a mile and a half up the road. One day we drove on through the Gap and out the other end. It's a dirt road, but a good one, with no bad turns. You could average thirty miles an hour over it."

"And when did you drive over there with Austin?"

"Why, only last fall - or early winter."

"I thought so. Do you remember how the road crosses Ragged Creek over the deep gorge?"

"Yes. The Norvel property is just this side of the creek."

"For your benefit, Winstead, that bridge went out with the big spring freshet over a month ago. You can't drive over Ragged Gap Road now."

Winstead stared, then looked at the map and blinked, realizing that his pet notion had struck a snag. But Frisbee promptly switched to a commending tone.

"We do not intend to miss a single detail in this investigation," declared Frisbee. "You have brought up a point, Winstead, that might raise a question later. We might find it difficult to prove that the bridge was actually out at the time of the Austin murder. The sooner we establish that fact, the better."

With Frisbee, that meant starting over to Ragged Gap Road immediately, taking all available witnesses along. So they were on their way again, with Harry, as usual, going along with Cranston in his car. As they were pulling away, Cranston supplied the cryptic comment:

"You heard what Frisbee said, 'The sooner, the better.' He may be more right than he knows, Vincent. This might be better if it had been done sooner."

SEVEN

RAGGED GAP ROAD came up to Winstead's claims. It made one sharp turn after it left Northern Turnpike, then worked up among the folds of the hills toward an opening in the mountain ridge ahead. The road was dirt, but firm except for a few slightly muddy spots; and the trio of cars - Frisbee's, Cranston's and a police car took the upgrade easily at thirty miles an hour.

A few minutes brought them to a side road leading to a farmhouse with the name Norvel on the mailbox, but Frisbee's car kept straight ahead. It swung a slight bend and pulled up in a cloud of dust that fairly swallowed Cranston's car as he braked to a halt, followed by the shrieking stop of the police car, just behind.

Frisbee was all apologies as they alighted and joined him at a barrier which bore the sign: Road Closed - Bridge Out.

The barrier was lightly constructed and set at a slight angle, with deep scrapes in the road indicating that it had been recently moved. Frisbee started to move it now, only to be interrupted by two rangy men in work clothes, who came loping from a field. They were shouting angrily until they recognized Winstead,

who introduced them to Frisbee as the Norvel brothers.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Frisbee," declared Lou, the older of the pair. "We heard you are investigating the Austin murder. Is there any way we can help?"

"Why, yes," returned Frisbee. "We thought one of the murder suspects might have driven over this road through the Gap. We're checking to make sure."

"If he tried it," asserted Lou, "he's at the bottom of the gorge with his car, like you'd be if we hadn't warned you. Only my brother and I are allowed to move that barrier, so trucks can bring in materials for the dairy shed we're building."

Lou pointed to a huge, half-completed steel framework close to a fringe of trees that crossed the road and ran along the far end of the field.

"Drive up to the line of trees," Lou advised, "but get out there and walk the rest of the way. It's a real drop-off where the bridge used to be."

They followed instructions and found that the term "drop-off" was apt indeed. The road ended abruptly on a stone ledge between two iron posts half-hidden in the brush. From far beneath came a continuous, muffled roar; then, as the group approached cautiously, they looked down at the churning white of the furious creek, two hundred feet below.

The gorge was scarcely more than thirty feet wide at this point, so the water foamed through like a mill race. On the jagged rocks were chunks of timbers and twisted iron rods and rails, all that remained of the bridge that had spanned the narrow cleft. Beyond the abutment on the opposite side, the road climbed up through the woods toward the mountain ridge and the Gap that passed through it.

Upstream and down, the gorge widened, its rocky walls giving way to steep banks with scrubby trees, while the creek zigzagged in a series of cascades so far below that it would be a few hours' work to go down one side and up the other. It was Winstead who spoke above the surging roar as he turned to Lou Norvel:

"Why, that bridge was as solid as the rock it was built on when I drove across it with Gregg Austin. What happened to it, Lou?"

"The timbers went rotten and the irons loosened. In the summer we'd have noticed it in time. But in winter, with the road closed, it went and gave under the weight of all the snow that piled on top."

A police photographer took pictures of the abutments and the wreckage in the gorge. Next, Frisbee had him take pictures of the group, to establish the exact date. Cranston borrowed Harry's camera and took some pictures along the gorge. Then, coming out of the woods, he stopped to shoot some pictures of the Norvel's new dairy shed, which was a modified quonset. In addition to the lightweight metal girders that formed the skeleton frame, there were others stacked on the ground. Cranston was photographing those when the younger brother, Hank, came storming up with the loud objection:

"What do you want pictures of this for? Out there in the road is where you should take pictures, over by where the bridge was. You hear me?"

"You are talking to the wrong man," returned Cranston. "Tell all that to Mr. Frisbee, who is standing right over there. He is the man in charge."

Just to prove he was the man in charge, Frisbee reacted as Cranston anticipated. He not only okayed Cranston's pictures, he ordered the police photographer to take some official shots. While that was being

done, Cranston remarked:

"What about the truckers who brought these materials here? They knew the bridge was out, so their testimony would be good, too."

"That's right," agreed Frisbee. He turned to Hank. "How often did the supply truck come up here?"

"Whenever there was stuff to deliver," replied Hank. "Maybe a couple of times a week."

"And when was it here last?" queried Frisbee.

"Yesterday afternoon," said Hank. "Kind of late like."

"And what were the names of these truck-men?"

"I wouldn't know. Different guys came at different times. They work for the Vanderkill Hauling Company and they never did have much to say."

While Frisbee was making notes of that, Cranston returned the camera to Harry and undertoned:

"Follow the ruts back across the field and get some close-up shots of the tire tracks left by that truck."

While Harry was strolling away, the rest of the group went down to the farmhouse, which was a rambling old structure with sheds and outbuildings that had been added through the years. Inside, however, it was neat and tidy. There, Lou Norvel dug into an old desk and brought out title deeds, agreements and correspondence that the brothers had held with Gregg Austin.

"These may help us," Winstead told Frisbee. "Lou and Hank bought this farm piece by piece from Austin, who made his profit by grabbing up little farms and squeezing out small landholders all around. Some of the people he bought out might still be mad enough to have taken a shot at him."

"That's right," agreed Lou, "because now that we own the property, they are just as mad at us, even if Austin did make the big profit. That's why we keep those shotguns handy" - he gestured to a corner - "to chase off prowlers."

Outside the house, Harry joined Cranston in his car; and during the ride back to Austin's, Harry reported that he had taken some good pictures of the truck tracks. At Austin's, Frisbee made a call to the Vanderkill Hauling Company and found out that they rented trucks to local companies and individuals who made deliveries in the area. They stated that they would send Frisbee a list of all rentals during the past two months and that from those, he could check the truck-men that he wanted.

Winstead, meanwhile, was busy checking the data that the Norvels had given him, comparing names with those in Austin's files. Frisbee's secretary was helping him; and now Winstead came from the office with a new announcement.

"We just found a memo pad among the papers in Austin's desk." Winstead handed the pad to Frisbee. "It looks as though somebody tore off the top sheet, because you can still see the impression of the writing on the next one."

Frisbee studied the pad and agreed. He handed the pad to the fingerprint specialist, who applied powdered graphite to fill in the indentations. The writing soon became legible, like a carbon copy; and when compared with a specimen of Austin's handwriting, it matched perfectly. The memo said:

See Winstead... 3:30

Call Mutual... 4 p.m.

Mark Wade... 6:30

Comm. Weston... 8 p.m.

"I saw Austin at three-thirty," confirmed Winstead. "That's when I called Craig Shallick and told him that Irene and I would meet him at the Twin Peaks Inn. That four o'clock call to Mutual was probably about insurance."

"Quite right, sir," put in Chester, who was standing by. "I heard Mr. Austin make it. He took a nap from four-thirty until five-thirty and had a light supper at six o'clock."

"And we know that Mark Wade came at six-thirty," added Frisbee, "and that Commissioner Weston arrived at eight o'clock. So that about covers it."

"Not quite," put in the technician, who was applying a brush farther down the memo sheet. "Take a look at these."

By "these" he meant fingerprints, which had been scarcely noticeable until the pad was dusted, but which were now developing in full detail. That brought a quick opinion from Frisbee:

"Whoever tore off the top sheet must have been pressing down on the pad with his other hand. Check those prints against those we have already taken."

The technician did as ordered, but none of the prints tallied. The fingerprints of Winstead, Shallick, Irene, Wade, Rick - even Chester's all differed from those on the pad, thus eliminating all persons known to have been with Gregg Austin just prior to his murder.

"Some outsider's fingerprints," declared Frisbee. "He must have torn off Austin's memo and taken it with him, hoping to cover up his visit and confuse us."

From his speculative tone, Frisbee could have been covering his own temporary confusion, but he promptly came to a practical, though obvious decision.

"Send copies of those prints to Washington right away," Frisbee told the technician. "Let's see what the FBI files have to show." He swung to Winstead. "What else is missing besides the top sheet of this memo pad?"

"It's hard to say," returned Winstead, "except that we found no money in Austin's desk, though I am quite sure he always kept some cash on hand."

"And the killer would have taken it," nodded Frisbee, "if only to make the motive look like robbery. Still, a few dollars wouldn't matter." He turned to Chester. "How much petty cash did Mr. Austin keep in his desk?"

"I never could say exactly," replied Chester, "but almost invariably, he had upward of five thousand dollars -"

"Five thousand dollars!" broke in Frisbee. "Why, that would be enough to make robbery the whole motive." He spoke to his secretary. "List the names of all persons who dealt with Gregg Austin. Have them ready when the report comes from Washington. We'll pick it up from there."

That ended the investigation for the day, but Frisbee stressed that he would like to have everyone

available for a few days more, so Cranston agreed to stay over. His manner, though, was reluctant, which Harry knew was a pose on his chief's part to create the impression that his interest in the case was slight. The afternoon was fairly well along when they left Austin's and Harry expected Cranston to drive into Vanderkill. Instead, he headed straight for Thunder Cliff Highway. Noting Harry's surprise, Cranston gave a slight smile.

"I know what you have in mind, Vincent, and I agree. I would like to check on those trucks, but it would be too obvious right now. Let Frisbee get his reports first. We'll have a chance to look them over and plan accordingly."

They reached the sharp curves and were hitting them fast as the highway climbed, but with each spurt, Cranston had to brake hard at the turn.

"You can't cut the time much," Cranston decided, "no matter how you try or what kind of car you have; and at night it is still harder. Right now, though, we are sure no car is close behind us. So have your camera ready."

Harry followed instructions without realizing why until Cranston made a quick stop at the very space where the murder truck had lurked the night before. There, Cranston nudged Harry to the ground, saying:

"Look for any tire tracks that the truck left. Shoot some close-ups of them, like you did over at the Norvels."

The parking space itself was gravelly, but a patch of dirt on the shoulder of the highway showed the marks that Harry wanted. He shot his pictures and clambered back in the car so quickly that they were on their way again before any other cars appeared from either direction. The sky was darkening as they passed Twin Peaks Bridge, for heavy, ominous clouds were gathering beyond the mountains across the river.

Cranston drove on to the arrow that marked this end of Ragged Gap Road. There, he turned eastward and continued up the road to the barrier, where he had stopped the night before. Now, in what was still good daylight, Cranston stepped out as himself - not The Shadow - and beckoned Harry along. Cranston pointed to the legs of the barrier. Harry noticed deep indentations and scruff marks in the road beside them.

"Somebody has moved this since we stopped here before," declared Cranston. "But that was early in the evening, so early that people were still arriving at Austin's; not leaving there."

With that, Cranston swung the barrier aside and turned toward the car, telling Harry over his shoulder:

"Put the barrier back in place after I drive through."

Harry complied and rejoined Cranston in the car. The dirt road became steeper during the next mile and the wooded slopes narrowed on each side, with low but jagged crags that gave Ragged Gap its name. Then, as the road reached a hump and leveled for a brief stretch, Cranston stopped the car at what Harry thought at first was a narrow, little-used crossroad, until he saw instead that it was actually a wide, well-worn footpath.

This was the Appalachian Trail, which followed the ridge and dipped down to cross Ragged Gap Road and continue up the other side. No hikers were in sight for the same two reasons that should have applied with Don Morland: the season was early and the hour was late. It was growing dark beneath the trees as Cranston and Harry sat there in a silence broken only by the evening songs of the birds and the chirp of

crickets. As Cranston spoke amid these hushed surroundings his words had something of The Shadow's tone.

"An odd thing, Vincent," observed Cranston, "with all the mileage required to skirt these mountain ranges, here we are at the junction of two shortcuts. When that bridge was open, you could drive over through the Gap in ten minutes, or less, as Winstead said. Even now, a hiker could make it from the Twin Peaks Bridge to Colonial Town in an hour, along the Trail. It would take nearly that long to drive around."

Harry, his eyes half-closed, was visualizing all that. How the road map showed Thunder Cliff Highway wangling twenty-six miles up the river to Rockwood with another ten across to Hickory Corners, which was also twenty-six miles from Vanderkill by the Northern Turnpike.

"You would think that they would improve this road," remarked Harry, "considering all the mileage it would save."

"Previous generations thought in terms of shortcuts," commented Cranston. "Ours deals in devious ways. Today, crosstrails are likely to produce cross purposes, with certain people using them to their own advantage."

With that, Cranston started the motor, but instead of turning the car about as Harry expected, he continued on beyond the Bump, down the stretch toward Ragged Creek gorge, a real dead end. It was darker now, beneath the thickening canopy of trees, with the sky behind them growing blacker; and Cranston had to turn on the headlights to pick out the road. Harry, remembering the drop off at the gorge, found his nerves becoming taut.

Cranston's voice came soothingly. "Worried, Vincent?"

"Frankly, yes," Harry acknowledged. "Coming the other way, you have a fringe of trees to warn you. This way, you're already in the thick of it."

"And when daylight shows through," reminded Cranston, "the trees will be thinning out and will tell us when to stop."

As Cranston spoke, patches of sky became visible through the higher boughs ahead. Cranston slowed down and found a spot just wide enough to turn the car around, which he did in short stints, to avoid the side ditches. With each swing, the headlights cut a swath at a new angle; and once the lights produced a crackle from the brush, as a deer went springing away, only to halt and stare, as if hypnotized by the beam. Then the light swung away, the deer was off again, and Cranston had the car fully turned around.

Yet, by some oddity, the swath of light still seemed to sweep beneath the trees, like a delayed reflection. Puzzled, Harry turned around to look down the road toward the gorge, which was now only about a hundred yards away.

"I see you noticed that sweeping light, Vincent," came Cranston's tone. "Keep watching and see what happens now."

Cranston turned off the car lights and through the trees beyond the gorge Harry again saw what appeared to be a reflected glare. A moment later, it blanked out, just as the car's headlights had.

"Say!" exclaimed Harry. "That wouldn't be -"

"Our friends the Norvels?" interposed Cranston. "Definitely, yes. They are allergic to prowlers, remember? They saw our lights and turned on one of their own; but now they have turned it off, hoping we won't see it. Odd that they should be so skittish when prowlers are on the other side of the gorge, as

we are, where no crossing is possible. So wait here, Vincent" - Cranston's tone was changing now, as was his appearance - "until I return."

Cranston, his arms and shoulders already cloaked, was drawing the slouch hat down over his eyes as he sidled from the driver's seat and eased the car door shut. Harry, emerging from his own side of the car, caught what he thought was a cloaked figure as it merged with the lower darkness of the road. Then, there was no tracing The Shadow's course, though Harry knew instinctively that his chief's objective was the edge of the gorge.

This was it, again. Harry could recall many times when The Shadow had left him to venture on some dangerous foray. Compared to this, Harry's adventure on Thunder Cliff Highway had been mild. There, his judgment had been bolstered by The Shadow's, who always came through in the pinch. Now, The Shadow was operating on his own, with Harry in reserve. That was easier, yes, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, when Harry did not have to come through at all. But the hundredth case could make the difference. When it was his turn, how would Harry meet the pinch?

Harry didn't realize how long he had debated that question until he saw a quick, repeated blink of a tiny light down by the brink of the gorge. It couldn't be a firefly's gleam, for it came in three long glimmers; then a long, a short, a long; finally three shorts and a long one. It was The Shadow's flashlight, spelling, "O.K.V.," which meant, "All right, Vincent."

All was right with Harry, for he could see The Shadow's light. But Harry could see other blinks beyond the gorge, due to his higher altitude; and he was certain that The Shadow could not spot them down below, because of the fringing trees. Those lights meant the Norvel brothers; they had spotted Cranston's car, as he had said. Now, they were moving up to their side of the gorge, where The Shadow, even now, was probing for the drop-off.

That was something The Shadow needed to know. On impulse, Harry started down the road, picking his way by the fading light that came through the tree tops, hoping to warn his chief. But Harry was too late for that. He was less than halfway down the slanting stretch when a powerful searchlight blazed from beyond the gorge. It was mounted on the body of a truck that Harry could see outlined against the darkening sky; and flanking the beam, just visible in its fringes, were the Norvel brothers, one on either side, each armed with a half-raised shotgun.

The searchlight was focused slightly downward toward the gorge, so Harry was above the level of its beam. But caught squarely in the glare, like a moth against a flame, was the cloaked figure of The Shadow, hovering on his side of the gorge. Harry could hear the shout of distant voices:

"Stay where you are, you! And put your hands up! We're giving you one warning!"

In response, Harry heard The Shadow's challenging laugh, taunting, fading, like the cloaked figure that weaved away from the glare, then twisted forward and veered along the very edge of the gorge, to trick the man behind the searchlight into turning it the other way. A few moments more and The Shadow would have blended with the blackness of the tree trunks beside the road, but the brazen brothers did not allow that leeway.

Up came their shotguns, delivering simultaneous spurts, each booming from halfway between hip and shoulder. All in that same split second, Harry saw The Shadow's cloaked form fold and vanish over the brink, to be swallowed by the gorge below!

EIGHT

FOR A LONG, endless moment, the whole scene was as frozen as Harry's own gaze. From his high

angle, the cleft of the gorge was plainly discernible and he realized too well that The Shadow could not have made a last moment dart to cover at either side of the road. Harry had seen his cloaked chief use those fadeaway tactics so often that he was one man who was seldom fooled by them; in fact, The Shadow had trained him to follow such gyrations.

Now, that training was wasted. Harry had been too late in the pinch and The Shadow had gone beyond Harry's ability to rescue him. All Harry could possibly do now would be to deliver vengeance for The Shadow. There had been times when The Shadow himself had dealt in vengeance, though never cruelly, never even coldly. But Harry wasn't limiting himself on those counts, not where the Norvels were concerned.

Caution was Harry's policy as he drew a .45 automatic and moved down closer to the fringe of the searchlight's beam. Once in the glare, he would be outnumbered two-to-one by those shotgun specialists, the Norvels. He would have to rush them, then stop in his tracks before they could get out of theirs, so he could blast away at just the right range.

Harry was calculating this as nicely as if he had only target practice in mind, not the bigger task of vengeance. Harry's cause was helped when one of the Norvels - it looked like Lou - swung about and waved both arms into the searchlight's blaze. A nice target he would have been right then, except that the range was still too long. But when the other brother also turned, it gave Harry his chance to dash forward, which he did. Momentarily, he was in the full light, only to halt, still unnoticed as the searchlight blinked off.

Now, against the dulling sky, Harry saw the full outline of the truck and its bulk reminded him of the one that had juggernauted at him over on Thunder Cliff Highway. This time, it suddenly took off in the other direction, heading down the eastern slope of Ragged Gap Road, its driver eager to reach the turnpike and be away before neighbors or anyone else came to inquire about the shotgun blasts.

As for the Norvel brothers, they were moving closer toward the gorge, picking their way with flashlights. That was to Harry's advantage, for he crept down the road on his side without showing a light at all. When Lou and Hank reached the gorge they pointed their flashlights straight down and studied the depths, while Harry, gauging his approach by the increasing roar from the creek, stopped on the opposite brink.

There, Harry could hear the voices of the murderous pair above the tumult; but they were crouched too low for him to risk a pot shot. Instead, Harry worked his left hand to the very edge of the stone abutment, identified it and hunched his body forward to the limit, so that his gun hand, and his head and shoulder above it, were actually projecting out into space above the gorge.

"That's him down there," Hank's voice was saying, nervously. "See his body on those rocks? What if they find it there, Lou?"

"They'll find a chunk of timber from the bridge," snapped Lou. "That's all you see down there, Hank, so stop imagining things. Whoever the guy was, he's been swept downstream" - Lou swung his flashlight in that direction - "and that's the end of him."

"And the end of us, maybe, when they do find the body somewhere."

"For taking a couple of shots at some prowler in the dark? How are they going to prove we did it? Get hold off yourself Hank, and let's go."

Lou flicked off his light and Hank did the same. They both raised up, forming perfect silhouettes against the still lighted sky. With a forward thrust of his gun, Harry was ready to topple them like the figures on a

shooting gallery rack, for they were at just about that range, when something halted his trigger squeeze.

That something was a whispered voice that said:

"Don't be a fool, Vincent. I have them both covered."

If the foaming cataract had lashed up from two hundred feet below and splashed Harry squarely in the face, he couldn't have been more amazed. The voice, however, came from only a few feet below, yet in the solid blackness beneath the brink, Harry, looking down, could not trace The Shadow's outline.

"Ease away," the whisper added. "Into the brush. Don't let them spot you."

Good advice, that. Harry was in the brush by the time Lou Norvel gave his powerful flashlight a wide sweep across the gorge and up the slope of the roadway, hoping perhaps to spot a parked car somewhere toward the Gap. When the light showed nothing, Lou turned it off, without lowering it below the level of the old stone abutment. Hence, he failed to spy The Shadow in his precarious perch, which was fortunate for both Lou and his brother Hank, as his automatic would have withered them if he had been detected.

The brothers headed off toward their farmhouse, using their flashlights sparingly. Harry emerged from the brush as The Shadow pulled himself up over the brink from a ledge five feet below. When the departing lights faded, The Shadow focused his flashlight on the jutting step where he had taken refuge. Harry saw that it extended three feet out from the abutment, forming part of it. The ledge had deep indentations at the sides.

"Those are where the iron rods were fixed," stated The Shadow, "so it should be simple to rebuild the bridge by fitting new supports in place. I noticed this ledge earlier today while looking across from the other side."

To emphasize that, The Shadow turned his light across the gorge, showing the opposite abutment from which the Norvels had looked down. It was identical, with a jutting three-foot shelf; but unless a person leaned far over, it was difficult to realize how far those stone steps did project. But The Shadow had been aware of it. When the searchlight caught him, he had dropped to the handy perch a split-second before the shotguns blasted, knowing that he would be below their path of fire as well as the searchlight's gleam.

Looking up, Harry saw enough light above the trees to realize that The Shadow, half-reclining unseen on the ledge, had easily spotted the Norvels and Harry as well, all outlined against the sky. His position had been perfect. With automatic ready, he would have settled the murderous brothers instantly, if they had spotted him and tried to bring their shotguns into play.

Now, The Shadow had a new purpose, for he was urging Harry up the road toward the car. Once they were in it, The Shadow started the motor, clicked on the lights and gunned the car up to the hump and over it, without even a side glance as they whizzed across the Trail. It was dark ahead, now, except for the glare of the headlights and The Shadow clipped along at forty miles an hour, a faster speed than Winstead's best estimate.

In mere minutes, they were down at the road barrier. Harry hopped out, swung the block wide and closed it as The Shadow drove through. Then Harry was back in the car and they made a short, swift run of a mile down to Thunder Cliff Highway and a mile and half north along it, all in three minutes, which The Shadow capped by swinging in to the Hudson View Tavern and parking along with the cars that had already arrived there for the cocktail hour.

The Shadow was Cranston again as he and Harry left the car and entered the tavern. There was no sunset, for the whole sky was blackened by thunder clouds and occasional lightning streaks showed the black river far below. When they were inside, at a corner table in the lounge where they ordered drinks, Cranston quietly asked:

"Did you see the truck drive away?"

"Yes," replied Harry. "It went high-tailing for the turnpike."

"I thought as much." Cranston gave a reflective smile, "and now you are thinking that we should be out trying to find it."

"Well, not exactly," returned Harry. "There are so many ways it could have gone, like down through Vanderkill or up past Hickory Corners. Unless it doubled around this way, we would never have a chance of spotting it."

"And if we were looking for it right now, Vincent, somebody would be spotting us. In fact, all cars on Thunder Cliff Highway and those crossing Twin Peaks Bridge are probably being spotted on the chance that ours is one of them. This whole area is combed with pitfalls and alive with spies who have been ordered to spring such traps on persons like ourselves."

"Why can't we reverse the game and go spotting them?"

"We can, and the master mind behind the thing is hoping that we try that plan. For what can we bag? Some truck-men, who will play dumb and say they didn't see a car go through a rail; or a couple of farmers who will admit they fired shotguns to protect their property, but that nobody was there."

"But those people are all parts of the setup."

"Small parts, yes. So small that they are merely tiny cogs that can be detached and left spinning on their own. But if we reveal ourselves, they will send the word along. Already, they have alerted the entire ring, which is why I sped over here, before cars closed in on this end of Ragged Gap Road."

"Then if we were back there, we could pick up the trail of one of them?"

"Yes, so it could lead us on a wild chase. Meanwhile, we would be tagged by others as we went along. This time both of us would probably wind up in some nice cool, refreshing place like the bottom of the Hudson River or a two-hundred-foot gorge." Cranston paused and his smile was whimsical. "This time we would share the plight, Vincent, if that would be any comfort."

There was a pause; then Cranston commented:

"We have one thing in common, Vincent. We are both dead so we can't possibly be ourselves. That is, the man who snooped around Twin Mountain Inn has presumably been liquidated. The same applies to the prowler who was down at Ragged Creek gorge tonight. Of course, you and I are still around, Vincent, so that makes us two different people. So the smart thing is to keep our slates clean."

"But some of those spies, as you term them, should certainly provide a lead to someone higher and so on up to the master mind himself."

"Quite right, Vincent, and that calls for counterespionage, so I intend to provide it. The Austin case is getting big enough to bring Burke out here to cover it. Marsland is a good horseman and would enjoy a stay at Wade's dude ranch. A golfer like Crofton would be a welcome guest at the country clubs where young Rick Langdon hangs out. Mann is the very sort who would fit in with Shallick's ultra social set. I

shall call Burbank now and arrange all that."

While Cranston was making the call, Harry ran over the list of names mentally and in more detail. All were The Shadow's agents, Harry's own companions in arms. Clyde Burke, police reporter for the New York Classic, was often assigned to cases like the Austin murder. Cliff Marsland was both rugged and capable; the same applied to Miles Crofton. Together, they formed a real sock-'em and rock-'em duo. Rutledge Mann, mild, rotund and unobtrusive, had a way of frequenting the most exclusive places and absorbing all that happened around him, while remaining little noticed.

As for Burbank, he was The Shadow's contact man, who had all these agents and more on constant tap. Harry seldom saw Burbank, but it was easy to picture him, a steady-toned man seated at a switchboard, with a short wave at one hand and reams of files at the other, relaying instructions from The Shadow, furnishing agents with prompt information, filling in coolly by remote control in some of the most drastic situations, when The Shadow was too heavily engaged to call the shots himself. Not only that, Burbank, like all his equipment, was mobile. When needed, he might be anywhere. So this was the compact, self-operating, and above all, secret organization that The Shadow intended to move in to counter a criminal group that apparently straddled the Hudson highlands like an unseen octopus. As Harry pictured it, the opposing faction might be ten times as large as The Shadow's chosen agents, but it was probably not one-tenth as efficient. Harry, as The Shadow's oldest agent in point of service, well knew the capabilities of the entire crew. A few more guests were entering the cocktail lounge when Cranston returned from his phone call, but the place was still only sparsely occupied. A waiter was bringing drinks to Cranston's table and when he had gone, Harry put the query to Cranston:

"About the Austin case -"

Cranston interrupted with a gesture so slight that only Harry could have caught it. Without moving his lips, Cranston undertoned:

"Don't look now, but they are here to check on us already."

By "they" Cranston referred to two men and a woman who had entered singly, but were now greeting one another. The girl looked around and said loudly:

"I'm sure Sylvia should be here by now. She was leaving the house when I phoned her and I had to drive a lot farther to get here."

"Suppose I phone her again," said one of the men. "You and Jack take a table and order some drinks. Make mine the usual."

The girl started toward a table, then chose another near where Cranston and Harry were seated. Jack then suggested taking a table close by the door, so they could see Sylvia if she showed up. That way, they covered enough of the room to get a close look at everybody or to catch snatches of their conversation. Cranston, apparently, did not notice them as he was flagging the waiter for another drink. But when Jack and the girl were finally settled, Cranston spoke again:

"They would look better in a beer parlor than a cocktail lounge. They will be making the rounds of those, later."

Cranston's opinion was based on their attire as much as their manner. The girl was wearing slacks and her friend Jack had on heavy boots along with his sport clothes, hardly the customary garb for a somewhat conventional place like the Hudson View. The other man was back now, telling his two friends:

"Sylvia's line is busy. We'll wait a while and call her again."

"They'll forget all about Sylvia," Cranston told Harry, "and they will all go away in the same car together after they've sized up the situation here."

While the group was still stalling, another man entered and Cranston recognized his old friend, Rufus Palford. Instead of greeting him, Cranston looked the other way, leaving it to Palford to make the opening overtures, which Palford did, just as the waiter was serving the second round of drinks at Cranston's table. Palford came over, shakily but eagerly, and during the greetings, he invited Cranston and Harry to have dinner with him. Cranston agreed, but put it the other way about:

"You must have dinner with us, Palford. We've been waiting for a table for the last half hour, so it should be ready soon. Have a drink, meanwhile."

Cranston spoke rather loudly and his mention of "the last half hour" carried to the group by the door. Apparently, they'd given clearance to all other persons present and that clinched it for Cranston and Harry as well. The group paid for their drinks and left without waiting for Sylvia, exactly as Cranston had said they would. Through the side window of the lounge Harry saw Jack climb behind the wheel of a beaten looking car, where his two companions joined him, also as Cranston had predicted. All that talk of "Sylvia" had been just an excuse for mooching around.

During dinner, Palford sparkled in what must have been his old familiar style, judging from Cranston's pleased reaction. Palford's voice was crackly, though, and his face wore a somewhat forced smile while he tilted his head to one side and looked up with quick, birdlike blinks. Occasionally his voice saddened, as when Cranston mentioned that Commissioner Weston had come out here to see Gregg Austin.

"Too bad about Austin," said Palford, with an emphatic shake of his tilted head. "He was a very fine chap. Very fine."

"You knew him then?" queried Cranston.

"Of course. Quite well, in a way. I bought Folly Castle from him, along with all sorts of antique weapons and other oddities that went with the place. I wanted those most of all, so I could add my own collections to them." Palford's smile returned. "And Austin gave me quite a bargain."

"That's surprising. I heard that Austin was a sharp dealer."

"With little land grabbers, yes, because they tried to beat him at his own game. But Folly Castle was a white elephant and we both knew it, so we came to sensible terms. Austin and I were good friends from then on."

"Like we were," observed Cranston, "after we met in Tibet."

Instantly, Palford's lips tightened as they had before; but at the close view of the dinner table, the reason was more evident. Palford was not just trying to repress his habitual smile; he was holding back a quiver that threatened to turn his face into a drooping drool. His eyes were darting, in hunted fashion, until he managed to control them with his quick blinks. He was able, then, to declaim, as though rehearsed:

"I would rather not talk about Tibet."

Palford was looking straight at Cranston and Harry was amazed by the glow that came to Palford's gaze, until he suddenly realized that it was a reflection of Cranston's own glint. More precisely, Cranston had turned on the hypnotic power of The Shadow's burning eyes to give his old friend Palford a quota of new confidence. But Cranston's gaze had become merely casual when Harry looked his way, for by then,

Palford was more himself again, his eyes blinking only slightly, his lips wearing their friendly smile as he tilted his head and cackled:

"Let's talk about Folly Castle. Or, better still, let's go there right now. There is much there to remind you of places where we both have been" - Palford's lips tightened only momentarily - "that is, places outside of Tibet. You will like Folly Castle, Cranston, indeed you will. You will want to stay there a long time - a very long time -"

"I know," interposed Cranston, "but I can't go there tonight."

"And why not?"

"Because of the storm. I wouldn't want to get caught in the middle of it." Cranston arose, gave Palford a light clap on the back, "You had better get back to Folly Castle, while Vincent and I go our own way. We can visit you later."

During dinner, the lightning flashes had been getting more vivid and now a terrific crackle emphasized Cranston's claim that the storm was close. The burst of thunder that followed seemed to roll up from the Hudson and jar the walls of the old tavern. The proprietor, Sumner, was at the door of the dining room, anxiously beckoning to the departing guests and saying, "The rain will come at any moment now! At any moment!"

"Call Mr. Palford's car," Cranston told Sumner. "Ours is just across the lot." He turned and clasped Palford's hand. "Good night, Rufus."

Sumner waved and a limousine rolled forward with a chauffeur at the wheel, to pick up the owner of Folly Castle. By then, Cranston and Harry were in their car, but Cranston let Palford's car pull from the driveway first. It swung to the left and Cranston commented drily:

"Good. I wanted to be sure he turned north before we went south."

Go south they did, as the storm broke with full fury. The rain pelleted hard enough to make the driving difficult, until the lightning etched the road ahead as plainly as in daylight. That, to Harry, was too plainly, for it made Thunder Cliff Highway live up to its name. Above were towering crags, topped by swaying trees. Each brilliant glare showed bulging rocks that threatened to topple and hurl destruction upon the car below. Jagged chains of lightning were splitting trees along the slope and at any moment one of those might tumble to the road and wreck the car.

Then, worse than such threats, came sheets of rain that turned the whole highway into a tributary of the Hudson, cutting the visibility so close to zero that Cranston was actually guided by those guardrails that had proven so inadequate when Harry's car had put them to the test.

But through it all, lightning, rain and flood, Cranston drove calmly, steadily, as he chuckled in a tone that had a slight trace of The Shadow's laugh:

"At least we are on the road alone tonight, Vincent, and headed the way we want to go. Our only real problem now is what tomorrow may bring."

NINE

THE NEXT MORNING, Cranston had Harry's pictures developed and enlarged, Cranston held a negative to the light, then set it on a print and said:

"Look at that Vincent. See how well the treads match."

"Which they should," returned Harry, "since one is the negative and the other the positive."

"Except that the negative is a shot of the tire tracks at the Norvel farm, while the positive is that picture you took at the parking spot where the truck waited to jar you into the Hudson."

Harry did a doubletake when he heard that; then he saw that Cranston was right. By a simple matching test, Cranston had proved that the murder truck had come from the Norvel farm earlier, where, according to the two brothers, it had been delivering girders and other materials for their half-constructed dairy shed. But considering the way that the Norvels had later shown their hand, it was doubtful that their word could be taken on anything.

"That truck last night wasn't delivering building materials," said Harry. "Do you think the Norvels had it hidden away when we were there with Frisbee?"

"Hardly," returned Cranston. "There are plenty of good hiding spots among those old farm buildings and their cellars, but none big enough for a truck. It is more likely that the truck came around to pick up something late yesterday."

"And one thing we won't be able to pick up today is more tire tracks; not after all that rain last night."

"That works in our favor, too, Vincent. Nobody will be able to trace the tire tracks that our car left, coming over Ragged Gap Road."

As he spoke, Cranston was studying the prints of the pictures that he personally had taken of the construction work and stacks of extra girders that the Norvels were using for their dairy shed. Evidently, he was pleased with them, for Cranston took them along when he and Harry drove north on the turnpike to the county courthouse at Kingsburg, where they found Frisbee in his office. Cranston showed Frisbee the shed pictures and the county detective promptly produced those that his own photographer had taken, telling Cranston that he could take copies of any he wanted.

Cranston helped himself to a full set, including photos showing the tire treads of all the cars that had been at Austin's, remarking that he would show them to Commissioner Weston in New York. That pleased Frisbee, who was anxious to impress everyone with his ability as an investigator. In fact, Frisbee swelled with special pride when he announced:

"The Austin murder is now big news. Only this morning, the New York Classic phoned to say that they were sending their star reporter, Clyde Burke, to cover the case. What do you think of that, Cranston?"

"Excellent, provided you have some new developments to give out."

"There are none yet, but something should break soon."

"What about those truckers who hauled the girders up to the Norvel farm. Any word on them?"

"Oh, yes." Frisbee dealt through a stack of reports. "I've talked to six different men who made deliveries up there at one time or another. They all saw that the bridge was out, so I am getting affidavits from them, with the exact dates."

"That includes the pair who made the last delivery, a few days ago?"

"No, because nobody knows who was on that truck. Its winch was out of order, so it was left at the repair shop instead of being returned to the regular garage where it was rented. But I have enough witnesses where the bridge is concerned. The earlier ones are more important anyway."

Cranston differed with that opinion, though he didn't say so. Frisbee's phone began ringing and while he was answering it, Cranston gave Harry a nod, meaning that they would visit the repair shop on their own, later. Frisbee never did get back to the subject of the truck, because just as he finished the phone call, Winstead arrived with a full list of persons who had dealt with Austin.

"This is final," announced Winstead, in his stolid way, "and I must say this about Austin. He was consistent. Nobody who did business with him liked him."

"I can name one exception," put in Cranston. "Rufus Palford."

Winstead's squarish face lost its stolid looks as he tilted his head, spread his lips in a senile smile and raised his voice to a cackly pitch:

"You mean the chap who looks like this and talks this way?" He blinked his eyes in perfect imitation of Palford. "The man who bought Castle Point?"

"That's right," agreed Cranston, "but he calls it Folly Castle."

"One and the same," clucked Winstead, in Palford's style. "Call it either, it was still a bargain, a real white elephant." Then, ending his comedy, Winstead added in his own serious style: "Yes, Folly Castle was an exception. Austin bought and sold it three times, taking a loss in every case."

"How did that come about?" asked Cranston.

"The first time," explained Winstead, "it cost so much to repair, that Austin simply had to unload it or go broke. The man who bought it couldn't keep up the payments, so Austin took it back, thinking he could build something new there. But the wreckers wanted too much to tear down the castle, so Austin tried to unload its furnishings on Palford, along with a lot of antique weapons in the place. But Palford wouldn't buy until the castle was practically thrown in."

"Since that is the case," put in Frisbee, "we won't put Palford on the list. In fact, we won't bother with the list at all, until we get that fingerprint report from Washington. It is due at any time now."

An impatient quarter hour followed; then Frisbee's teletype began to click. The message that came through was a surprise indeed to Harry Vincent, though Lamont Cranston didn't take it that way.

"Those prints belong to a man named Donald C. Morland," announced Frisbee, "better known as Don Morland. He is a mining engineer, at present unemployed, but with experience in Peru, Mexico and Canada. He can be reached through International Mineralogists, in New York."

Frisbee was reaching for the phone to call that organization, when the teletype resumed its rattle. Apparently, Morland's background made him something of a security risk, for Washington had already checked on his more recent activities and was sending on a detailed report, which Frisbee called off as it came through.

Between jobs, Morland went on hiking trips which he combined with field excursions in search of minerals. These were conducted under the auspices of various colleges and Morland had been planning a series of lectures and field trips at Sheffield Junior College in Sheffield, Connecticut, just over the line from New York State. He could be reached there through Professor Herbert Okum, head of the Geological Department.

No more data came through, so Frisbee made a long distance call to Sheffield and talked to Professor Okum, stating that International Mineralogists were anxious to contact Don Morland right away. As Frisbee talked, he jotted down notes that he punctuated with occasional questions. The call finished,

Frisbee turned to the group and stated:

"Okum received a postcard from Don this morning, saying that he was hiking up to Sheffield along the Appalachian Trail. The card showed a picture of the big community room in Twin Peaks Inn. It had a Vanderkill postmark and it was stamped 10 p.m., night before last."

"The evening Gregg Austin was murdered," declared Winstead, in a solemn tone. "If Don Morland had mailed that card at Twin Peaks Inn, it would have gone out from a post office on the other side of the river. So he must have come into Vanderkill."

"Okum said that Don has a girl friend named Mildred Joslyn, who lives in Henniker, New York," stated Frisbee. "I'll call her and see if she heard from him."

Soon, Frisbee had Mildred on long distance and was giving her the same routine about International Mineralogists. After a brief conversation, Frisbee hung up with a satisfied smile.

"She got a postcard, too," he said, "only it showed the outside of Twin Peaks Inn. Same postmark, Vanderkill, same time, ten o'clock, night before last. Let's see: There are two pickups, one at three o'clock, another at nine. So Don must have mailed those cards some time after three o'clock. How long after, is the next question."

Harry Vincent could have given a fairly good answer to that question, but he played strictly dumb, in response to a knowing glance that Cranston gave him. It was Winstead who came through with a suggestion:

"That would depend on when Morland left Twin Peaks Inn. Why don't you call the desk over there and find out if the clerk remembers a hiker buying postcards. There can't be many on the Trail this early in the season."

Frisbee made the call with prompt results. His voice became more eager as he talked, his hand more rapid as he jotted notes.

"The clerk remembers him all right," announced Frisbee. "He says Morland bought the cards and intended to mail them in Colonial Town, so they would go out that night. It was about an hour before sunset, time enough for Don to have hiked there before dark." He paused, rubbed his heavy jaw and boomed in a demanding tone: "But in that case the cards should have a Colonial Town postmark. He must have come into Vanderkill instead." He paused, questioning his logic. "Twelve miles along the Thunder Cliff Highway, with its traffic and its grades? That would be no good for a hiker."

"Not for a Trail hiker, but all right for a hitch hiker," Winstead answered. "Morland probably hitched a ride as soon as he crossed Twin Peaks Bridge. Most anybody would pick up a man in a regular hiking outfit. I know I would, for one."

"But you didn't see any hikers when you drove in from Twin Peaks Inn with Irene?"

"No," replied Winstead, "but it was beginning to get dark by then. From what the clerk just told you, Morland must have hitched a ride pretty well ahead of us. We certainly didn't see any hiker on the highway."

"So Don Morland must have ridden in as far as Vanderkill," mused Frisbee. "Now, let's see, just where would he have mailed those postcards?"

"There's a mailbox alongside the walk in that underpass beneath Northern Turnpike," informed Winstead. "You know, where Pleasant Valley Road goes through. I've often dropped mail there after leaving

Austin's house."

"That fits perfectly!" enthused Frisbee. "All Don Morland had to do was walk on to Austin's and stay out of sight until all the cars had come and gone. Then he could move in quickly to rob Austin of his money and murder him, knowing it would be blamed on someone who had been in the house. Then he was heading along the Valley road again, to get back to the Appalachian Trail, giving himself a perfect alibi - except for dropping those cards in a Vanderkill mailbox!"

Frisbee was on his feet, strutting about as though he had personally analyzed the Don Morland angle from start to finish, from alpha to omega, without even an iota of credit for Winstead, who took it all quite stolidly.

"The newspapers will have their big story before today is over," assured Frisbee. "But not a word is to go out yet. I'll show you why!"

He spread a big map on his desk, one that showed the lower portion of New York State in great detail. With a red crayon pencil, Frisbee traced the zigzag of the Appalachian Trail from the Hudson River to the Connecticut line, a distance of some sixty miles, over more than slightly rugged terrain.

"Professor Okum figures that Don Morland will take three days or possibly four to cover that whole stretch," stated Frisbee. "It depends on how long Don stops to look at old abandoned mines along the way, which is a habit of his, as might be expected with a mining engineer. Yesterday was Don's first full hiking day; today is the second, so by noon, he will be only halfway along, if that far. And by then" - Frisbee's strong features showed an anticipative gloat - "my dragnet will be closing in."

Frisbee was using a blue pencil now, to checkmark every spot where a road or highway crossed the Appalachian Trail, as well as the lesser trails that fed into it and the side paths that branched from it.

"We'll alert the police of every township, as well as all state police patrols and even every game warden along the way," continued Frisbee, "so they can move in and blanket every sector, all at once. They will pick up every hiker that they find and Don Morland will be one of them. If he has Austin's money on him, he will be self-incriminated. If he doesn't have it, we'll find where he hid it, unless he can explain away those fingerprints of his."

With that, Frisbee began to wave the visitors from his office, so that he and his staff could put the dragnet into speedy operation.

"If we are really closing in by the time Burke and those other reporters get here," declared Frisbee, "I'll let them go along with us." He turned to Cranston. "Meanwhile, you may as well go back to New York, unless of course, you want to stay here -"

"I'll stay long enough to drop in on Rufus Palford," interposed Cranston. "He was very insistent that Vincent and I should visit Folly Castle."

Upon leaving the courthouse, Cranston drove back to the motel, where he and Harry checked out. Next, they went into Vanderkill, where Cranston stopped to have his brakes checked at an automobile repair shop, saying that the motel had recommended that he go there. Harry strolled about while Cranston was watching the checkup. During that interim, Harry found a chance to shoot some nice close-up pictures of a truck that was parked out back with its winch dismantled. Harry was particularly interested in some close shots of the tires.

From there, Cranston and Harry drove north along the Hudson, which today was a placid blue against the soft green of the rising hills, a striking contrast to the stormy blackness of the night before. They

crossed the bridge and had a late lunch at Twin Peaks Inn, where Cranston reviewed Harry's early adventures and summed them up with the comment:

"You crossed somebody's path, Vincent, and you stepped on their toes when you did. I have an idea how matters stand, but there are pieces still to be fitted in the jigsaw. First, I must call Burbank and relay some instructions."

Cranston was on the phone for several minutes; then he returned and gave Harry the nod. They left the inn, drove back across the bridge, turned north and sped past the Hudson View Tavern on to the town of Rockwood. There, Cranston took the road that continued north along the river, working steadily down toward the Hudson's shore as it approached Castle Point.

Harry realized now that they were accepting Palford's invitation to visit Folly Castle, whatever the result might be. This was one of those rare times when Harry Vincent wondered if even The Shadow knew!

TEN

THE EVER-CHANGING Hudson presented another of its varied aspects, when viewed from this lower altitude, where the River Road followed the contour of a gradual slope that shelved inward toward the receding hills. Here, grassy mounds and open knolls vied with wooded domes and craggy cliffs, while occasional roads ascended to houses that sparsely studded the higher reaches. Across the river, however, the scene was more mountainous than ever. Towering green summits blackened the water with their shadows, so that patches of scintillating blue were visible only beyond the distant bends.

The railroad ran between the highway and the river, cutting through low hillocks or slight rises, which the highway surmounted. At one such rise, an arrow pointed to a bridge that crossed the track, with a sign saying Castle Point. Cranston swung onto the bridge, which was strong and well built, though its wooden planking clattered as the car crossed it. Then, the side road dipped gradually toward a narrow neck of land which formed a causeway, leading straight into the looming bastion of Folly Castle itself.

That one entrance was through a huge, iron-grilled portcullis, a faithful replica of the great sliding gates that safeguarded the baronial strongholds of the Middle Ages. The castellated walls were also imposing, as were the square turrets at the corners. But the visitors gained only a brief glimpse of those, for now the portcullis was grinding straight upward and they were driving in beneath its yawning iron teeth. As Cranston braked the car in a courtyard, the portcullis clanged down behind them, a grim reminder that they were now within its metal maw.

Seen from the courtyard, the battlements were forbidding in their bulk, rising in irregular steps and terraces. But when Cranston and Harry walked through an inner gateway, where Palford was beckoning in his sidling fashion, the whole effect changed. They were in a great hall, its stone walls carved with bas-reliefs of ancient battle scenes and a huge crystal chandelier hanging from its domed ceiling.

From there, Palford conducted them through lesser halls and up short stairs to various rooms and apartments, none of which seemed to be on the same level. It was plain to see why the castle and its furnishings had to be sold as a unit. In a large dining hall, the massive center table had great blocky legs that were fixed in the floor. Casement windows were set in the stone walls themselves. Instead of chairs, there were built-in window seat and stone benches.

Each short flight of steps had its permanently carved railing, while the Library had three decks of built-in book shelves, each with its own balcony. Metal light brackets were part of the grillwork that decorated the walls and ceiling. Palford kept pointing out such features as he chuckled:

"By the time you removed or dismantled all this, it would be a salvage operation. Anything taken out of

here would not look right anywhere else."

There were many tapestries on the walls, but those had been brought here by Palford himself. Still more important was his collection of armor, which not only included the conventional sort worn by Crusaders and European men-at-arms, but more ancient types and many examples of Oriental equipage that had been in use until comparatively modern times.

"Some of these came with the castle," stated Palford, "but it looked like a Medieval junkyard until I added the fine Oriental stuff. Now let me show you my real prize, my collection of rare and antique weapons."

Palford led the way in that shambling, sidelong fashion, occasionally giving his head the habitual lift that Winstead had so cleverly imitated. In the dim light from the tall but narrow windows, all that could be seen of his face was its wide-curved smile and those quick-blinking eyes. The group went down a short, wide stairway and through a double doorway into a huge room which was at about ground level. There, Cranston and Harry were truly amazed by the vast array of weapons that literally teemed from the walls.

There were broadswords, battle-axes, maces, halberds and other trophies of the days when knighthood flowered, as well as glaives, half-pikes, poleaxes and other antiquated implements that Palford named as he indicated them. As with the older armor, these had come with the castle; and again, Palford was prouder of the items that he had personally brought from all parts of the world.

Those were Filipino bolos, Malayan barongs, a wavy-bladed kris from Sumatra, curved Gurkha kukris in assorted sizes, Cuban machetes, Burmese thrusting daggers, Chinese beheading swords and even Scottish claymores. Australian boomerangs, Sudanese throwing knives, Fiji war lances, Congo war clubs, Zulu spears and Indian javelins were also part of the collection. There were many varieties of these weapons, along with others that were unclassified.

"There's just about every weapon that you ever heard of," boasted Palford. "Any that you can think of, just name them and I'll find them for you."

"What about those long, thin-bladed Mongolian swords?" inquired Cranston. "The Sungmas, who called themselves miracle men, used to bend the blades of those swords into spirals, claiming they had the power of demons. You certainly should have brought back some of those as souvenirs from Tibet -"

Cranston halted before Palford could express himself. Then, clapping Palford's shoulder, Cranston apologetically changed the subject.

"Sorry, Palford," he said. "I didn't mean to worry you. What's it like outside the castle? How about showing us the rest of Castle Point?"

Palford's lips were twitching and his eyes again had a hunted look, but thanks to Cranston's sympathy, he managed to regain his forced smile and the composure that it represented.

"There is not much to see outside of the castle," said Palford, "but what there is, I'll be glad to show you."

He led the way back up the stairs and out on a high, railed balcony, where they overlooked the river. Cranston noted that a low wall followed the shore of the Point, clear to the river and that all the space within its bounds was formed of solid stone.

"What is that?" Cranston asked. "An extension of the foundation, so the castle can be built to cover the entire Point?"

"Heaven forbid!" cackled Palford. "It's too big already. That's simply the top of the old storage vaults, where the ammunition was kept. This place used to be a government arsenal, you know. After it was abandoned and sold, the vaults were closed off permanently. That roof is very strongly constructed, so some day I may make it into a courtyard or an esplanade."

While they were still looking across the rather extensive enclosure, a powerful cabin cruiser came ploughing up through the river, passing very close to the Point. It was surprising to see how the sizable boat rolled, for the Hudson seemed comparatively calm, as though the white plumes that flecked it were nothing more than wavelets. That, however, was an illusion, due no doubt to the great height of the massive mountains opposite, which made the river seem insignificant beneath them.

Actually, the water was very rough and it took a strong boat to buck it. Yet the master of the wallowing craft was sitting unperturbed on the rear deck, his rotund body deep in the seat, his arms folded over his ample stomach and a yachting cap pulled down slantwise over the side of his head. He gave a bored look at the castle and didn't even bother to raise a hand in response to Palford's friendly wave.

"Another of those snoots," sneered Palford. "They come cruising up the river pretending to be yachtsmen and acting like a lot of landlubbers. They haven't the first idea of the courtesies that rule the high seas."

Cranston was studying the cruiser through the binoculars and now he handed them to Harry for a look. As the power boat veered into the trough of the waves, Harry gained a close-up of the indifferent skipper who was leaving the navigation of the craft to some apprentice. Harry recognized him as The Shadow's agent, Rutledge Mann, and realized that his very indifference was a tip-off that the coast was clear, the coast in this instance being the Hudson's shore.

"It's getting late, Palford," decided Cranston, "and we must leave you to your arms and armor. We have greatly enjoyed our visit, so take us inside the castle and find the way out for us."

Palford complied, though he kept asking them to stay for dinner and spend the night, saying that he had plenty of room and enough servants to take care of everything. That was true enough for during the tour of the bizarre premises, Cranston and Harry had counted as many as half a dozen stocky but rather mousy men, who moved about like museum attendants, which in a sense they were, considering that they took care of Palford's odd collections.

One of the drab servitors opened the door to the inner courtyard, while another went to hoist the portcullis. A few minutes later Cranston was driving up to the bridge across the tracks while Harry was looking back at Folly Castle, which seemed more grim and gray than ever under the lengthening shadows that were enshrouding it. The few hours that they had spent there had gone rapidly, even pleasantly, but once outside, Harry felt as though he had escaped from a living tomb.

Five minutes more and they were approaching the town of Rockwood, where Cranston purposely slowed down at a crossing to allow a traffic light to turn red against them. As he did, he gestured to a high slope of rolling land, where a flag was flying above a squatty clubhouse and widely scattered pennants marked the greens of a golf course.

"That's the new Highland Country Club," stated Cranston. "Very sporty, they say, because they've used the old Revolutionary earthworks for bunkers and some of the greens are on emplacements where cannon were mounted to keep British ships from coming up the Hudson. There's a pair of golfers holding out on a green right now. See if you can spot them through the glasses, Vincent."

Harry did and promptly recognized the face that came in focus.

"Say, that's young Rick Langdon, Irene's boy friend!"

"And the other man, do you recognize him?"

"Why, yes. It's Miles Crofton. He's checking back over his scorecard, as though he can't get it right. Knowing Crofton, I'd think he was stalling -"

"He is stalling," interposed Cranston, as the traffic light went green and he spurred the car ahead. "That's his cue that all is clear."

In Rockwood, as with most river towns, they came to one main street that slanted toward the Hudson, with several side streets, turnoffs and parking spaces where cars might be waiting unnoticed, their drivers even watching from elsewhere. Outside an old store, half a dozen riding horses were hitched to an old rail and a square-faced man in light tan riding jeans and jacket was shortening a stirrup on a saddle.

Harry recognized another agent, Cliff Marsland, as he turned away and strolled into the country store. Obviously, Cliff had already checked in at Wade's dude ranch and had ridden over to Rockwood with a party from there. He, too, was giving the "all clear" sign. So Cranston swung the car into a side road that followed a roundabout course to a bridge across the railroad and came back along the river to Rockwood Landing, where power boats of assorted sizes were moored at a small but fancy marina.

The latest arrival was the cabin cruiser that had sped up past Castle Point. It had been making a wide turn across the river when Cranston and Harry had gone back into the castle with Palford. By the time they had made their polite departure and had driven back up to Rockwood and then down here, the cruiser had easily returned to this berth at Rockwood Landing.

There was no sign of the rotund Mr. Mann, who must have gone into the marina restaurant, so Cranston went on board the cruiser as if he owned it. It turned out that he actually did, for the two-man crew was expecting him and took the orders he gave. Soon the speedy craft was cleaving its way southward on the choppy bosom of the broad Hudson with Cranston and Harry on the stern deck. Dead ahead, Twin Peaks Bridge formed an enlarging cross line where the river narrowed between the looming headlands.

"Chances are that Mann is meeting the Shallicks at the marina," commented Cranston. "Anyway, I've left him my car. A fair exchange for a cabin cruiser."

So far, three of The Shadow's agents were functioning quite smoothly: Rutledge Mann, Miles Crofton and Cliff Marsland. But Harry Vincent had a fourth in mind as he asked:

"What about Clyde Burke? Do you think that he has landed his big story? Has Frisbee cracked the Austin case?"

Cranston smilingly countered with a query of his own:

"I suppose you mean, has Frisbee's dragnet closed in by now and gathered up Don Morland, somewhere along the Appalachian Trail?"

Harry nodded. Cranston retained his smile.

"You answer that, Vincent. In this case, you are the expert."

"I? How?"

"Because you are the one person - except for the clerk at the inn who talked to Don Morland, the only witness who had any contact with him. You have met up with many criminals, Vincent, and some very hardy ones. Did Morland strike you as that type?"

"Well, no. I took him to be just what he said he was, a hiker who wanted to pick up the Appalachian Trail."

"And those postcards that he wrote, did he leave them purposely on the desk, just so that you could read them?"

"If he did," decided Harry, "he was pretty dumb to mail them down in Vanderkill, after saying that he was hiking on to Colonial Town."

"That's the crux of the whole thing," analyzed Cranston. "Vanderkill. Let's assume that Morland really wanted to go to Vanderkill and that he either wanted to murder Austin, or that he was - and is - a killer at heart, with robbery the motive that triggered his action. What would be his first step?"

"Why, just what Frisbee said - or was it Winstead?" Harry pondered. "It doesn't matter who said it. Don's big idea was to hitch a ride in a car down to Vanderkill."

"Exactly, so why should he begin by passing up such a chance?"

"Passing it up? How? When?"

"Again, Vincent, you are the man who should know. Why didn't he ask if you were going to Vanderkill? You had already given him a lift from the cloverleaf to the inn. If he wanted a hitch, you were his first choice."

"Then how," asked Harry, "does Don Morland figure in all this?"

"Much as you did, Vincent. He found out something - or people thought he did - and he became a victim of some sort. Look up there."

Harry looked up. On the left, he saw Hudson View Tavern, the sunlight still bathing the high eminence where it stood. Twin Peaks Bridge now loomed just ahead, between the brooding brows that flanked it. Cranston traced it with a pointing finger against the clear blue sky beyond.

"Morland walked across that bridge," stated Cranston, "and continued on the Trail up to the top of the ridge and inland along it." Cranston ran his finger eastward, indicating the course. "Somehow, somewhere, something happened. Don Morland just disappeared, by acting normally, though he may have made some slight change in plan that brought him to the brink of trouble. You follow me?"

"I follow you," nodded Harry. "What's more, I followed Morland, across the bridge, at least."

"And there you turned south along Thunder Cliff Highway." The cruiser was under the bridge now and speeding fast enough for Cranston to point out the spots as they passed. "You stopped there on the overlook and used the binoculars. That may have been your big mistake. You were already under suspicion and you could have been seen from there."

By "there" Cranston referred to the lurking spot of the murder truck, toward which he now pointed. Though it was beyond the hairpin turn, which they were now passing, it commanded a view of the overlook, which jutted out much farther than the turn and at a different angle. From down below, the whole setup was quite plain. Harry's comment came grimly:

"So you think Don Morland stopped somewhere - and vanished."

"Very probably, because you have vanished too, Vincent, though you keep forgetting it. If we had cut in close to shore, we might have wrecked this cruiser on a submerged automobile that nobody else even

knows about."

A big freighter was coming up the river, as it had that evening when Harry had scanned the Hudson from the overlook. The cruiser veered wide of it and they saw seamen leaning idly along the rail. The sailors gave a wave, which the crew of the cruiser returned; then, they were rolling in the wash from the freighter, which added new turbulence to the already choppy water.

"Of course," commented Cranston, "my theory regarding Morland has already been put to the test. If Frisbee's dragnet has picked Don up, we shall know that he hasn't disappeared."

"Maybe we could get a radio report on that right now!"

"No, Frisbee would have kept it off the air, particularly because Morland might be carrying a portable radio. I doubt that even the evening television reports will carry it. We'll read about it in the early edition of the Classic, which was promised the full story. So let's relax."

Relax they did, studying the new scenes that the Hudson offered. They passed the widespread walls of Sing Sing Prison, with the guards on duty in the watchtowers, a huge stronghold that made Folly Castle seem dwarfish in comparison. Next, they were passing under the big bridge at Tarrytown, where the New York Throughway crossed the wide expanse of river known as the Tappan Zee. It was dark when the bright lights of the George Washington Bridge came into sight, with lines of headlights twinkling across its two-level roadways. They passed numerous small craft, tugboats with and without barges, and big ships moored in the Hudson.

Finally, they docked and took a cab into the heart of Manhattan, with Cranston remarking as they rode along:

"I'll drop you off at the Hotel Metrolite, Vincent. You can get in touch with me at the Cobalt Club, but it probably won't be any use. If Frisbee has gotten anywhere, Weston will be hopping around the club, hoping to find me and ask my advice. Otherwise, we can call it a night. I'll reach you later through Burbank."

In the lobby of the Metrolite, Harry bought an early edition of the Classic. Clyde Burke had gotten his story, even though Frisbee had not gotten his man. The headlines screamed: **NEW RIDDLE IN AUSTIN MURDER - MYSTERY HIKER VANISHES ON MOUNTAIN TRAIL.**

The story was told in Burke's best style. Harry could picture Clyde beating it out on the typewriter, as he had often written stories in Harry's room here at the Hotel Metrolite. Harry was able to discount any exaggerations, though they were comparatively few. The account related how hundreds of enforcement men had moved in secretly and simultaneously blanketed the Appalachian Trail from key points only a few miles apart.

They had bagged a few dozen hikers along the sixty-mile stretch, but Don Morland was not one, nor did any of them recall seeing another hiker answering his description. The prime suspect in the Austin murder had disappeared; now Frisbee was ordering an all-out manhunt elsewhere and expressing confidence that it would soon succeed.

Harry wondered. What if the hunt should be for Harry Vincent, instead of Donald Morland, with the only clue a car that Frisbee didn't even know was at the bottom of the Hudson. That would be tough enough for Frisbee, but Don's case was still tougher, for it offered no clue at all.

So Cranston had said, and like The Shadow, he should know!

ELEVEN

THREE MEN were seated in a quiet corner of the Cobalt Club.

One was Police Commissioner Ralph Weston, brisk of manner, his square-jawed face firm and decisive. Another was Lamont Cranston, whose hawkish expression was one of complete complacency, as he masked his keen gaze with half-closed eyelids.

The third was a special visitor named Eric Delka. He was a man with sharp features and ruddy complexion, whose somewhat wiry build made him appear younger than his actual years. A crime investigator of long experience, Delka had been a member of the famous C.I.D. Ghost Squad at Scotland Yard until the British government had lent him to Interpol as a trouble shooter.

Weston had formally introduced Cranston to Delka, only to learn that they already knew each other. They had met in England when Delka was tracking down international criminals for Scotland Yard. Weston was quite pleased to learn of their former acquaintance, for the international phase was bulging big in the unsolved Austin murder, even though the public knew nothing of that completely hidden angle.

Eric Delka, just in by plane from London, was briefing himself right now on all that the public did know. Three days had passed since the quickie manhunt for Don Morland had drawn a blank and his disappearance was more of a mystery than ever. All Eastern states had been alerted to watch for the hiker and police flyers had gone out with Don's picture and fingerprints, carrying the statement: Wanted for Murder.

That had produced more news stories, particularly under the byline of Clyde Burke. Weston was showing clips of these to Delka, who was studying the newspaper maps of the area north of Vanderkill, with X's marking all the key spots. Photographs supplemented these and Delka dropped his noncommittal air to express admiration for the thorough coverage that New York newsmen had given the case. But when Weston asked his opinion of Frisbee's investigation, Delka was dubious.

"This chap Frisbee has it down too pat, as you poker players would say. Look at this map, with its dotted line, showing how Morland hitch-hiked, as you term it, down the highway to the side road, where he walked the rest of the way to Austin's. From there, it keeps on up Pleasant Valley Road a little way and then it ends in a question mark. Why?"

"Because Morland couldn't have gone any farther," returned Weston, "or he would have gotten back on the Trail and they would have found him there."

"So why didn't Frisbee start searching around Austin's in the first place?" demanded Delka, "I'll tell you why. He was sure he would find Morland on that Trail. When he didn't, he'd gone back to a spot where Morland may never even have been. That makes Frisbee doubly wrong. Why doesn't he drop this business of Don Morland and accuse somebody else?"

"He can't accuse anyone else," put in Cranston. "He hasn't enough against Mark Wade or Rick Langdon. It is fortunate, in a way, that Morland walked into the thing. Since Wade and Rick are merely witnesses, at least so far, they have been talking rather freely to reporters, which has let out most of the known facts in the case."

"I see what you mean," nodded Delka. "They wouldn't be so chipper, those two chaps, if they were classed as actual suspects." He gave his listener a direct stare; then added: "But that is how I would list them both, in my book."

"Suppose," said Weston, "that you give us your analysis, Delka."

"Gladly. We'll go by what the newspaper calls the 'Murder Time Table.' Winstead left at seven o'clock and joined the dinner party at seven-forty-five. That clears him and the Shallicks, too; they were so close behind him. But either Wade or Langdon, by their own admissions, could have stalled around, as you would put it, until after seven-fifteen."

"So that if one or the other told a false story about the time he left," declared Weston, "you have only to find out which is right and you will know which is wrong - or vice versa."

Delka shook his head. "I wouldn't say that."

"And why not?" parried Weston. "If both are right, both must be innocent. If one is the killer, they can't both be right."

"But both could be wrong."

"What - but what - just how" - Weston managed to curb his stammer - "oh, I see what you mean. They could have been working together! Yet, they practically accused each other, Wade and Langdon, when Frisbee grilled them."

"An old trick, so neither could be pinned down. Just a case of passing the ball back and forth until the blame was finally shifted on to this hiker chap, Don Morland. Where were those two blighters prior to the murder?"

"Wade was talking to Austin," recalled Weston, "when Langdon broke in on them. Where Rick was before that, I don't know."

"Perhaps he knows what happened to Morland. Anyway, when the pair left, Wade might have watched the road out front, while Langdon was inside murdering Austin; or vice versa, as you would put it, Commissioner." Delka turned abruptly to Cranston and asked, "What do you think?"

"I think your theory is far better than Frisbee's," replied Cranston, "but I can't picture Wade and Rick as a team. They were pitching accusations back and forth too hard for that, each trying to get the other in too deep to crawl out. But either one is a stronger murder suspect than Morland. What I like about your theory, Delka, is that Morland's disappearance fits with those that have already occurred up in the highlands."

"Except for one thing," put in Weston. "Every important person who has presumably disappeared has been supplanted by a supposed impostor who is operating in his place. With Don Morland, the disappearance has been total."

"And for two good reasons," expressed Cranston. "First, Morland is not important; second, it has made him the top suspect in the Austin murder, which has so confused the case that nobody is getting to the bigger facts behind it."

"You are right, Cranston," agreed Weston, grimly. "Gregg Austin contacted me because he knew something about those abductions -"

"And the disappearance of Don Morland," picked up Cranston, "proves that the machinery exists to drop someone out of sight at a moment's notice. So let's have some more data on these cases that you've mentioned."

Weston unzipped a portfolio and brought out a sheaf of papers. Among them was a sheet that listed all the cases in brief. The commissioner kept that for reference as he proceeded.

"All these cases," he declared, "involve individuals holding responsible positions with delegations to the United Nations. Some of them are comparatively small, while others are quite important, but in many instances, they are from certain countries where tensions exist and the government may be overthrown; in short, nations where subversive influences could be furthered by anyone in a key position.

"So for both security reasons and international policy, these cases are referred to by code letters only, with the names of the countries disguised, if used at all. Only a few have been proved, so it would be highly embarrassing" - Weston referred to the list - "if Mr. J X X of Paragonia should turn out to be the real Mr. J X X of the Paragonian delegation to the United Nations."

"And the evidence," queried Cranston, "is strictly a matter of individual behavior in every case?"

"Except for the proven few. The impostors who were actually discovered were small-fry who managed to get away and find asylum in dictator-run countries. The men whose places they took have not been found. That was what started the Interpol investigation. They began checking with other delegations for questionable cases where imposture might be involved.

"They came up with quite a few. Some showed signs of amnesia, others failed to recognize certain people, or displayed peculiarities in speech or action. Still more" - Weston was checking the list again - "simply voted wrong in committee sessions or were careless in handling confidential data. In checking all these, Interpol reports showed that in every instance, these behavior changes occurred after each individual had made a trip to the Hudson highlands, indicating that the switch had been made in that area."

"Are you sure it was always a switch?" put in Delka. "Couldn't some of them have been brainwash cases?"

"Hardly in America," returned Weston, "though I am beginning to think that anything can happen here." His lips went grim beneath his mustache, then relaxed. "What I mean, specifically, is that none of these U.N. people were missing long enough for anyone to do a real good brainwash on them." He turned to Cranston. "You are familiar with hypnotism, yoga exercises and the ways of Oriental mystics. How long would it take in a place like Tibet?"

"If you are thinking of our mutual friend Rufus Palford," returned Cranston, "I would say it may have taken a few years."

"Rufus Palford?" echoed Weston. "He was a member of this club once. When did we see him last, Cranston?"

"Only a few nights ago, but now he looks and talks like this." Cranston tilted his head, opened his lips in a wide-curving smile and delivered birdlike blinks in a style more realistic than even Winstead's clever imitation. His voice was perfectly Palford's as he cackled, "Commissioner Weston, of all people! Fancy you this far up the Hudson! Don't tell me -"

"That pest!" broke in Weston, with a half-bellow that shook the sanctimonious silence of the Cobalt Club. "I remember, now. Why, he almost broke up the surprise that we were springing on that dinner party at Hudson View Tavern. So that was Old Pal Palford, as we used to call him. Wasn't he lost on some expedition in the Himalaya Mountains?"

"He was," nodded Cranston. "Possibly it was the altitude of Mount Everest that changed him, rather than the solitude of Tibet. But let's get back to these U.N. cases, Commissioner. We'll consider them as straight impostures."

Weston thumbed through some of the notes, to check them with his list. Eric Delka, meanwhile, studied Lamont Cranston with new, but unexpressed admiration. He recalled, now, that Cranston had specialized in such quick-changes as the one he had just demonstrated. He also remembered that Cranston had the sort of intuition that Delka regarded as more essential to efficient crime detection than a mile-high stack of certified reports.

Reports were what Weston was reading now. So while Delka listened closely, he watched Cranston quite as intently.

Weston reeled them off:

"Case histories of ZRZ and ZWZ, both from Tyrolia. Mutual interest, ski jumping. They went to the winter carnival at Twin Peaks, the big event of the season, attended by thousands of ski fans. They became separated from the rest of the party and each returned a few hours later, claiming he had been looking for the other. Each exhibited traces of amnesia which have lessened since."

Weston laid that aside and went on with the next:

"Case history of V2X, from a new but unspecified African republic. He was invited on a fishing trip, with special permits for fishing in state reservoirs. Took shelter in a nearby lodge during a thunderstorm that knocked out electric lights and telephone connections, which were not restored until the next day. Acted strangely for the next few weeks. This was attributed to the excitement of the storm.

"Another lesser member of a newly arrived African delegation. Took a special trip to top of Uncas Mountain on the cable railway the week after it opened for the new season. He came back with a glowing report of the view of the Hudson Valley. But a checkup with the railway company showed that service had been temporarily suspended due to mechanical trouble with the cable."

Weston then cited four instances of U.N. personnel who had been invited to play golf at courses in the Hudson region. In each instance, this had been a few days or so before their behavior had begun to puzzle the fellow members of their delegations. The reports named the country clubs in question and Cranston made a mental note to check their membership lists and see if Rick Langdon belonged to any of them.

Other U.N. delegates, some from long-established countries, had gone in for horseback riding. Weston read off half a dozen of those, stressing that they, too, had visited the highland area, where horses were obtainable at various places. Again, the reports did not specify the Palomino Dude Ranch, owned and operated by Mark Wade. Cranston decided to check that slight detail, too.

In such cases, Weston added, odd behavior by the U.N. delegates had been attributed to falls from horses. Cranston did not go along with that. All were good horsemen and the dude ranch steeds were too docile and well-trained for that.

"Five delegates from various Indonesian nations," continued Weston, "took a camping trip with three members of a newly formed Caribbean country in Green Hills Park, west of Twin Peaks. All made friends with other campers and became separated. They returned to New York together in their two cars, but five of the eight showed mental lapses afterward."

Weston laid the list aside, remarking that there were twice as many more, but that all followed the pattern that he had cited and that some were highly doubtful. He looked toward Cranston for comment - which Cranston supplied.

"About the only thing this U.N. crowd didn't do," he said, "was to go hiking along the Appalachian Trail.

Maybe it was booby trapped for the next crop of visiting delegates, when Don Morland stumbled into it instead."

Weston gave a slow, approving nod, but Delka caught a knowing glance from Cranston that told the irony behind it. Unquestionably, this was an international scheme of mass kidnaping, with subtle substitution of individuals as its mask. Whoever the master mind was, the Appalachian Trail probably had not figured in his plans. But when Don Morland came along, the mesh was ready for him, which showed how extensive these operations were.

From his portfolio, Weston brought out sets of photographs bearing code names ZRZ, ZWZ, V2X and a dozen more of individuals whose cases he had detailed. Each set contained two or more photos marked "before" and "after" so that they could be compared to see how much the faces had changed. Not only was there very little difference; often, it was impossible to tell them apart.

While Weston was commenting on that fact, Eric Delka had his moment of triumph. From a portfolio much bulkier than Weston's, he brought out coded files and photographs, each bearing the added letter "a" or "b" as he announced:

"We have been tracing your leads in the countries where these missing persons come from. We have checked the early careers of all who are now connected with the U.N. as well as the backgrounds of others who could have supplanted them. Take this example: Cases W7V-A and W7V-B, from the buffer state of Nagoba. The key letter 'A' stands for the genuine W7V and 'B' is the impostor."

One old photo showed a class at a mission school, with circles around the heads of two boys. Blowups of those pictures were marked "A" and "B," showing that they closely resembled each other. From his file, Delka brought later pictures in which A's face grew harder, while B's became smug. Then came one showing A's face battered and scarcely recognizable, peering through a barred door.

"That," stated Delka, checking the caption of the picture, "was when W7V-A was jailed for fighting for the Right."

"You mean for the freedom of Nagoba?" queried Weston.

"In a sense, yes," replied Delka, "although at that time, the Nagobans were free of everybody except themselves. I meant the Right as opposed to the Left. W7V-A led an uprising of the Rightists, while his counterpart, W7V-B was in command of the Leftist forces that suppressed it."

Delka showed a picture of W7V-B in full dress uniform, his fat face a study in arrogance. But later photos changed all that. As A's party staged successful coups, his face became fuller and stronger, while B's turned worried and haggard, until each looked as the other had before.

"By that time," stated Delka, "W7V-A had become Assistant Finance Minister of Nagoba, while W7V-B had fled the country."

Delka reached to Weston's files and took out two pictures, both marked W7V. After studying their captions, he nodded and declared:

"Here is W7V when he came to New York two years ago on special assignment to the United Nations. The other picture shows him after he came back from a hunting trip up the Hudson several months ago. These belong in different files. The earlier picture is W7V-A and the later one is in W7V-B."

"We never guessed that such a clever switch was being made!" exclaimed Weston. "Why, this 'B' was groomed for years to replace 'A.' It's fantastic!"

"Not at all," returned Delka, bluntly. "It's commonplace, the usual thing in this instance. For every coded name in your file, Commissioner, I can supply an 'A' and 'B' from mine, with their case histories from boyhood up."

"But what about fingerprints, handwriting and birthmarks?"

"Such records have been lost, destroyed, misplaced, or faked outright. In short, they have been switched like the persons themselves. No move is made until that is done. Hence fingerprints and such are the worst things we can go by."

While Weston pondered, glumly, Cranston inserted a comment:

"Do you see, Commissioner, how this ties in with the Austin murder? It fits with my claim that Don Morland has been framed. Having his fingerprints show up on a memo pad in Austin's office, where he may never have been, could not be difficult for anyone who has planted wrong sets in the U.N. files."

"And that," said Delka, "is why I went along with your theory, Mr. Cranston."

"But if this crowd is so clever at ringing in impostors," argued Weston, "how do you explain all those amnesia cases and other little slip-ups?"

"For one thing," analyzed Cranston, "they couldn't do a perfect job. Delka's files show that to be true. After each abduction, they would have to let the impostor act a little oddly, while he was getting adjusted to his new part."

"I'll go along with that," nodded Weston. "Anything else?"

"Definitely," rejoined Cranston. "Delka's investigation shows that this international cabal is playing for the future. When these impostors return to their own countries, they will be key figures in the very governments that they are working to destroy."

"Wouldn't that be too risky?" objected Weston. "Some of these impostors would certainly be recognized by relatives or close friends of the men they have supplanted."

"That has all been planned for," assured Cranston. "Such cases can be handled by switching the genuine persons back where they belong. Instead of 'B' for 'A,' it would be 'A' for 'B' - which is much easier."

"But wouldn't these abducted people give the game away?" demanded Weston. "After they were safely back in their homelands?"

"Not if they have been brainwashed in the meantime," declared Cranston, "to such degree that they would forget what had happened to them and could also be kept under continued control, possibly through post-hypnosis. But for a while, they would act queerly, as they had when they were abducted. This time, however, no amount of investigation could prove them to be anyone but themselves."

"You've hit it, Cranston!" enthused Delka. "We've wondered what happened to the A-group who were abducted and we've been hoping they might be too valuable to be liquidated. Now, you've given us the answers - one, two, three - like a bowler pulling the hat trick in a cricket match. So there's a real chance that we can reclaim the whole lot, with none of them too badly off!"

Despite Delka's enthusiasm, Weston stayed strictly glum.

"Until we crack the Austin case," the commissioner reminded, "there is nothing we can do except sit back helplessly while more switches are being made."

"I wouldn't say that," observed Cranston. "Now that we know how the game is being played, we can anticipate it, by singling out the next person who is due to be abducted."

"But how could we be sure of that?" queried Weston.

"We can't be. But time is short for the abduction ring. If the Austin case is cracked, they will have to lay low for awhile. So if they want to snatch more key personnel, they will have to snap up any chance they can."

"Do you know of such an opportunity, Cranston?"

"Yes. Here is a schedule of functions sponsored by the U.N." Cranston handed a printed list to Weston. "You will note that Kart Barka, Director of ULDA, is to be the commencement speaker at Birchwood College, two days from now."

"ULDA," repeated Weston. "That's a new organization, isn't it?"

"Yes, the Universal Language Development Agency," defined Cranston. "It is not part of the United Nations organization, but it may be eventually, which is all the more reason for totalitarian groups to take it over as soon as they can. They could do that by switching in an impostor for Kart Barka, right now."

"And Birchwood is not too far from Vanderkill," recalled Weston, "so it would be the usual setup. It would be excellent if we could keep him under surveillance from the time he leaves New York City until he returns here. Do you happen to know this man Barka, Cranston?"

"Yes, we are well acquainted, though I haven't seen him lately."

"Then we'll give you the official go ahead," decided Weston, with a look at Delka who nodded his approval. "You arrange the contact and handle it your own way, keeping it as hush-hush as possible, rather than show our hand."

Lamont Cranston wore a calm smile as he left the Cobalt Club and his immobile lips phrased a softly whispered laugh that was lost amid the louder sound of passing traffic. As The Shadow, he was sure that he had already caught up with the crime ring operating in the highlands. Now, he was one step ahead.

TWELVE

KART BARKA reached across his desk, took the envelope marked "Confidential" and ripped it open with a quick thrust of his long forefinger. He brought out the note from the envelope, read it, crumpled it and thrust it deep in his coat pocket. Barka studied the clean-cut, frank-faced man on the other side of the desk; then spoke in smoothly purred English, without a trace of accent:

"Tell me more about this, Mr. Vincent. I am interested."

Harry Vincent proceeded. He stated that as a friend of Lamont Cranston, he had been delegated as bearer of Commissioner Weston's official note, because Cranston himself might be marked by spies in the ULDA office. Pointedly, Harry recited facts that Cranston had given him that morning, covering the machinations of the international abduction ring and the substitutions that they had perpetrated.

While Harry talked, he had a good chance to study Barka, who sat back with folded arms and listened intently. In appearance, Barka was both distinguished and dynamic. His bronze face had a long jaw and rugged chin; and his heavy brow projected above his eyes, which looked dark chiefly because they were deep-set. His high forehead and wide temples marked him as a keen thinker, as well as a man of action.

When Barka raised one long-fingered hand and waved an interruption, Harry thought he was going to ask a question. Instead, Barka sat back and waited in silence while a demure, dark-haired girl in a simple dark blue office dress entered and laid some papers on the desk. Barka signed them with a flourish, talked pleasantly to the girl in a language that Harry recognized as Italian; then dismissed her with another wave.

That was only one of a dozen such interruptions. Soon, Harry was able to detect the faint note of a buzzer, which was on Barka's side of the desk, for always, Barka waved just before a girl entered. Always, too, he spoke in a different language, for the girls were all of different nationalities. Harry recognized a few, like Spanish and French by the languages themselves; others he guessed from the appearance of the girls - as Japanese, Hindustani, Indonesian - while a few baffled him. Always, Harry came back to his own theme, in English, and Barka resumed his listening in that same sphinxlike pose.

Often, in his varied career, Harry had sold a bill of goods to a reluctant customer, or had won an argument with someone who didn't want to be convinced; but never had he met with such a stony-faced reception as this. Barka's reactions were as difficult to guess as his nationality, which had Harry puzzled. The interruptions weren't to blame; if anything, they eased Harry's tension, giving him breathers between the cases that he cited. Finally, Harry finished his theme:

"That's about it, Mr. Barka. All these abductions have been listed by Commissioner Weston and certified by Inspector Delka. There are many other cases, but these have the strongest evidence to support them."

"What you term evidence," spoke Barka, his gaze as cold as his tone, "is sheer guesswork, hearsay and speculation, the synthetic ingredients from which mercenary crime investigators concoct the false solutions which they use as a panacea to soothe the deluded public. Are you aware of that?"

"Quite," acknowledged Harry, who had been warned that Barka would be a hard man to convince. "But it is a definite fact that all the persons under investigation did act oddly and show traces of amnesia after those trips."

"And why not?" demanded Barka, his tone still icy. "Anyone involved in the maelstrom of the United Nations is subject to tensions and frustrations that are unmatched elsewhere. A brief respite from that whirlpool of conflicting interests leaves a person in such a mental daze that he naturally finds it difficult to adapt himself to its churning madness when he is precipitated back into its seething undercurrents. A departure of his behavior patterns from the accepted norm is the logical consequence."

Barka rose from his chair, lifting his hand for Harry to do the same, as Harry did. His cold tone showing marked disdain, Barka added:

"In the American vernacular, Mr. Vincent, anyone mixed up in such a mess would be an oddball to begin with, so these creeps have simply shown themselves up for the goofy characters that they really are." He finished with a wave toward the door. "So my only intelligent answer to your idiotic outpouring would be to order you summarily from this office."

Harry turned to go, only to receive a friendly clap on the back from Barka, who was smiling genuinely at Harry's surprise when he faced about.

"Instead, I want you to stay." Barka's purr was sincere. "Because of one factor that outweighs all else. That is our common trust in the keen intuition and uncanny foresight of our mutual friend, Lamont Cranston."

Harry Vincent looked relieved.

"Cranston is right," asserted Barka. "I am a logical target for any totalitarian cabal, because they prefer to keep nations disunited, in order to play one against another. What is more, I could easily be impersonated by any clever imitator, as I have a receptive nature; otherwise, I would not be able to absorb so many languages and their moods. Also, spies could be common in this office as the hundred or more persons working here have been chosen because of their interest in linguistics, nothing more."

"I can understand that," nodded Harry, "after seeing you switch from one language to another with each different girl."

"Out of that vast babel," continued Barka, "I am trying to formulate the basic elements of a universal language; not an artificial type like Volapuk, Esperanto, Ro and others, but a truly natural tongue. Many of my assistants speak three, four or five languages fluently; when they reach six, I put them to work on Unival, the universal language, which is already far beyond the formative state. Soon, it will be introduced in educational institutions and I am going to make that the excuse for your visit here. Then you can look about the place, Vincent, and do some counterespionage, as Cranston wants."

Barka called in a solemn-faced Turkish secretary named Kemal, who was one of his most trusted aides. Barka told Kemal that Mr. Vincent was a member of an educational board in a Western state, who was here to look into the coordinated method of language study recommended by ULDA. So Kemal took Harry into a big outer office and introduced him to several different girls, all attired in dark blue dresses like those whom Harry had seen earlier; and all of various nationalities.

Each explained how words of different languages could be interchanged, combined or compared for similarity and finally pinpointed into a common form of verbal expression. After hearing them reel off examples, Harry was taken to workers higher up, who sat in little cubicles and compiled coordinated charts. He finally reached some department heads, who answered whatever questions he had listed as he went along.

All the personnel were strong for Kart Barka, as was evident from the way they quoted him at every opportunity, so when Barka came to the outer office to see how he was making out, Harry remarked:

"I have all the needed information, Mr. Barka, so far as the coordination method is concerned, but I feel that I should know something of your personal experience and background, to tell the state board."

"Why, of course." Barka turned to Kemal. "Show Mr. Vincent my personal files in full. I shall see you later, Mr. Vincent."

Kemal brought the files to a corner desk, where Harry made notes from news reports, magazine accounts and circulars put out by ULDA. As Harry hoped, the file contained an envelope marked "Private Records" and he particularly ignored it until a buzzer sounded, summoning Kemal to Barka's own office. That was Harry's cue to slide the envelope beneath some papers and draw its contents from it. Not for an instant did he look about to see if eyes were watching from any of the forty-odd desks where the blue-clad girls had Harry in plain sight.

Among the private data was an identification card with the name Kart Barka and bearing impressions of his fingerprints. Harry studied it while pretending to read a magazine article and the notes he made referred to the prints. Harry was familiar enough with various types of loops, whorls and arches to give them a fairly detailed classification. Harry also found a full sheet of Barka's handwriting and gave it a brief analysis, even copying a few salient letters like M's and T's.

Barka's buzzer sounded elsewhere and Harry hurried the sheets into the envelope. When Kemal returned, Harry was finishing his runup of the ordinary biographical articles. On the way to Barka's office, Harry noted three girls whom he was sure had been watching him, for they were now too deeply buried

in their work. One exception was a Chinese girl near the back of the row. Apparently she had been checking the girls who had watched Harry, for her glance now roved swiftly from one to another.

Cranston had timed this visit for late afternoon so that Barka would have an excuse to leave with Harry, which he did, telling Kemal that they were going to dinner together to discuss the prospects of Unival in a school curriculum. In the elevator, Barka suggested several restaurants and Harry chose the Headliner Cafe, where he had often gone with Cranston. They arrived there early enough to obtain a choice, secluded booth, where Harry promptly undertoned:

"I'm sure this booth isn't bugged and nobody can look in on us. So give me some samples of your fingerprints -" Harry brought out a pad for the purpose - "and half a dozen lines of your handwriting."

Barka complied. Harry studied the results and shook his head.

"Not yours, Mr. Barka. At least they don't tally with your files."

"You mean they have been switched already?" Barka's deep eyes showed a sharp glint as he raised his heavy brows. Then, as Harry nodded, Barka added, "So they will be coming for me next. Have you any instructions for such a case?"

"Only that I am supposed to keep you in constant sight as much as possible until Commissioner Weston can pick you up in his car tomorrow and take you out to Birchwood College."

"You can stay at my apartment. I often put up guests overnight."

"Good. Will anyone else be up there?"

"Yes. Maddox, my valet. He is capable and absolutely trustworthy."

"And how safe is the apartment itself?"

"Very safe. You will realize that when you see it."

It was drizzling slightly as they left the Headliner, but a cab popped into sight before the door man could even call it. As they rode along, Harry said:

"So I'll stay tonight and tomorrow, the commissioner will take you to Birchwood -"

"That's right," interposed Barka. "Now, let's not worry."

"But since they've already switched your identification card," exclaimed Harry, "and those samples of your handwriting as well -"

"Forget it, Vincent!" Though forceful, Barka's interrupting tone retained its purr. "Let's discuss something else. This drizzle, how long will it last? Until tomorrow, do you think?"

They switched to the weather and when they alighted at the imposing Midvale Towers, where Barka lived, Barka confided in Harry:

"I didn't want that cab driver to overhear what you were saying, Vincent. Fortunately, you didn't say enough for him to realize what it was about."

Fortunately, Harry had said enough. The cabby happened to be Moe Shrevnitz, known as "Shrevvy" to his friends, who included all of The Shadow's agents, since Shrevvy himself was one of them. If Shrevvy simply repeated Harry's words over the phone to Burbank, The Shadow would soon know.

Barka's apartment proved safe indeed. It was at the penthouse level, the only top floor apartment served by the elevator, which had an operator, instead of being the automatic type. As they reached the penthouse, Barka told the operator:

"No one is to go up or down from this floor without my permission. When you go off duty, tell that to the night man. Do you understand?"

The operator nodded that he understood and from his manner, Harry could tell that Barka's orders were usually followed. Once in the penthouse Barka gave the same instructions to his valet, Maddox, who looked capable and reliable, as Barka had said. They went into a small, secluded library, where Barka was about to turn on the television, when he gestured to a chess board, which was fully set up on a table and asked:

"Do you play chess, Vincent?"

Harry nodded that he did, so Barka turned off the TV and they began a chess game, to find themselves well matched. Maddox served them drinks for a while, but about midnight, when the score stood two games to two, Barka brought the drinks himself and remarked:

"I've let Maddox turn in, but if the phone rings, he will answer it, as it's right outside his door. By the way, if postage stamps interest you, here is a new issue that just came from the United Nations."

Barka started to rip open an envelope with his right forefinger, as he had at the office but this time, he gave a wince of pain.

"A paper cut," he said, nursing his finger. "Slight, but rather mean." He tossed Harry the envelope. "You can look over the stamps while I find some iodine."

Harry studied the new U.N. set and Barka rummaged in a medicine cabinet, where he found an iodine bottle and dabbed his finger thoroughly. He put away the bottle and sat down at the table, as he said:

"Win, lose or stalemate, this will be the final game."

The game progressed nicely to a point where Barka had the choice of castling with his king's rook or threatening one of Harry's knights with his queen. As Barka pondered over his choice, he lifted his head and asked:

"Was that the house phone? Why didn't Maddox call me?"

Barka kept listening, unable to concentrate on the board, so he finally went out into the hallway. Harry became absorbed in planning his own next move; then looked up to see Barka coming back in the doorway.

"Just my imagination," purred Barka. "There wasn't anybody there. Let's see now, Vincent, have you made your move?"

"My last move, yes," reminded Harry. "I took a pawn with my knight." He indicated the move that he had made. "It's your move now -"

"And I'll use the queen to threaten your knight. So watch out!"

Harry didn't watch out. He merely watched. He saw Barka's right hand move the queen, with fingers well extended. Harry's gaze froze.

There was no iodine stain on Barka's forefinger!

Between dinner, drinks, chess and postage stamps, Harry might have been a bit befuddled, but not that much. He was slow, though, as he looked up and slower still as he came to his feet and thrust his hands forward too late to meet the attack that was already on its way.

Two hands caught Harry's throat; their fingers found the spots they wanted and they pressed hard and deep. This man who wasn't Barka but who looked like him was skilled in the nerve pressure trick. Harry's senses went numb and he blacked out entirely as his attacker let him slump to the floor.

The false Barka went out through the hallway, stepping across another senseless body, which happened to be Barka's. The door of Maddox's room was closed and the impostor listened there a moment; then picked up the house phone and spoke to the desk clerk in Barka's soft-purred tone:

"All evening I have been expecting two men to come and pack some books that I am sending to my office. If they don't come shortly -"

"They are here now, Mr. Barka, with the boxes. I'll send them up."

Half an hour later, two large, squarish boxes were carried out the service entrance of the Midvale Towers. They were packed in the back of a small truck, with nobody in sight to see it go. That departure was noticed, though, by someone who was out of sight. A furtive figure darted from an opposite doorway and scooted to a darkened alley where a cab was parked, the driver dozing at the wheel. The furtive man pounded the cabby's shoulder:

"Wake up, Shrevvy! It's me - Hawkeye - so get going!"

Shrevvy wakened and shot the cab out to the street where he turned right, the direction indicated by a one way arrow as Hawkeye told him:

"Keep after that truck."

The truck was two blocks away by then, but it was the only one on the street at this hour. It led them to a North River pier, where Shrevvy waited while Hawkeye stole forward and watched the truckers lower two square boxes into a waiting tugboat, which started out toward the vague hulk of a ship that loomed gigantic in the drizzly mist.

As the tug swung alongside, the gathering fog enshrouded all. A whistle blared from the river's blackness and by then, Hawkeye was back in Shrevvy's cab which was driving from the scene.

Again, word was on its way to The Shadow.

THIRTEEN

THERE WAS suppressed excitement at the ULDA office when the personnel watched Kart Barka stroll in as usual the next morning. The quick glance that he gave toward the rows of desks indicated that he sensed something in the air. Once in his private office, he saw the reason why. His desk was decked with flowers and heaped with notes of congratulations from the staff.

This was the gala day when Barka was to speak at Birchwood College, one of the outstanding educational institutions of the East. Everyone was wishing him well, so Kart Barka - the false Barka, of course - stepped from his office and bowed to a round of enthusiastic applause. Then he addressed them briefly in Unival, the new language that they all understood.

That was the smartest thing the impostor could have done. Unival was so precise, so uniform, that speaking in that language was like reciting a lesson from an old-fashioned copy book. So the pretender was able to pose as the real Kart Barka before the entire staff, with no one any wiser.

The impostor followed up that initial triumph with the usual routine of signing papers and speaking to the girls in their own languages. Time being short, he was brief, saying so little that no one doubted that he was the real Barka. He even fooled Kemal, who was standing by.

"Commissioner Weston of the New York Police is due at any moment," announced Kemal. "He is taking you out to Birchwood in his official car."

"But why should the city police be taking me there?"

"Because another escort was arranged to meet you out there," explained Kemal, "so they invited the Police Commissioner to bring you that far."

The fake Barka repressed a smile. In his pocket he had Weston's crumpled letter explaining all this. Now, there was a last interruption as a Chinese girl entered with papers for Barka to sign; the same Chinese girl that Harry had noted watching the other girls in the office, the day before. About to leave, she placed a printed card in the false Barka's hand and undertoned in Chinese:

"This is very important. You will realize that when you read it."

The fake Barka studied the card and nodded. He knew enough Chinese to talk briefly to the girl, but he could not read the language. Impressed with the probable importance of the message, he purred to Kemal:

"Send for a man who reads Chinese, I want his opinion on this."

Kemal phoned for a Chinese interpreter, who arrived within ten minutes. When Barka showed him the card and said, "Read it," the interpreter laughed.

"A Chinese 'Get Well' card," he stated. "It says something that goes like, 'Since you are sick - sick - sick, please get well quick - quick - quick.' Very, very, very funny."

It wasn't funny to the fake Barka. He dismissed the interpreter, turned to Kemal and demanded: "What is that Chinese girl's name?"

"Ming Dwan," replied Kemal. "She has been here several months."

"I want her held for security reasons. Don't let her leave here."

It was too late for that. Ming Dwan had left her desk and had gone into a rest room, where she peeled off her drab dark blue dress, turning it inside out so that it became a bright red shirtmaker consisting of combination skirt and blouse. Ming Dwan then covered her face with a special cold cream, which she rubbed away with a sweep of her hands, watching in a mirror as she did.

The transformation was remarkable. Ming Dwan's Oriental makeup was carried away completely, her eyes losing their almond shape and becoming fully rounded. She quickly back-combed her hair, giving it a fluffy appearance and slipped into her red attire. As an American girl, completely different from Ming Dwan, she went out through the office.

Unsuppressed excitement reigned there now. Girls were being told to stay at their desks until cleared, while the few visitors were hurriedly ushered out, rather than create more commotion. Among them was

an American girl in red, who was waved through by the security guards because they were looking for a Chinese girl in blue, though they didn't say so.

When the girl in the red dress reached the lobby, she went into a phone booth and dialed a number. A quiet voice responded:

"Burbank speaking."

"Myra Reldon, reporting -"

The supposed Ming Dwan, now Myra Reldon, was an agent of The Shadow, giving the inside version of how the false Kart Barka had tricked himself. At the finish of Myra's account, Burbank spoke methodically:

"Report received. Contact later for instructions."

Up in the ULDA office, the pretended Kart Barka was receiving word that the commissioner's car had arrived, enabling him to shift things on to Kemal and duck from under the chaos he had precipitated. Soon he was riding up the F.D.R. Highway with Commissioner Weston and two other men; Inspector Joe Cardona of the New York Police, whom Weston had brought along as a liaison man; and Eric Delka, on special assignment to Interpol, as chief investigator of the international abduction ring.

As the official limousine crossed the Triborough Bridge and swung on to the Major Deegan Expressway, leading to the New York Throughway, Weston outlined the day's schedule. It called for them to deliver Kart Barka at Birchwood College and pick him up later for dinner at the Hudson View Tavern, where Barka's old friend Lamont Cranston would join them. That reminded Weston of something else.

"This man Vincent, who contacted you yesterday," remarked Weston. "Didn't he intend to stay with you constantly until we met you today?"

"Definitely," acknowledged the false Barka, "But we learned that they were holding a celebration in my honor at the office, so Vincent felt that he would be too conspicuous there. He said he would get in touch with us later."

That settled it where Weston was concerned; but the reaction to Harry's absence was quite different, elsewhere.

In a black-walled room lighted only with a dim bluish glow, The Shadow was waiting to receive reports from his agents. It was here, in this hidden sanctum, that he planned his campaigns against crime.

On the third finger of The Shadow's left hand shone a large, strange gem, resplendent with a fiery sparkle that was ever-changing in the bluish light. That stone was The Shadow's token, a rare, unmatched fire-opal called a girasol that reflected the hypnotic glow of its owner's burning eyes.

A tiny light glimmered from the dark beyond the bluish ray. The Shadow pressed a hidden switch and a quiet voice came over an amplifier:

"Burbank speaking."

"Report."

"Report from Myra Reldon. Suspected substitution of false Kart Barka fully confirmed. Details follow -"

The Shadow's fingers were sorting typed reports under the dim light as he listened to the details of how

Myra Reldon, alias Ming Dwan, had tricked the fake Barka. Burbank's recital brought a whispered laugh from The Shadow, but its tone was grim and mirthless. This confirmed the disappearance of Harry Vincent, as indicated in the typed sheets that The Shadow had spread before him.

These were copies of reports that Burbank had received the previous evening from both Myra and Shrevvy. There had been none from Harry, which was logical, as he had known that the situation was well-covered and had actually relayed his own report through Shrevvy. But a later report from Shrevvy, regarding two boxes that had been ferried by tugboat to a ship in the North River, was ominous indeed.

It was possible that the false Barka had already been in control when Harry visited the ULDA office; that the fingerprints and handwriting sample found by Harry were those of the real Barka, left there just to make a meddler like Harry think it was the other way about. In that case, the two boxes spotted by Hawkeye could have contained the bodies of Harry Vincent and some other unfortunate interloper whom the false Barka had been anxious to be rid of. If so, those bodies by now were far out to sea and probably a few miles deep.

So instructions had been given Myra to put the impostor to the test. The real Kart Barka had been reading all the Chinese documents that Ming Dwan brought to his desk during the daily routine. He would have smiled at the "gag" card which she handed him as "something important" and it wouldn't have been out of line on a day when the office was having fun. Of course, the fake Barka might have read it and laughed, too, which would have made some other test necessary.

But the faker had missed out and thereby had given away the fact that the switch had taken place in Barka's penthouse. So The Shadow was now quite sure that both Barka and Harry had been shipped to that unhappy haven where earlier victims were being kept prisoner. Bad though that might be, it meant life - and with it hope. The abduction ring would probably regard it as good policy to keep Harry handy, so he could be put back into circulation long enough to lull his friends.

The cabal was speeding up its tempo, so The Shadow planned to do the same. He had outwaited the unwieldy outfit to make it show more of its facets and its followers, giving its coils that many more points of vulnerability; but now was the time to strike the sinuous organization in the quickest way possible.

The Shadow had already jumped the gun in Barka's case. He had long figured Kart Barka to be a key target for abduction; and he had also known of the long-scheduled commencement speech at Birchwood College. That was why The Shadow had slipped Shanghai-born Myra Reldon into the ULDA office as Ming Dwan, a part that she had often played. The foe had countered by snatching Barka before he went to Birchwood; and had switched in his double for that excursion. That bold, unexpected move was a challenge that The Shadow intended to meet with lightning tactics of his own.

Deft hands brought more reports into the light, the girasol scintillating in vivid, varied hues each time The Shadow perused needed data. Though he had only the benefit of a few days instead of the week or more he wanted, the interim had produced substantial gains, enough to bring a soft laugh from unseen lips.

A report from Cliff Marsland covered Mark Wade like one of the ranch owner's horse blankets spread over a bronco. Cliff had kept what amounted to a daybook on the ever-smiling Wade. The season had been getting underway when Cliff arrived at the Palomino Dude Ranch and from that moment on Wade had been so peppered with problems, decisions and appointments that it hadn't been possible for him to go anywhere without someone tagging along or bothering him.

Wade's last night off had been when he visited Gregg Austin and continued on to the dinner at the Hudson View. That was enough to maintain his status as a full-fledged suspect in the Austin murder case. But it did not allow for any follow-up activities on Wade's part. Cliff was watching for any such break in

the routine, but had so far seen none. He had even listed Wade's coming commitments to show how full his schedule was.

Tonight, Wade was to preside over a gala barbecue featuring a hillbilly orchestra singing cowboy ballads. Wade personally was to call the square dances and give out prizes to the winners. This was one affair where Wade simply could not duck out or hundred or more witnesses would know.

Methodically, The Shadow called Burbank and told him:

"Confirm Marsland's report on Wade's activities tonight. Instruct Marsland to stand by for later contact and to be on immediate call."

Next, The Shadow studied a report from Miles Crofton, which covered Rick Langdon. That checkup had been strictly intermittent, for the report sheets showed that Rick was so much on the go, so wayward in his ways, that it would have taken a full crew of The Shadow's agents to keep up with him.

However, Miles had found it easy to backtrack on Rick, whose whole life was a whirl of social activity. Rick was constantly at beach parties, golf tournaments, tennis matches, country club dances and bridge parties, flinging his light weight so fancily that nobody could forget him or overlook him. Where girl friends were concerned, Rick was playing the field, if only to rouse Irene's jealousy, should word get back to her. Such flagrant self-advertising on Rick's part was highly helpful in keeping tabs on him.

Tonight, by a happy chance, Rick was really tied up at a meeting of the membership committee of the Barchester Country Club. Rick had proposed two new members and with all the buzz about the Austin case, they were apt to be blackballed if Rick did not show up. Miles was to play golf with Rick during the afternoon, but they would be through early, as Rick was having dinner with the committee.

Again, The Shadow signaled Burbank. This time he stated:

"Confirm Crofton's report on Langdon's meeting tonight. Instruct Crofton to stand by for later contact and to be on immediate call."

There was also a routine report from Rutledge Mann, saying that the Shallicks had invited him to a dinner party at the Hudson View and asking if he should accept. The Shadow decided in the affirmative and gave added instructions for Mann to invite Myra Reldon to the party. He also told Burbank to relay instructions to Myra, telling her to accept the invitation.

The final report was from Clyde Burke, saying that Frisbee and Winstead were meeting Commissioner Weston at the Hudson View. Clyde was to be there in his capacity of a newspaper reporter, though whether he was to sit in on any discussion was still doubtful. The Shadow already knew about all that, so no instructions were needed for Clyde. The bluish light clicked off, a whispered laugh stirred the blackened walls of the sanctum.

Moments later, complete silence marked The Shadow's departure.

Afternoon was waning as Lamont Cranston sped northward in a sleek, dark blue sports car that he had bought to replace the old one lost in the river. He hoped to turn the new car over to Harry Vincent, but how soon was a question. Near Vanderkill, Cranston stopped to make the phone calls that Cliff Marsland and Miles Crofton expected. That done, Cranston continued on his way.

The overcast sky had darkened heavily when the sleek car swung from Northern Turnpike and hit the dirt road of Ragged Gap Road, where it climbed the grade until it neared the Norvel farm. There, the car nosed into a turnout beneath an embankment, where it was partly concealed by the overhanging brush.

The figure that emerged was The Shadow's. In the uncertain dusk, he followed an elusive, circling route to the farmhouse that was almost lost against the blackness of the high ridge beyond the gorge. That, however, was all the more helpful to The Shadow's approach, for the lights in the ground floor windows served him as a beacon. A rising wind swept down from the hillside, wavering The Shadow's cloak, as he crossed the last stretch to the house; then, his vague figure merged with the gloom of the house front.

The Shadow opened the door enough to look in. One of the Norvel brothers was at the desk on the far side of the room, going over what were probably account books. A gust of wind came suddenly as The Shadow twisted through the door and quickly closed it behind him. The man at the desk felt the sudden breeze, became alert and caught the click of the closing latch, just before The Shadow faded to the one darkened corner of the entry.

The man turned about, shifting so that the light from the desk shone directly on the door, but that only increased the contrasting darkness of the corner. The Shadow, motionless, remained totally unseen, but the man's own face was plainly shown. It was that of the younger Norvel brother, Hank. In a gruff, anxious tone, he queried:

"Lou! Is that you?"

There was no response. Hank reached for a shotgun that stood beside the desk. The outside wind, coming in new gusts, rattled the door latch slightly. Hank laughed nervously, laid the gun aside and turned back to the desk. Simultaneously, a cloaked figure emerged from the corner by the door and moved steadily toward the desk. Encroaching blackness enveloped Hank's stooped figure as he began adding figures in an account book. Then, blackness crept across the page itself.

That was when Hank saw it, moments too late. The Shadow's action was doubly purposeful. He had drawn an automatic from his cloak and was pointing the weapon straight toward Hank, the darkness cast by the swing of The Shadow's hand announcing its approach. Now, as Hank swung about, he stared straight into a pair of burning eyes that glared from beneath the brim of a slouch hat. The intruder's other features were hidden by the upturned collar of a black cloak and a gloved hand that thrust the .45 forward.

Hank's own right hand, starting for the shotgun, halted and raised slowly upward like his left, as his hoarse voice became a choke:

"Who - Who are you?"

"A ghost," responded The Shadow in a sepulchral tone, "a ghost from the bottom of the gorge, here to haunt you in the name of vengeance!"

FOURTEEN

TO HANK NORVEL, this was a flashback to the night when he and his brother Lou had blasted too freely with their shotguns, only to have murder on their hands. Hank had been brooding over that ever since, for he still thought that he had seen a body crumpled on the rocks of Ragged Creek, despite Lou's argument to the contrary. The Shadow was playing on Hank's weakness now.

"We weren't meaning to kill you," began Hank. "We were only -"

He halted, realizing that this was no ghost. The cold steel of the automatic muzzle was very real; and the eyes behind it were equally cold, even though they had the glow of burning coals.

"So you're still alive," gulped Hank. "That means we didn't kill you, Lou and I didn't." His tone turned

bolder. "So what are you here for?"

"I'm here to ask you about another murder, Hank," declared The Shadow, in a steady tone. "Where were you the night Gregg Austin died?"

"Why, right here - this house - with Lou - you ask him."

"Always with Lou." The Shadow's tone was mocking, now. "How far do you think you can alibi each other, you and your brother? What would you say if I told you that you were seen in Vanderkill, the night of the Austin murder?"

It was a shot in the dark, though The Shadow had good reason for it; and he scored a direct hit. As before, Hank betrayed himself by his eagerness to beg the question.

"That wasn't until after -"

"Until after Austin was murdered?" put in The Shadow. "Or until after his body was found?" Then, as Hank still winced from the gun muzzle, The Shadow queried: "Or until after you finished the job you did up here?"

Hank was really troubled, the way this cloaked inquisitor was catching him on one point after another. Then came The Shadow's clincher:

"Yes, you and your brother will lie to save each other; but there are others who will lie to save their own hides at the expense of yours."

Hank had slumped to the desk and was leaning across the account book. The Shadow pushed him back in his chair and slapped the book shut, as though closing Hank's account. His right hand still threatening with its gun, The Shadow brought out some photographs with his left hand and spread them on the desk. He prodded the back of Hank's neck with the gun muzzle and told him:

"Look at those photos, Hank. The truck with the big winch - the close-up of its tires - their tread marks in the dirt of your back road" - The Shadow was pointing to each picture as he spoke - "and here's a car you will recognize - now, this close-up of its tires - and here are the girders the truck brought for that new shed you're building - and here are more tire marks, you'll recognize the treads if you look closely."

Look closely Hank did, with eyes that were now hopeless. As The Shadow relaxed the pressure of his gun muzzle, Hank twisted his neck around and turned a fear-fraught face up toward those burning eyes.

"Somebody has talked," Hank admitted. "You've got us, that's for sure. But we weren't out to hurt nobody, Lou and me. We only did what we were told."

"Then do as I tell you now," ordered The Shadow. "For your own good - and Lou's." He thrust a pad and pencil in front of Hank. "Just put down everything as you remember it. If you need help, tell me. We'll work it out together."

The Shadow watched as Hank wrote; and his whispered tone was encouraging when Hank faltered or looked up as though asking what next. Occasionally, the rising wind rattled the door as before, until just when Hank had finished signing his name to what was virtually a confession, the clatter stopped short and a harsh voice ordered:

"Up with them, bo! I mean you in the black hat and coat. Turn around and drop that gun on the way. I've got you covered - and how!"

The Shadow knew the voice: Lou Norvel's. So, of course, did Hank. The Shadow came about as ordered, to see Lou framed in the doorway, his shotgun leveled, while at the same time, Hank made a dive for his own shotgun. The Shadow's hands came up fast, as Lou wanted; and his right hand let the automatic drop, as ordered, while his left hand performed the trickiest of all The Shadow's practiced moves. On the "up" it whipped a second .45 from its holster beneath the cloak.

Right then, the Norvel brothers should have gotten it. Even The Shadow couldn't have risked facing shotgun blasts at such close range. His only "out" was to drop Lou with one well-placed shot; then wheel and clip Hank with the next. Fortunately for the Norvels, there was rapid intervention.

From outside the door, two men pounced on Lou and hauled him backward, his shotgun blasting a few eaves from the roof. With that, The Shadow swung on Hank in time to crack the younger brother's wrist with his automatic, before Hank could bring his shotgun into play. Those outsiders were Cliff Marsland and Miles Crofton. While they suppressed Lou, The Shadow settled Hank with a hard punch.

"Hold them until further contact."

With that word to his two-man team, The Shadow was on his way, leaving the Norvel brothers under full control. Cliff Marsland who had sped here in his riding clothes, looked like a Western lawman as he kept the brothers covered with one of their own shotguns. Miles Crofton, still in his golfing togs, read the misspelled statement that Hank had scrawled.

"It's lucky the chief didn't crack Hank's wrist until after he signed this," declared Miles, "because it just about cracks the Austin case."

Back in his new car, The Shadow had become Lamont Cranston and was testing the blue streak on the twists and curves of Thunder Cliff Highway. The overcast had completely cleared in the extreme west, dispelling the premature dusk that The Shadow had encountered at the Norvel farm, much to his satisfaction. Now, in a last bright burst of daylight, the billowy clouds far to the east were perfecting the golden glory of the sunset from the Catskills, going a silver lining one better.

Far below, the Hudson was catching the sky's crimson hues and transmuting them to purple through the blending of its own deep blue. From a dock on the opposite shore, a dayliner was starting down the river to New York City, its deck loaded with homeward-bound excursionists. Far upstream, a freighter was plodding northward beyond Castle Point, a hazy blotch in the wispy remnants of the fog that had been gradually lifting all during the day.

Cranston's destination was the Hudson View Tavern, which lived up to its name on this gorgeous evening, but since Cranston had already seen the view, he went inside. There, he found Weston's party in one of the smaller and more exclusive dining rooms and he joined them for dinner. With the group were Fred Frisbee and Peter Winstead. Off through a doorway, Cranston saw Clyde Burke sitting at a table in a larger room, hoping for news but getting none.

That wasn't surprising. About the only story of the day was the splendid commencement address that Kart Barka had delivered to the Birchwood students, using nine different languages, including Unival and answering questions in as many as fifteen. The faker, whatever his real name, deserved credit; but Cranston soon pegged him for what he was, an old-time vaudeville showman from the European stage who probably specialized in a rapid memory act. Such performers could acquire a sufficient smattering of many subjects, including languages, to hold their own in almost any company.

Due to the presence of Frisbee and Winstead, the discussion chiefly centered on the Austin murder. Both glumly admitted that the investigation was getting nowhere. Frisbee, of course, blamed it on the total disappearance of Don Morland, whom he classed as the only real suspect as yet uncovered; while

Winstead added that the immense amount of detail in Austin's private affairs and the extent of his varied interests made it difficult to garner data there. Winstead made his point when he gestured to a dinner party in another inner room that opened from this one. There, he indicated Irene Austin chatting happily with her husband, Craig Shallick.

"I arranged that reconciliation," stated Winstead drily, "and it is holding up, simply because Irene still doesn't know how she stands with her uncle's estate."

Later, Craig Shallick happened to stop by and Winstead introduced him to the group. Eager to aid an investigation which apparently had an international aspect because of Delka's status with Interpol, Shallick delivered a dissertation on the late Gregg Austin.

"Austin had some big plans," assured Shallick. "He talked to me about getting members of my family to invest in foreign holdings, particularly in countries where most money men were afraid to go, because the governments were too shaky. But Austin insisted that he could fix that. He acted as though there was a big conspiracy that could be broken up just like that" - Shallick gave a finger snap - "but instead, Gregg Austin went just like that himself."

"If Austin was so sure of all he said," commented Commissioner Weston, narrowly, "why didn't he put his own money into such investments?"

"He intended to," replied Shallick. "Irene says he was gouging people for every last dollar to put it all in some pet scheme. He wanted to borrow all that my relatives would lend him, at high interest in return for letting them in on the same opportunities."

"Did Austin name the countries involved?" asked Delka.

"No, that was his big secret," returned Shallick. "With half the world all mixed up, you couldn't guess which ones he planned to play. That was his trump card."

After Shallick went back to his party, Winstead made the comment:

"Austin always talked about buying foreign countries, but only where everything was solid and well-stabilized. He had funds earmarked for that purpose."

"Probably his cover-up," decided Delka. "He was going to put it in the shaky countries instead, the ones where the abduction ring has planted its substitutes." The Interpol investigator tapped the fat portfolio he carried. "The whole crowd whose names, photographs and records I have right here."

Delka looked to others for comment and received it from Inspector Joe Cardona, a swarthy, stocky man who had so far maintained steady silence.

"Once Austin put money in those shaky countries," stated Cardona, "he could have blown the whistle on that bunch of phonies. If they were grabbed, the countries would be shaky no longer, for the right guys would be in full control."

"If you mean the Rights," put in Cranston, drily, "you are right. Anyway, we are now sure that Austin was mixed in this scheme of international imposture or knew enough to double-cross it. So they disposed of him."

"And that," reminded Frisbee, dourly, "leaves us just where we have been all along, still looking for the man who murdered Gregg Austin."

An odd touch followed, though few of those present appreciated it. Rutledge Mann came by with Myra

Reldon, his date of the evening, and Lamont Cranston introduced them to the supposed Kart Barka. The imposter never recognized Myra as the elusive Ming Dwan, the Chinese girl who had so mysteriously slipped from the ULDA security cordon.

Rufus Palford came along about then and stopped to shake hands with Commissioner Weston. With tilted head and wide, moon-man smile, Palford went into a somewhat maudlin hurrah over the good old days at the Cobalt Club. Cranston, meanwhile, put a few side words to Rutledge Mann:

"Get Palford out of our hair and keep him out."

Mann did that, in a placid yet persuasive way. He coaxed Palford into joining the Shallick party, so they went into the other dining room together, with Myra. By then dinner was about over and Frisbee abruptly announced that he was going back to his office to do some work there.

That threatened an immediate plan that The Shadow had in mind, but he countered it by going to the phone booth beyond the cocktail lounge. There, though still in Cranston's guise, he used The Shadow's whispered tone to contact Burbank and have him make two immediate calls.

The first was to Frisbee's office, where Burbank was to give an anonymous tip for Frisbee to go to the Norvel farm. He then was to call the farm itself, telling Cliff and Miles to leave the brothers bound and gagged with Hank's statement on the desk; then to depart and proceed with other duties.

Frisbee was outside and starting for his car, when Cranston flagged him on the porch. In a convincing tone, Cranston congratulated Frisbee on his remarkable handling of the Austin case. He added that he preferred to voice this commendation privately, rather than have persons think it was mere flattery. Nor did he care to rouse the jealousy of his good friend Commissioner Weston by extolling another crime investigator in his presence.

To Frisbee, that soft-soap had the taste of honey and he could have swallowed it all night; but Cranston didn't keep him that long. When Sumner, the proprietor, came hurrying out to tell Frisbee that his office was calling him, Cranston wound up the eulogy. But in adding a few glowing compliments, Cranston continued on indoors with Frisbee, as far as the telephone booth. Then easing to a corner table, he awaited results.

Frisbee must have argued back and forth with the office help, for he took a long while to assure himself that this was no hoax. Then, things happened as Cranston had anticipated. Frisbee practically sprang from the booth and dashed out to his car, off on a hot tip that he hoped would make him famous, which was exactly what it was to do.

All that had taken time and by then Weston's party was leaving its table. Winstead happened to remark that he was going to Austin's house to pick up some more papers; and overhearing that, the false Barka turned to Delka, with the suggestion:

"Why don't you go along with Winstead and see if any of Austin's records tally with yours?"

"A good idea," agreed Delka. "Which way did Winstead go?"

"Out this way, I think. He said his car was parked out back."

The fake Barka steered Delka through a passage behind a stairway and even opened the door for him, because Delka was burdened with his heavy portfolio. With a gesture that began as a parting wave, the skilled impostor shot both hands to Delka's neck and gave him the swift nerve pressure treatment. Caught totally off guard, Delka sagged to the ground outdoors. Two men who looked like extra parking

attendants immediately pounced forward, gathered him up, portfolio and all, and packed him in a light panel truck that bore the name Vanderkill Pastry Shop on its side.

The fake Barka, meanwhile, was returning through the passage. He reached the front porch and was looking about when Cardona came from the door and asked:

"Where is Delka? Didn't he come out with you?"

"He said something about going along with Winstead," was the reply. "Down to Austin's to go over some papers."

Winstead's car was pulling out of the driveway at that moment, so Cardona took the statement at face value. He went back to report to Weston. The fake Barka watched until the pastry truck swung around from the back parking lot and continued to the highway; then he turned and followed Cardona indoors.

Inside, Cranston had gone into the dining room and was chatting casually with Clyde Burke at the latter's table. The crowd had thinned so Cranston's low tone could not be heard as he asked:

"Where are the Commissioner and the rest of his party?"

"Shallick invited them to join his crowd," replied Clyde, "so that's where most of them went, though I couldn't see them all. I know that Frisbee went out and I think Winstead did also."

"And Barka?"

"He definitely went in to join Shallick's party."

Cranston rose and as he did, he slipped Clyde a sealed envelope with the admonition:

"Stay close and see that Commissioner Weston gets this and reads it before he leaves. It has to do with Barka, who is an impostor. Mann already knows, but he may not have a chance to tell Weston. Be ready for further instructions, as this case may be due for a fast break."

With that, Lamont Cranston was gone, though where, Clyde could not guess. Clyde had finished his dinner, so he strolled out to the porch for fresh air. While he was there, old Rufus Palford came shambling from the tavern in his doddering style, smiling in his stilted way to Sumner, as the proprietor called for his car. Evidently Palford had remembered that it was getting past his bedtime. He sank back in the rear seat as the car pulled away, as though he were already falling asleep.

Things seemed very quiet along the Hudson after that. Yet Cranston had told Clyde that a break was due; and Clyde Burke - like all of The Shadow's agents - was sure that his chief must know!

FIFTEEN

HARRY VINCENT came slowly from his daze as hands shook him heavily. He finally opened his eyes and looked about to find himself in the oddest room he could have imagined. It was like a cell, yet with fairly ample proportions, with square walls and a low, domed ceiling that looked oddly like two curved arches forming a letter X.

The two men who shook him looked familiar, but Harry couldn't remember when or where he had last seen them. That wasn't surprising, for Harry had come through an ordeal that might have lasted only hours, yet could have persisted for days or even weeks, as far as he knew. It had begun during a chess game in Barka's penthouse; that much Harry could recall. Barka had been about to make a move when everything had gone black for Harry.

The fact that he couldn't remember what took place just before was not unusual. Such things happened when a person got slugged or suffered some form of sudden shock. Harry had undergone such experiences before. Hence, though he didn't know it, all remembrance of the false Barka had been blotted from his mind. Harry's neck hurt, though, and his knowledge of jujitsu tactics made him realize that he must have been hit by a nerve treatment and a mean one.

On waking, Harry had found himself on a boat - and a big one. He knew that from the bunk in which he had been lying and the sound of the fog horns outside. The boat had been moored for some time, it seemed, then it had slowly gotten underway and Harry could remember a slow plodding trip; but only at intervals. A man dressed like a ship's steward had given him some milk to drink, telling him it would make him feel better, which it did, because it had doped him. Later, Harry had run into the same result with a bowl of soup.

Then he had been awakened and helped groggily to a hatchway, where he had been taken from the ship's side onto a dock and down some steps, all in the midst of a vague gray light and the wash of waves that again seemed familiar. Now, after what could be a few hours rest - or a few days - he was being revived again in this place he didn't recognize.

From the cell, Harry was conducted into a narrow passageway, with a cell much like his own across the way. From it, another pair of familiar-looking captors brought Kart Barka, who appeared much the worse for wear. Indeed, judging by Barka's bleary-eyed appearance and the sympathetic look the linguist gave him, Harry decided that he must be just about as beaten down himself. Going along the passage they passed still more cells, all large and domed, yet low in height.

Unlike most jails, which had long corridors, this one was a great crisscross of many passages, all narrow, like a huge griddle. The cells, though airy, were windowless, many of them being an interior type. As they turned one corner, a babble of voices reached them. Harry couldn't understand a word he heard, but Barka seemed to recognize all of it, for as they began passing cells, he paused before each one and spoke words of encouragement.

In every instance, the occupant came rushing to the cell door and poured an excited story into Barka's ear, always in a different language. The guards were indulgent; apparently, they had been told to treat Barka and Harry decently; nor did they have anything against the prisoners. From that, Harry's mind, though still dulled, began to add things up.

These must be the men connected with U.N. delegations who had been kidnaped so summarily and secretly by the international ring, only to be supplanted by well-trained substitutes. Cranston had shown Harry photos of these supposed victims before he had gone to the ULDA office and Harry had studied them closely at the time. Now, their faces were coming back to him, but in a shocking way.

All were men with rugged and adventurous backgrounds, who had engaged in guerilla warfare or worked with the underground when their countries had been threatened by totalitarian invasion. From their photos, Harry had expected them to be the sort that could stand up under any strain. Yet they seemed nervous, almost hysterical and the hands that rattled at the cell doors were thin, while the faces behind them were gaunt.

Though Barka had not seen the photos, he recognized the pitiable condition of the prisoners and was quick to learn the reason; for he gained it from the men themselves. As he passed between each cell he managed to explain it to Harry.

"They are mentally starved," Barka told Harry. "They have wanted to talk to someone in their own language. They have been purposely separated so that it was impossible. They all say that I am the first

person they have been able to talk to as they wanted."

Harry suggested that Barka ask them if they had talked to anyone at all. He did and came back with the same answer on every case: yes, they have, but always with someone who tries to dominate them, forcing them to repeat things they do not like. They keep hearing voices, some of them say, whenever they wake up at night.

"They are being brainwashed," rejoined Harry, "exactly as we were afraid would happen. We'd better prepare ourselves for the worst. This is worse than solitary confinement, being put with people who try to talk to you, but can't."

"That won't apply in my case," reminded Barka, "because there is not a language that I cannot speak to some degree and I think that with my knowledge of linguistics I could begin to understand any dialect I heard. But they will probably find some other way to soften me for the brainwash treatment."

By now, the guards were moving Harry and Barka along. The babble faded as they turned another corner and came to a cell where Harry recognized the man inside, both from his face and his costume. Harry exclaimed:

"Don Morland!"

The hiker didn't recognize Harry, which wasn't surprising, for they had met only briefly, while Harry had seen pictures of Don later. But Don was glad to hear his own name and he was eager, too, to get out of his cell. But the guards left him there, moving Barka and Harry on until they reached a fan-shaped stairway that took them up from this strange grillwork of underground passages, which Harry felt sure must cover an acre or more of ground. They reached a doorway, which opened into a paneled reception hall, where the guards closed the door behind them. Harry had seen that place by daylight; now by the glow from its glittering, glass-decorated chandeliers, he recognized it again and exclaimed:

"Folly Castle!"

Barka spoke quizzically as they walked along.

"You know where we are then, Vincent?"

"Yes, up the Hudson above Vanderkill. This used to be an old government arsenal and those must be the old storage vaults where the ammunition was once kept. Rufus Palford, who owns the castle now, told us they were all walled off, but either he lied or didn't know.

"Wait until you see Palford," Harry told Barka grimly. "He's a real brainwash job. If you mention Tibet he starts to fall all apart, because that's where they gave it to him. Otherwise, he's just a drooling old droop who just about knows his way around. These are his servants" - Harry gestured to the guards - "that's why I half recognized them. But you can bet right now they are answering to someone lots bigger and smarter than Palford!"

That was immediately evident when they were conducted into the room beyond, where a man was seated at a table busily writing as he heard them coming. At a wave of his hands, the guards told Harry and Barka to sit down. The man at the desk arose and turned toward them. Barka studied him blankly and again it was Harry who provided the recognition:

"Peter Winstead!"

The master plotter gave a bow of acknowledgment. Kart Barka, who had read about the Austin murder, recognized Winstead's name. Barka showed surprise, too, for the one man apparently clear of all

suspicion in the case was Winstead. From his chuckle, Winstead was apparently pleased at the reaction he had produced, but his tone was not friendly. Rather, it carried an ugly gloat.

"You two are fortunate," declared Winstead. "More so than you realize. You, Barka, are a man we can really use. We need someone to talk to the prisoners, one after another, to study their comparative reactions. Your knowledge of languages will be helpful. Hitherto, we have had to use too many different persons.

"As for you, Vincent, we are sure you can answer some questions that have bothered us regarding the investigations into the abductions; and you may be valuable as a hostage. I am only sorry that we did not detain you the other day, when you were here with your friend Cranston. At that time we were more anxious to give the place a clean bill of health."

Well could Harry realize that. He knew now why Cranston had avoided Palford's early invitations. Only when he had stationed his outside agents to watch Castle Island had he gone there. He must have gotten the "all clear" before he entered; and they were waiting outside afterward to make sure he was not followed.

Harry's reflections ended as Palford came through the doorway that led in from the courtyard. Back from dinner at the Hudson View, the proxy master of Folly Castle was shambling along in his usual style. He gave Winstead his customary moon-faced smile. Then, seeing Harry, Palford really went into his cackly act.

"One chicken come home to roost," he gloated. "Good work, Winstead. When will you bring home another?"

"If you mean Cranston," returned Winstead, "any time he meddles in our business we will be ready for him. But we already have another chicken - and a fat one." He waved to the guards. "Bring him in."

The guards returned with Eric Delka. They slumped the Interpol investigator into a chair, where his chin sank forward. Winstead, confident that he was in full control, dismissed the guards with another wave. Then, Winstead told Harry and Barka:

"This is Eric Delka. He received the same treatment you did and from the same man, because we wanted this."

By "this" Winstead meant Delka's portfolio which he lifted from the floor beside him and planted on the table.

"You made a trifling mistake last night, Barka," continued Winstead. "You left instructions that only you were to go up or down in the elevator. When the night man came on duty, he didn't know whether you were down or up. Neither did your servant, Maddox, who had gone to sleep early as you usually allow him to.

"So your double, a very clever impersonator named Varno, simply entered the lobby, phoned Maddox and told him in your voice that he was coming up. The elevator operator took Varno up and Maddox let him in. Then Varno told Maddox to go back to sleep."

"So that's why I heard the house phone," groaned Barka, "and stupidly, I stayed at the chess board. When I did go out, this man Varno was ready for me!"

"And I should have been ready for him," added Harry, "if I hadn't been thinking out my next move."

"Just one 'if' after another," laughed Winstead, in his gloating way. "But you must admit that Varno is

clever."

"And you are clever too, Winstead," put in Palford, with a chuckle. "Why don't you tell them how you fooled everyone all along?"

"I'll come to that," interposed Winstead, "but right now -"

"Right now is when you should tell them" - Palford's head was tilting and his smile was widening - "because they happen to be our guests and they have a right to know."

"There is a time and a place for everything, Palford -"

"And this is the time and the place!" Palford's cackle had reached its highest pitch. "Why, you're a good impersonator yourself, Winstead. I've heard you have even imitated me - like this -"

Palford was on his feet now, sidling crablike to the table, as he grinned up at Winstead in his moonish way.

"So tell them how you fooled everyone, Winstead - everyone - right up until now -"

Palford's right hand was against the front of his open jacket; now, with a flip of his wrist, he brought it upward with an automatic in his fist. As the muzzle pointed straight between Winstead's eyes, Palford's body came up, too, his voice changing with his posture:

"Right up until now." With that firm tone, Palford shed all traces of his doddering self. "Or perhaps I should tell them, Winstead." Now the figure was erect, the voice calm, impressive in its steadiness. "Because I happen to know the answers, too."

Harry Vincent didn't doubt that. Now the transformation was complete. Of all the impersonations so far staged, this was the best. Winstead had been fooled by a man who could imitate Palford far better than Winstead ever had.

The master impersonator was Lamont Cranston!

SIXTEEN

IF EVER the tables had been turned upon a master plotter in the very center of his web and under circumstances which he thought were foolproof, that man was Peter Winstead. The stolid expression faded from his square-jawed face and his eyes, usually sharp and calculating, showed flashes of alarm that became a moody glare of deep chagrin.

Winstead's hands, resting on the table top, were an even better index to the reactions that he was unable to conceal. At first, they started nervous moves, seeking to press a buzzer or bring a gun from a drawer; but Cranston's own gun stopped those gestures short. Then, Winstead's fists went tight, as though he hoped to gain a grip on himself and play a waiting game.

Such was Winstead's pose as Cranston began a cool analysis that unraveled the tangled threads of crime.

"Gregg Austin was murdered for one sufficient reason," stated Cranston. "He knew too much about the international abduction ring, which - wisely or unwisely - confined its operations to the Hudson highlands."

Usually, men who classed themselves as master criminals were either challenging or utterly subdued when

confronted with evidence of their guilt. Winstead was different. He was critical and in a sneering way. His tone showed it as he demanded:

"What do you mean - wisely or unwisely?"

"Wisely, because it was efficient," defined Cranston, "utilizing the same setting, the same mechanism, the same crew. Unwisely, because it involved too many factors, within too limited a sphere."

"Too bad we didn't meet you earlier, Cranston," observed Winstead. "We could have used you on our team."

"Austin knew this territory so well," Cranston continued, "that he must have seen the links between Folly Castle, the Norvel Farm, the Vanderkill Hauling Company and many other local enterprises. So it was obvious that his murder was well planned. The very circumstances indicated that someone present at his house that evening was responsible.

"Only two persons were almost certainly in the clear: Craig Shallick and his wife Irene, because they had been separated too long to have plotted it together on such short notice. That left three real suspects; you, Winstead, for one; Wade and Langdon, the others."

Winstead, self-admittedly the mastermind of the abduction ring, now had little reason to deny the murder charge, but he scoffed it down, probably as a point of pride. Sarcastically he asked:

"And how could I have been the last to leave Austin's and the first to reach the Hudson View?"

"By taking that short cut over Ragged Gap Road. You left at seven o'clock, as you said. But as soon as you were past the row of cedars separating Austin's side yard from the quarry, you backed in beyond them, turned out your lights and waited."

Cranston's words rang home to Harry Vincent, who remembered how he and his chief had parked in that very spot when The Shadow had gone in to have a look at Austin's. But Winstead simply sat back, his fists still clenched, meeting Cranston's gaze with a scoffing smile.

"You saw the Shallicks go by," accused Cranston. "You clocked the minutes until ten had passed. Then you saw Langdon's car go by, followed a minute or so later by Mr. Wade's. You still had ten minutes leeway until seven-thirty. But it didn't take you more than three or four to murder Austin.

"You cut through a handy opening in the cedar hedge, into Austin's office by the side, where you circled the desk like this." On his feet, Cranston was copying the killer's exact moves. "You came around in front, brought your gun into play like this -"

Cranston was dramatic, playing Winstead's own part as the killer; but Winstead, trapped into filling Austin's role as victim, stole the show despite himself. He quailed, letting his hands come up before his frantic face as he gasped:

"Don't - don't shoot!"

Cranston didn't shoot. That wave of fear displayed by Winstead was so perfect a reenactment of the death scene that Cranston had visualized, that it stood as the equivalent of a confession. Still keeping Winstead covered, Cranston returned to his chair and drove home the rest:

"The big flaw in your too-perfect crime was the way you played it absolutely safe. If the others had lingered, leaving you too little time, you would have allowed Austin to live - for a while at least. But with everyone gone within the limits of your tight schedule, you murdered Austin, dodged back through the

hedge and were on your way -"

"With everyone else ahead of me," broke in Winstead, regaining his false front, "yet I got there first."

"On your way," continued Cranston, unperturbed, "up the turnpike and across Ragged Gap Road, which by your own calculation was less than a twenty-minute run, so you were easily the first person to reach Hudson View Tavern."

"Except that the bridge across the gorge was out," argued Winstead, a challenge in his tone. "You saw that yourself the next day, Cranston - and Frisbee has witnesses who will swear that it had gone out weeks before."

"The regular bridge, yes, but not the special temporary structure that your friends the Norvels had ready for you."

"And what kind of a bridge would that be?"

"A good, well-tested bridge composed of lightweight girders placed on the old stone abutments. The sort of bridge that could be dismantled, part by part, so that its sections could be put where they belonged, in the dairy shed that the Norvels were constructing. Look at these photographs, Winstead."

Cranston named them as he drew them from his pocket and laid them on display, just as he had done earlier - as The Shadow - with Hank Norvel as an onlooker.

"There is the car you were driving, Winstead," reminded Cranston. "Irene's red convertible. Here are close-ups of its tires; and here are the tread marks, official shots taken by Frisbee's photographer. And here" - Cranston was driving home his words - "are photographs that I took of the girders the Norvels were using for their quonset job. Look closely Winstead. On them you will see those same tread marks - very faint, but visible - proving that your car was driven across. They should have washed those off, but they didn't, because they never noticed them."

"The fools!" Winstead came upright, bringing his fists down to the desktop with a terrific pound. "Why, they - they -"

"Frisbee has their confessions by now," interposed Cranston, "because he was going over to the Norvel farm when he left the Hudson View. Setting up that bridge was quite a job. The Norvels needed two men and a truck with a special winch to help them. It left early and went around by Thunder Cliff Highway, where it waited for a car and practically knocked it into the river. Would you know anything about that, Winstead?"

There was a brief pause, while Winstead, his composure regained, began drumming the table top with his now relaxed hands.

"I certainly would know," Winstead declared brazenly, "because I phoned for the truck from Twin Peaks Inn and told it to be ready. There was a man snooping around the cloverleaf with a pair of binoculars; and I wanted him watched. The men on the truck saw him stop at the overlook, where he studied the river -"

"And saw a freighter traveling north, intending to stop here at Folly Island after dusk, in order to deliver supplies."

"That's right," acknowledged Winstead, in a tone of genuine admiration. "You're even smarter than I thought, Cranston. We could still use you, if you want to make a deal. I'll even give your friends here a nice break."

"And what about Don Morland? Does he get a break, too?"

Winstead's fingers stopped their drumming, but they did not tighten into fists. Steadily, he asked:

"Just how do you think Don Morland figures in all this?"

"He was your big mistake, Winstead," Cranston declared. "You had two perfect foils: Mark Wade and Rick Langdon. Each had only a slight reason to murder Gregg Austin, but those reasons sounded bigger by the time they had accused each other. But you couldn't resist it when Morland came along."

"What do you mean by 'came along.' Would you mind telling me?"

"With pleasure." Cranston's tone was biting now. "Don Morland was a legitimate Trail hiker. He had no reason to hitchhike down to Vanderkill. He was following the Trail on to Colonial Town, like he planned, when he came to a road that crossed the Trail. I mean Ragged Gap Road."

Winstead nodded as his fingers drummed: "Go on."

"Don figured that road would take him down to the turnpike, where he could mail his cards. Also, it was getting dark sooner than he expected. So he walked down that road and found the Norvel brothers sitting beside their nice, shiny temporary bridge, waiting for you to come along and use it, Winstead."

Now, Winstead's square face gleamed with admiration.

"So they grabbed Don," declared Cranston, "because it was the only thing they could do. They slugged him, went through his pockets and found those postcards. You came along and wasted one of your precious minutes nosing Irene's car across that very safe but rather nerve-wracking bridge. So you had another minute or so to listen while the Norvels told you about Morland."

"And so?" asked Winstead.

"And so you told the Norvels to take the bridge apart," replied Cranston, "and also to get down to Vanderkill and mail those postcards before the last pickup. You thought that it would be smart, coming up with a new and unusual suspect, but it weakened those you already had framed: Mark Wade and Rick Langdon."

Winstead couldn't reply to that. He knew that Cranston was right.

"So the Norvel boys stuck Don Morland in a cellar" continued Cranston, "and kept him there while you were showing us around the premises the next day, convincing everybody - or nearly everybody - that Ragged Gap Road was really impassible."

"Meanwhile, you decided that Don would make a good suspect, so while he was doped or unconscious, you had Lou Norvel impress his fingerprints on a memo pad that you took from Austin's office. Later, you planted that pad back there; one of those little foibles, Winstead, that marked you as the murderer because you alone were in the position to fake such evidence.

"That night, you had the truck come around again to pick up Don Morland. There's only one place where you could have taken him and that is right here. He must be down in one of those old ammunition vaults where you are keeping all the U.N. personnel you kidnaped. So here is my ultimatum: Deliver them."

Instead of adding the words "or else," Cranston thrust his gun hand forward. At that threat, Winstead wilted. He spread his hands hopelessly toward Kart Barka and Harry Vincent and said, pleadingly:

"You two know where they are. The cell doors are simply barred from the outside. So release them all and bring them here."

Even though they both still felt shaky, Harry and Barka eagerly accepted that assignment. They hurried over to the door that led below, continued down and pulled the outside bars, releasing all the prisoners, Don Morland included. At the head of the babbling throng, they returned upstairs. Yet on the way, Harry Vincent kept thinking that somehow, this could only be a trap.

If only The Shadow knew!

SEVENTEEN

IT WAS a trap and a deadly one.

Peter Winstead, self-admitted murderer, could never have hoped to make a deal with a crime hunter like Lamont Cranston, who had hounded him to his lair and trapped him there.

Whatever Winstead's mistakes - and Cranston had really called the turn on them - there was one he would not make. That was to give up without a struggle in the realm where he was still master.

That was proven as the reception hall became filled with the freed prisoners, all crowding one another happily, all trying to talk to Kart Barka at once. Harry Vincent was holding back as many as he could, but they were far too few. Winstead had pulled the smartest of all tricks; he had released a human tide that could not be stemmed.

One man who realized it was Eric Delka. Recovered from his daze, the Interpol investigator was even more amazed to see a mass of swarming faces that matched the stacks of photographs in his portfolio. Delka realized that these were the men he had come so far to seek, but that he had found too many of them all at once. For Delka, like Harry and Barka, was caught in the human maelstrom.

Cranston and Winstead were both being swept back by the pawing, frantic crowd of haggard humans who were going completely berserk in their urge to be free. Cranston was still covering Winstead with the automatic, but only intermittently; for although they were still side-by-side, they were becoming separated. There were moments - and all too frequent - when the surging figures of unleashed prisoners formed a human barrier between. But Winstead did not try to take advantage of such a shield. Instead of diving away, he kept waving his arms and shouting above the babble:

"You asked for it, Cranston - and you're getting it. So give up - make a deal - I'm giving you one more chance - just one -"

Cranston knew the kind of deal that Winstead meant. It would be one in which Cranston would be dealt out; and permanently. Winstead had figured on all that, when he had cannily paved the way to releasing this flood of half-mad humans. Winstead had known that there would be no way to stem the tide.

"You can't hold them back," Winstead was arguing. "They've turned primitive on you, Cranston. Let them go, work yourself clear, so we can talk."

Cranston saw what Winstead meant by "talk." The surge from the vaults had formed cover for Winstead's men to come in from the doorways on the flanks; the wild medley of voices had been their cue that they were needed. Smart, indeed, Winstead's play! If he had grabbed for a gun or made a single false move when Cranston had him helpless, that would have been the end of Winstead; for Cranston - otherwise The Shadow - would have given the murderer no quarter. But now, Winstead had things as he wanted them.

Swirling away in the living whirlpool, Winstead was at last beyond the coverage of Cranston's automatic. All he had to do was reach his own crew on the outskirts and give the order for an all-out attack.

And Winstead was on his way!

So was Cranston, but in the opposite direction. From the moment Winstead was free of the gun point, Cranston knew what the result would be unless counter-measures could be taken. The only move of that sort was to stop all this futile milling and lead the mad horde to some refuge where they could make a stand. With that in mind, Cranston broke through and began beckoning from beyond, shouting about the tumult for all to follow him.

Follow him, the crazed throng did, for their thoughts were rudimentary and their instinctive urge was to accept the first leadership that was offered. Cranston led them on through the hall where the suits of armor were displayed, down the steps into the place where this human stampede could spread itself, the big room where Palford kept his collection of ancient and assorted weapons.

By this time, however, Winstead had reached his followers, who numbered nearly a dozen, all armed with rifles and revolvers. They were hard on the heels of the thirty-odd prisoners, who had become more frenzied than before and therefore even less manageable.

"Keep after them!" bawled Winstead. "When they get into the weapon room, they may grab a few rusty swords and maybe some empty guns - so, what? Herd them if you can and if they still act foolish, shoot them down. And be sure to blast one man the moment you get a bead on him: that tall guy, Cranston!"

At that moment, Cranston was playing an even more dramatic bit. The human swarm had reached the weapon room and was spreading in a high pitch of excitement, with each frenzied face desirous of something, yet too dazed to go beyond the primitive stage. That, Cranston knew when he swung about in the center of the room, gave a sweeping wave and shouted:

"Choose your weapons, gentlemen!"

For moments the tumult persisted, because only a few understood and their reaction was not enough to sway the rest. But fortunately Barka had come along with the wave of wild humanity and he shouted the order in one language after another. Rapidly, the uproar of voices turned to war cries.

The careers of all these men had been studded with situations wherein self-preservation had become their fist and only law. In their earlier days, they had been persecuted, driven like beasts, forced to seek refuge in caves and jungles, with only one form of retaliation possible. That was through guerilla tactics, which often depended upon using whatever crude and outmoded weapons their respective countries had to offer.

To these men, a call to arms was just as varied as the languages in which it was voiced. It prompted them to an instinctive urge, in which they reverted to whatever was most familiar, if they could find it. And never had such a call been more timely.

Here, in this one room, was every native weapon known to these now fanatical fighters who were thirsting individually for vengeance. For weeks, for months, their minds had been starved until they longed for the sight of anything familiar. Now, they were finding it, each unto each. As their eyes followed Cranston's sweeping arm, each man singled out the very weapon that he wanted. They sprang to the walls, snatched the arms they favored and turned chaos into action.

Winstead's crew couldn't even begin to herd these transformed madmen. Fighters armed with bolos and machetes were slashing their long blades at gun hands, as though cutting sugar cane or jungle vines. One

of the riflemen stared as though hypnotized by the snakish thrust of a wavy-bladed kris that drove deep into his chest before he could raise his gun.

One freed prisoner grabbed a Malay barong, its long blade sheathed in a scabbard formed by two slabs of wood, with strips of leather holding it together. He swung the weapon wildly, scabbard and all, at one of Winstead's followers, who laughed as he raised a rifle to ward off the stroke, thinking that a sheathed blade would be harmless.

Instead, he learned how a barong is really used. The combined weight of blade and scabbard knocked the gun back and the sheathed sword hit the gunner's shoulder. With it, the blade automatically cut the thongs, so the slabs dropped away and the bared edge gashed the victim's flesh clear to the bone. A barong, it seems, is about the handiest of weapons.

Except perhaps for the huge African spear that one ex-prisoner hurled at an aiming rifleman. The spear missed by inches and buried itself in the paneled wall, while the gunner darted across the room and swung about to take new aim at the thwarted spearman who was bounding over to reclaim his weapon. As he wrested it free, he hurled it again, all in the same motion, impaling the aiming gunner.

That spear had two heads, one on each end, giving it what amounted to a double action. There were other weapons, too, that came whizzing in unexpectedly to the further misery of Winstead's rapidly evaporating crew. While one man was using a rifle to fend off a Fiji war lance, a Sudanese throwing knife caught the rifleman in the shoulders, laying him open to the lance thrust that followed.

An Indian javelin felled another rifleman, while an Australian boomerang scaled in from an angle and caught a man who was aiming a revolver at an attacker who swung a huge-headed Congo war club. When two of Winstead's men ganged up on one fighter and wrested away his big, curved Gurkha knife, he whipped out two smaller ones from hidden pockets in the leather scabbard and went to work with those.

Now, Winstead's followers were so thinned out that those who remained were fleeing for their lives, with the assorted fighters pouncing after them. They were a real underground, this international group of gaunt, nervous men, who had been confined in the ammunition vaults for varying periods. Winstead had himself to blame for letting them loose, but it was Cranston who had turned them into the guerilla fighters that they now were, each with the weapon of his choice.

The pursuit continued out through the halls of the castle, with Winstead's men still dropping as the relentless fighters overtook them. The place was becoming a shambles, but not the sort that Winstead had planned. Instead of bullets mowing down helpless victims, the gunners themselves had been literally chopped down. They were shooting to the last shot and dropping to the last drop of their blood.

Once the chase began to spread out through the castle, Cranston sped straight on through, telling Barka, Harry and Delka to grab up revolvers that Winstead's men had lost. When Cranston reached the door to the courtyard, he stopped to pick up what looked like a coat that he had laid over the back of a chair, when he had come in pretending to be Rufus Palford. The coat proved to be The Shadow's black cloak, with the slouch hat buried in its folds.

Quickly, Cranston slid his arms into the cloak sleeves and clamped the slouch hat on his head. As The Shadow, he moved out into the semi-darkness of the courtyard. He needed his black garb because he suspected a trap; and the courtyard was definitely such. Winstead, about to drive out in a car, had stationed the last of his riflemen to cover his flight.

Only the gliding figure of The Shadow could have eluded the two marksmen who aimed from darkened niches, ready to go trigger-happy at sight of anything - even a shadow. But the only watcher who might

have spotted the black-cloaked figure was a third man in a box-like turret above. He was ready with a rifle, but he had another job, the handling of the portcullis. He laid his gun aside to raise the big gate; then, as Winstead's car shot through, he let it fall. At that moment, The Shadow's glide became a dart.

The Shadow dived beneath the massive iron teeth as they came champing down. He was spotted then, but the clang of the great gate was echoed by slighter clanks as rifle bullets hit the broad strips and framework of the metal grille. The portcullis itself had become The Shadow's shield against the pursuing rifle fire.

Outside, The Shadow dashed across the narrow neck where Winstead's car had already sped. The only chance to stop it was when it climbed to the old bridge with the wooden planking that crossed the railroad tracks. The Shadow could have used a rifle now, but he had no time to find one and bring it along. His only chance of stopping Winstead was to puncture a tire or punch a hole in the gas tank of the fugitive car with a long-range shot from an automatic.

The Shadow had a .45 in each hand and was pumping them alternately, but Winstead's car kept on. Then, as its headlights swung onto the bridge, they seemed to reflect others that loomed from the other side. Not just one pair of approaching lights, but two sets, practically in tandem. Instantly, The Shadow recognized what they must be.

Those were cars driven by Cliff Marsland and Miles Crofton, who left the Norvel farm before Frisbee arrived there, and were now following Burbank's instructions to head to Folly Castle and serve as reserves, should The Shadow need their aid. Now, they were cutting off Winstead's flight at the only bottleneck where he could be stopped.

There was one problem: Did this car carry friend or foe? Were they perhaps stopping The Shadow on his way to some new goal? It took quick thinking to decide. One car shot on to the bridge and stopped abruptly, leaving just enough space for the car from Folly Castle to skim by. The other car stopped before it reached the bridge, ready to swing and block the road beyond.

It was time for split-second judgment, whether right or wrong. It turned out right, in an unexpected way. To Winstead, both these cars were hostile, so he gunned his car as it hit the bridge, intending to sweep past the double blockade in one terrific spurt.

From back near the neck of land, The Shadow's .45s were tonguing their last stabs. Possibly one of those slugs found a tire on the fleeing car; or it could have been that Winstead himself veered too far to the right. In either case, he hit the rail, as Harry Vincent once had.

This wasn't the Thunder Cliff Highway; nor was the rail tricked. But it was old, wooden and weather-beaten. The flimsy barrier splintered and Winstead's car did a sidewise somersault on to the northbound tracks, twenty feet below.

The glare of a mammoth searchlight was coming up that track and Winstead's car flitted into it like a moth seeking a flame. Hardly had the car hit the rails before it, in turn, was struck by the front of the mammoth diesel locomotive that was hauling a Chicago-bound limited at a seventy-mile-an-hour clip.

The big engine played football with Winstead's car, bouncing it beneath the bridge and along the track in tremendous bounds, finally shunting it toward the river bank, a twisted jumble of metal that contained an even more contorted occupant, Peter Winstead.

From the tongue of land that led to Castle Point came a strange weird laugh that shivered into fading echoes that were lost by the lapping sound of the waves along the Hudson's shore.

It was The Shadow's mirthless knell for Peter Winstead, the mastermind who had outguessed himself for the last time!

THE END