

ALIBI TRAIL

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

The big private transport tricycled itself into a landing that was rather miraculous considering the thickening fog that was turning the ground flares into smudge pots. What made it all the tougher was the limited size of this little-used flying field on Long Island.

It looked like an emergency landing, but it wasn't. The whole thing was planned and Jerry Reeth knew it. That was why he was here, waiting by the hangar, and trying to look inconspicuous.

The plane had a good pilot, otherwise he wouldn't have made it, so on the pilot's account, Jerry was pleased at the nice landing. That was quite a concession on Jerry's part, considering that Brenda Van Dolphe was on the plane. She was one person toward whom Jerry Reeth extended anything but wishes for a happy landing, despite the fact he'd never met the girl.

Right now, however, Jerry Reeth intended to meet Brenda Van Dolphe.

Little clusters of men were starting toward the plane, barely visible in the swirl of the night fog. Jerry hurried in the same direction, hoping he wouldn't be noticed. Lights indicated the transport's door, and a few people

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were stepping out, a muffled girl among them. Unquestionably she was Brenda Van Dolphe, the girl whose face was as great a mystery as the sources of her father's fortune.

Jerry was a dozen yards short of the plane when the flanking men closed in on him. Then, for the first time, he realized that they weren't just curious to see the mysterious Miss Van Dolphe. They were wearing uniforms, representing either state police or some local constabulary, and they were here to form a cordon to crowd out people like Jerry. A pair of them picked Jerry for a starter and pounced on him.

Instead of waiting for that pair to announce their authority, Jerry asserted his own. He did it with his fists, placing his punches well. The darkness swallowed the faces and the fog muffled their oaths, but a moment later another pair of officers was lurching after Jerry. As they grabbed him, he twisted almost free and nearly within reach of the girl from the plane.

The Van Dolphe girl had stopped stock-still. Beside her, Jerry saw a sharp-faced man, probably Cedric Treat, the secretary who answered all her letters. In the background, a tall imposing man was helping a tubby lady from the plane and both had turned at the excitement. That didn't interest Jerry; he was concerned with the girl.

And the girl was concerned with Jerry.

Brenda Van Dolphe was wearing a coat of ermine, its collar turned up around her face. Above was a Cossack turban of the same white fur, tilted jauntily over the girl's forehead, just showing her eyes. As Brenda drew away from Jerry's reach, the men put the grapple on him, hauling him back in turn.

To Jerry, the girl looked aloof rather than startled, but Jerry was wrong. The cry proved it:

"Miss Van Dolphe!"

It wasn't Jerry who gave the call. A choking arm was too tight about his neck. The shout came from another direction, given by a man who bulged suddenly from the fog, trying, as Jerry had, to shake off interceptors. But this man was burdened with a squarish object that he was thrusting forward as though he intended to fling it.

Maybe the girl mistook it for a bomb, for she tried to turn away, half tripping over the soggy ground. Her collar fell away and the lights from the plane showed her face, a very frightened face, which perhaps enhanced its beauty. It was indeed a beautiful face, because in that moment, Jerry hated the girl for having it. He'd wanted Brenda Van Dolphe to be ugly and if she'd just been normally good-looking, Jerry's prejudice would have been enough to class her as homely.

But in that one glance Jerry saw features as finely molded, as perfectly blended, as any he could remember from anywhere, including stage and screen. As for rendering emotion, the fabulous Brenda had that faculty too. Her lips and eyes had gone wide, proving that even fright was something she could manage prettily.

Even the girl's slight cry was tuneful as the flash-bulb exploded.

The square object the man was shoving was a camera. He'd caught a three-quarter profile of beautiful Brenda and he couldn't have wanted a better shot. In fact, he wasn't going to get another, for a variety of reasons. Half-blinded by the flash, but recognizing what it was, the girl had wheeled away and was muffling her face again. The camera man was getting muffled too, by the local law. The secretary and the big man were scurrying the girl away, towing along the waddly woman to a limousine that had swung up near the plane.

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Those details were lost on Jerry Reeth, who could only see the girl's face, etched like a negative print in the half-blackness that his eyes, too, had gathered from a straight look at the flash bulb. In fact, Jerry didn't realize that the girl was gone, so vividly did her after-image hover before him. But there were other impressions, vague ones of reeling men, coming directly Jerry's way. Ripping from his captors only to bring them pouncing after him, Jerry lunged into the mass.

Jerry was mixing it with the pair who had grabbed the photographer. Loose for the moment, he took them by complete surprise. Then, with Jerry proving himself a clouting menace, everybody took care of him at once. He went down beneath a pile-up that reminded him of a Freshman Bowl Rush. Jerry might have taken a lot of punishment if somebody hadn't loosened the melee with the shout:

"That camera guy! Stop him!"

Racing off somewhere in the fog, the photographer reached a car and Jerry, being dragged along in the pursuit, heard the fellow working on the starter. Then, amid the sudden blaze of flashlights, the local police found him, seized him, and hauled him from the front seat, camera and all. When he relinquished the camera, they pounced for it, each cop anxious to claim the prize. They didn't worry about the photographer any further and he made a quick leap back to his car where he'd just started the motor when they grabbed him. The car went scooting madly out through an open gate in a direction opposite that taken by the limousine.

Jerry's case was somewhat different. The constabulary marched him over to the hangar where they were rather surprised when they ushered him into the light. He wasn't the King Kong they expected; in fact, Jerry was rather handsome, discounting a few scars and a growing black eye, all acquired in the recent fray. He was handsome in a rugged way, with straight profile and broad chin, but that was logical enough, considering the way he'd battled.

Before anybody could start asking questions, a big police lieutenant shoved into the hangar and scowled when he saw what was going on. One of the officers handed him the camera; holding the scowl, the lieutenant finally brightened and gave the camera to Jerry, putting a question that sounded somewhat like a statement:

"Yours?"

In answer, Jerry shook his head and this time the lieutenant really scowled as he looked at the silent cops.

"Who does this belong to?" he demanded. "What did you grab it for?"

The officers began to explain matters, which only made it worse.

"We were here to keep the field clear," roared the lieutenant. "To keep back a crowd if there was one. Of course we were supposed to protect the dame if she needed it, but you should have stopped that camera man before he got to the plane. Since he shot a picture he had a right to it and to his camera, too."

One of the cops thought he'd better square things by putting a burden on Jerry.

"It was this guy mixed us up, lieutenant," declared the accuser. "We thought he was going to grab the girl. It looked like maybe he was out to stage a snatch."

The lieutenant glowered at Jerry, came over, whirled him around, gave him a thorough frisk.

"No gun on him," the lieutenant decided. Then, to Jerry: "What you got to say for yourself?"

"Don't blame the officers, lieutenant," returned Jerry, rather blandly. "I imagine I was somewhat intensive."

"Yeah? And why?"

"On account of my friend," replied Jerry, thinking fast. "I was supposed to draw everybody my way, only I didn't. I managed a fair job though" – Jerry added a grin – "because he at least took the picture, though I suppose all he got was a load of that ermine wrap the Van Dolphe girl was wearing."

The lieutenant made another reversal of expression as he thumbed from the hangar.

"You mean you were stoozing for the camera man?"

A nod from Jerry.

"And you know where to reach him?"

Jerry bluffed a very confident nod.

"Then give him back his picture box," suggested the lieutenant, sweetly. "Don't add our compliments; just say we didn't even take it. Since he handed it to us, we naturally kept it for him until we found out how we could reach him. And now if you'll excuse us, we'll close the field for the night. You'll have just about time to get out of the gate."

Taking the hint Jerry raced for the gate, carrying the camera with him. But on the way to his car, which was parked outside, that certain elation that he felt began to fade. Though he carried the camera very conspicuously as well as carefully, Jerry was regarding it as anything but a prize. Its weight as well as its looks were against it.

Once in his car, Jerry made sure. At the risk of spoiling what might be the only photograph of Brenda Van Dolphe in existence, Jerry opened the camera and found that his hunch was right. This wasn't the box that had snapped the all-important shot. The photographer must have dumped that in the back seat of his car, where he had this one planted in the front all the time.

It was just an old, very shabby camera, if not a dummy, certainly the next thing to it – a decoy. Whoever the photographer was, he deserved credit. Despite his disappointment, Jerry chuckled. After all, he'd fared well enough, thanks to the camera man's ruse.

Maybe the camera man deserved even more credit, or perhaps Jerry Reeth shouldn't have chuckled. Those were points that were due for further consideration – and very soon!

CHAPTER II

DRIVING along a stretch of lonely road wasn't so very lonely when you had Brenda Van Dolphe to think about. In the glare from the headlights, Jerry Reeth could still picture the girl's face, frozen in half-horror at the flash bulb, and he rather regretted that his only souvenir had turned out to be an empty camera.

A print of that photograph would be very nice to have, but Jerry would probably be clipping it from a newspaper soon. The camera man, whoever he was, wouldn't waste time peddling the photo and probably at a big price. But it wasn't the value of the unique picture of a hitherto unphotographed girl that interested Jerry. Where money was concerned, his claim on the Van Dolphe estate might run into box-car figures if he could ever collect it.

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Jerry smiled at the thought of box-cars. Just at the moment, the headlights were showing a few on a railway siding that flanked this old road. As for figures, he was wondering how Brenda's would shape up, without so many furs. Maybe he'd find out, the next time he met the girl, which Jerry had already decided would be very soon. There were a couple of questions that Jerry wanted answered and he was tired of dealing through other people. That was why tonight he had tried to meet Brenda Van Dolphe face to face and in a sense had succeeded.

Again, Jerry smiled.

The way that face kept haunting him was something he rather liked, though that didn't prove he had begun to like its owner. On the contrary, the fact that the girl had looks was probably another count against her. Her good looks would logically add to the conceit and arrogance that Jerry fancied she had inherited from her father, Craig Van Dolphe, whose very name Jerry detested.

Now Jerry was picturing other faces that he had seen along with Brenda's. He'd remember the sharp-faced man, who was probably Treat, the secretary. The tall, imposing gentleman must have been Judge Jeffrey, the girl's uncle. He might be all right, because he came from the other side of Brenda's family. The tubby lady couldn't be anyone but Senora Hidalgo, the duenna who had accompanied Brenda from Colombia.

As for Brenda's cousin, Captain Platt, he wasn't due in New York until tomorrow. That was the factor that had thrown off the newspaper men, Platt's announcement that he was going to meet his cousin Brenda at La Guardia Airport the next morning. With the sole exception of the photographer who had come to the obscure landing field on some lucky tip or chance guess, nobody had known that Brenda Van Dolphe would be arriving in from Havana tonight.

At least no one except Jerry.

Jerry's grin of self-congratulation ended in a frown as he suddenly reversed his own finding. In the mirror he saw the headlights of another car coming closer behind him. It couldn't be the limousine, because it had turned left ahead. Nor could it be the photographer's car, which had sped off on another road that didn't connect with this one. On a hunch that the other car might be bringing trouble, Jerry gunned his accelerator.

The coupe, which wasn't too old a model, whipped past the line of sidetracked box-cars and really began to eat up the narrow road. It was only a mile until the road swung across the tracks of the Long Island Railroad and took a short stretch to a trunk highway. Once there, Jerry wouldn't have to worry about anybody.

Then came the short rising howl of a siren, like a banshee wail at Jerry's heels.

So that was it – a police car!

Maybe they'd decided they wanted the camera after all and a fine time Jerry would have explaining why it was empty now. Or possibly they were just peeved because Jerry had out-talked them and were goading him into speeding so they'd have an excuse for arresting him. In either case they'd get another argument and Jerry was just in the right mood to begin it.

Letting his coupe coast so the other car could overtake him, Jerry allowed himself to be forced over to the side of the road, where he braked to a stop. Meanwhile, the siren had chopped off its brief howl in a manner that Jerry should have recognized as too polite, but didn't. At least he didn't think of it until men from the other car were crowding up to his, telling him to get out from behind the wheel.

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That was when Jerry realized that the only similarity between this contingent and police was the fact that both carried guns.

They weren't masked, but Jerry couldn't see their faces because it was too dark. He hoped they were conscious of the fact, because if they were, it meant they might not decide to shoot. On the contrary, if they thought Jerry was looking them over, tallying the faces that he couldn't see, they might give the blast and be done with it.

One of the group said gruffly: "Let's have that camera, mug."

So that was it, the camera. But if Jerry gave it, then what? Figuring what this bunch would do was a problem. It reminded Jerry of the time a squad of krauts had hemmed him on the fringe of the Battle of the Bulge. While they'd been figuring whether to take him to the rear or load him with some bullets, Jerry had taken off past a line of ammunition trucks.

Maybe he could do the same right now, or its equivalent. For Jerry could hear the wheezing, heavy-plodding chug of a Long Island freight coming along the track beside the road. Coolly, but in a tone that didn't seem his own, Jerry said:

"You want the camera? I'll give it to you."

They let him turn and reach into the car. They hadn't much to lose since three of them were prodding Jerry with gun muzzles and if he'd come around with a revolver of his own, it would have been the last thing he did. And Jerry was deliberate too, not just to prove he was only reaching for the camera, but to give the freight time to come along.

It was a singular scene with the giant eye of the locomotive flooding down the track, yet not quite including the halted cars in the fringe of its widened glare. Unfortunate perhaps, otherwise the locomotive crew might have been able to observe and report on crime by the wayside.

There was a fortunate angle, too.

Easing into the scene was another car, its headlights out, its motor smothered by the approaching roar and clatter of the train. Its driver was bringing it into line with the halted cars, but to the right of Jerry's where hard-baked ground lay between the road and the railway.

A closing door announced that someone was alighting from the ghost car, but the noise of the door was also muffled by the freight train's clatter. A stealthy figure was moving forward, totally unsuspected in the darkness.

If Jerry had stalled a short while longer, he wouldn't have had to spring a surprise of his own on the men who pressed him with their guns. But Jerry was already well advanced with his own plan.

Carrying the camera in his hands, Jerry was bringing it around to the front of the car so he could show it in the light. The guns were crowding right along in back of him.

"I guess you want the plate," Jerry was saying. "Anyway, you're welcome to it, camera and all. Here's the works – so take it!"

Around the front of the car, Jerry turned and flung the camera into the first face he saw. Then, with a twisting dart, he loped across in front of the lights and made a mad dash straight toward the railroad track. He hoped

they'd think he'd ducked around on the other side of the car; if so, he'd have all the time he needed.

The gunners thought he'd done just that. In hot pursuit, they all took the wrong direction. But the ruse never could have worked the way Jerry intended, and for a simple reason he had overlooked. In making that mad rush across the track, Jerry was thinking only of the locomotive, not its searchlight.

Jerry was beating the locomotive and with plenty to spare as he hurtled across in front of its approaching pilot, but the giant glare picked him out and made him a vivid target. Those pursuers, if capable at all with guns, were being given a perfect opportunity to pick off the fugitive.

Good fortune prevented them from taking that opportunity; good fortune in the form of an unexpected fighter who met Jerry's enemies in a powerful surge, as one man shouted to the others and pointed the way that Jerry had gone. With a fierce, challenging laugh that even the locomotive's roar could not drown, that lone battler hurled himself into the thick of the gunners, sledging down their aiming hands with strokes from a brace of automatics.

They knew that laugh, these men of crime; they recognized the cloaked figure that materialized as it plunged them into the glow of the headlights that gleamed from Jerry's abandoned car.

This was the black-clad menace that all men of evil feared:

The Shadow!

CHAPTER III

SEEN from the road, Jerry Reeth's figure was diving headlong, as though flayed by the bullets that were represented by the spurts of enemy guns. An instant later, that figure was blotted from sight by an intervening curtain, a mighty curtain of clanging steel, the freight locomotive.

The gun barks were faintly audible to Jerry, though they seemed very distant amid the clangor of the locomotive. And bullets were really distant, for not one shot was fired in Jerry's direction. The dive that Jerry took was merely policy. Hitting the cinders on the far side of the track seemed the proper business, so Jerry flung himself flat and waited while the engine went crashing past.

Back by the automobiles, another sound had supplanted the spasmodic gun bursts. That sound was a strident laugh, mocking and triumphant, The Shadow's answer to the fighters who had turned their guns his way instead of Jerry's, only to have their aiming muzzles knocked high and wide. Slashing as he whirled, The Shadow was like a miniature cyclone, flinging his adversaries as he clouted them, finally whipping off into darkness from which he could gain new vantage.

Fantastically, The Shadow's laugh blended into a titanic burst that caught the exact key of the mirth's crescendo.

The whistle of the freight locomotive had picked up The Shadow's laugh to give it that amazing magnitude. The great steel clodhopper was blowing for the grade crossing, less than a mile ahead. But in the few seconds that it took them to realize what the huge blare was, the stick-up men didn't wait to argue.

Instead of firing wild shots into the darkness beyond the range of the headlights, on the chance of picking off The Shadow, the half-dazed thugs flung themselves back into their own car. The motor was still running and the man who landed behind the wheel lost no time in yanking the gear shift and gunning the car into a mad departure.

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The crook-manned car shot itself right out of The Shadow's reach. He hadn't tarried in the darkness, flanking the glow from the headlights. He'd rounded the halted car intending to come up from behind it and attack the baffled gunners from their own bailiwick. If they'd waited only a few seconds longer, they'd have been slugged into submission.

As it was, they were away, before The Shadow could quite clutch the handle of the door that had slammed behind the last of them. They were shooting from the windows, hoping to dissuade The Shadow if he tried to clip them from the flank, for they hadn't the slightest notion that he was actually behind them.

Right then, The Shadow might have stopped the flight with well-planted bullets into the tires or gas-tank of the fugitive car, but he had a better plan. Jerry was safe; of that The Shadow had made certain with a passing glance at the moment of Jerry's dive beyond the intervening locomotive. More important than waylaying Jerry's attackers was the chance to trail them and learn more about them.

Such thugs, if and when they talked, seldom could tell much of value, for they were usually hired assassins, obtained through intermediaries. But if The Shadow could tail them, learn more about them and their contacts, he might gain a lead to crime behind crime.

The Shadow slid into his own car and started an immediate pursuit. Again, his was a ghost car with no betraying lights, for the road was straight and he was guided by the mighty glare from the locomotive searchlight, well ahead. Once more, the whistle blared for the crossing, which was visible now as the lumbering giant ate up the brilliant path that stretched ahead of it.

Despite the warning, the car with its load of crooks was speeding even faster, intent upon beating the iron monster to the goal. Rather than remain on The Shadow's side of the tracks, the fugitive gang preferred to risk a tangle with a locomotive. It looked like they were going to receive just that when their car veered for the grade crossing, but the driver must have managed an extra spurt despite the swerve.

For the car was gone and an instant later, the locomotive was blanketing the cross-over. Next, The Shadow's chase was ended by a long line of rattling, swaying cars, a half a mile of them, which gave the crooks a minute of leeway in their flight.

Braking his car near the crossing, The Shadow turned it around and went back to look for Jerry Reeth, the one remaining factor who might furnish data regarding the source of crime.

FINDING Jerry Reeth was out of the question, even for The Shadow. Jerry hadn't let that line of freight cars go to waste. On his feet, running full speed with the train, he'd hooked a ladder and clambered on board a box-car. It wasn't until the freight train reached a station five miles ahead that Jerry again put himself into circulation.

Though a trifle bedraggled, Jerry made a reasonably normal appearance as a passenger on a local train that rolled into Manhattan on an electric line of the Long Island Railroad. By the time he alighted at Pennsylvania Station, Jerry had fairly well resolved his problems.

They were after the camera, that was all.

It might seem odd, a band of crooks hijacking a car just to deprive a camera man of a single photographic plate. But if Brenda Van Dolphe was worth so many million dollars, an exclusive picture of such a girl was unquestionably worth something in itself.

They had mistaken Jerry for the photographer, that was all.

Why not?

The real photographer had scooted out of the air field without declaring himself, whereas Jerry had made an open departure carrying a camera. So they had picked on Jerry. Such was Jerry's opinion as he came up the escalator, but as he walked eastward from Penn Station, he began to analyze the question.

Maybe they'd been out there looking for Jerry himself.

That notion made Jerry laugh. Nobody except Simon Severidge could have told them about a certain young man named Jerry Reeth. As for Severidge, he was the biggest close-mouth that Jerry had ever met. Maybe that was what he should be, considering that Severidge was the attorney for the Van Dolphe Estate.

In his few interviews with Severidge, Jerry hadn't gotten anything out of him and therefore didn't like the man at all. Not liking Severidge, Jerry was willing to concede that the lawyer might have hired thugs to do a little work on the side. It might be part of Severidge's job to hire a few strong-arm characters to make sure that nobody took any pictures of Brenda Van Dolphe. That brought Jerry right back to his original idea.

Nevertheless, he intended to ask Gonzales about it. After all, it was Gonzales who had insisted that Jerry held a fair claim on the Van Dolphe Estate, or a sizable portion of it. It was through that insistence of Senor Gonzales that Jerry had gone to see Severidge in the first place.

In addition, Gonzales had furnished Jerry with assorted items of information, all pertinent to Jerry's claim. It was also Gonzales who had helped Jerry check on data regarding Brenda Van Dolphe and her relatives, as well as when the girl would arrive in New York and why. In fact, right now, Gonzales would be waiting in Jerry's pocket-sized apartment to learn how successfully Jerry had crashed the gate at the air field and whether or not he had gained the interview he wanted.

Maybe Gonzales would have a good answer for some of the details that now bothered Jerry. The very thought quickened Jerry's pace and he lost no time in bringing out his key as he entered the old house where he lived in a pair of converted rooms that were called an apartment.

Unlocking the door of the apartment, Jerry found the light switch and pressed it. He was rather surprised, somewhat disappointed, not to find the place already lighted, with Gonzales awaiting his return. Maybe the senor hadn't expected Jerry to return so soon.

Apparently, Jerry's guesses were off tonight. At least the last one was, as he learned when he turned from the door. Jerry's gaze froze instantly as he saw what was lying on the floor, squarely in the middle of the pint-sized living room.

The thing was a body and there was no doubt that it was thoroughly dead. The evidence to that effect was the knife handle that projected from the dead man's chest. Jerry recognized it as his favorite hunting knife, a brutal, long-bladed affair that he had brought from Canada and had kept in his trunk.

It wasn't exactly cricket for someone to take Jerry's own knife and kill a man with it, particularly when the victim was a friend of Jerry's, about the only friend he had in New York. For the thing that harrowed Jerry more than the actual sight of the dead man, was the identity of that victim on the floor.

A darkish face looked up into the light, recognizable despite the unnatural glare of its glassy eyes. It was the face of a man called Gonzales!

CHAPTER IV

A CURIOUS sense of contrast swept over Jerry Reeth. Now that he viewed this scene, it seemed the direct opposite of the way things should have happened. Not much more than an hour ago, it might have been Jerry's turn to play dead man, for keeps.

Instead, Gonzales was filling the part.

How did it link with the episode on the Long Island road? Could somebody have murdered Gonzales thinking he was Jerry?

These questions and more were filling Jerry's brain until they became a whirl that revolved itself into a solid desire for self-preservation. Maybe Jerry's own recent escape from death had stiffened him, but he didn't feel a great regret over Gonzales. The fellow was an adventurer, the sort who thrived on enemies as much as friends. It could be that someone had settled an old grudge, using Jerry's apartment as a conveniently isolated locale. If so, Jerry should feel an animosity toward Gonzales, dead or alive.

Hard-headed, Jerry began to put his own case first. The knife was incriminating evidence, so the best plan was to dispose of it. Coolly, Jerry approached the body and stooped to grip the knife handle. His hand moved mechanically, spreading for a sudden clutch; then froze as it was, when a cool voice spoke from behind him:

"I'd leave that knife where it is."

Coming to his feet, Jerry wheeled with hands half-closed, not knowing what to do with them. He was facing a man whose face, though young, bore the mold of experience. It was a good-looking face, but in a practical sort of way and its steady features were the sort that promoted confidence. Nevertheless, the owner of that face was taking no chances with Jerry. To back his statement, the man displayed a solid automatic, which was aimed squarely in Jerry's direction.

As coolly as before, the stranger queried:

"You're Jerry Reeth?"

Brief hesitation convinced Jerry that he could lose nothing by admitting fact. He nodded.

"The dead man was a friend of yours?"

Jerry didn't respond to that question.

"Whoever he was," came the stranger's query, "what was his name?"

"Why not ask him?" put in Jerry. "Or if it's a question of names, what's yours?"

"Harry Vincent," replied the stranger, frankly. "Now what about the dead man?"

"He called himself Gonzales," snapped Jerry, prompted by a slight nudge from the automatic. "Anyway, I didn't kill him."

"I know that," said Vincent. "He's been dead too long. You couldn't have arrived here soon enough to murder him, considering that you made part of your trip by freight."

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That statement startled Jerry, but he was quick to cover the fact. Eyes narrowed, fists tightened against his coat front, Jerry tried to figure the answer. How Vincent knew so much was a question, but a chunk of it must be guess-work. Nobody could have seen Jerry hop that Long Island freight, but somebody might have guessed it.

Who was the guesser?

Certainly not this chap Vincent. He couldn't have gotten here faster than Jerry. Somebody must have relayed the word of the episode on the high-road; but that in turn produced a variety of possibilities.

Maybe the thugs had phoned some chum to intercept Jerry when he arrived here; but Vincent didn't look the sort who would be deputized by such a crew. Conversely, the Long Island police might have come across Jerry's abandoned car and notified Manhattan headquarters to check on the owner; but, again, Vincent didn't look like a plain clothes man.

That left only one solution and a very sketchy one. Something had scattered those thugs back on the highroad; Jerry knew it from having seen their car do a scooting flight across the path of the locomotive at the grade crossing. Though Jerry hadn't seen The Shadow, he recognized that somebody potent must have been involved. From that, Jerry analyzed that Vincent must be some emissary representing his unknown rescuer.

Perhaps Vincent was checking the notions that ran through Jerry's mind. Was he waiting for Jerry to add them up or was something else to happen? The answer came when the telephone bell began to jangle from beside a table in the corner. Jerry made an involuntary motion in that direction and Vincent gave a slight nod.

Then, before Jerry could reach the phone, Vincent's hand was stopping him with the gun, but only briefly. What Harry Vincent did, was take a handkerchief from his pocket, drape it over the table phone.

Then Harry said: "Now."

Jerry liked the precaution. It meant that Harry didn't want Jerry to implant his fingerprints over any others that might be on the phone. Stepping back, Harry waited blandly, as though expecting Jerry to be properly impressed by what came across the wire.

It was impressive enough, though it wasn't the voice Harry expected. He could catch its tones as Jerry listened to them.

The voice was low, disguised, hardened in its forced snarl.

"Get going, Reeth," it said. "You've got about ten minutes before they get there. You don't want trouble with the coppers, do you? If you lam, you won't."

That was all. As Jerry planted the phone back on its stand, he stared at Harry and noted that the other man's eyes were somewhat puzzled. Then:

"So you have ten minutes," was Harry's comment. "In that case you can spare a few. Only don't waste them. Let's hear what else you know about Gonzales. It may be helpful to both of us."

"All right," decided Jerry, suddenly. "The more you know, the less reason you'll see for me to be covering up. Gonzales knew my father down in Mexico."

"And your father was Felix Reeth, the mine promoter."

"I see you know some facts already," acknowledged Jerry. "That makes it all the better. Since you've heard of my father, you'll probably remember that he was framed for some phony mine promotions by his partner, a certain Craig Van Dolphe."

Harry gave a noncommittal nod, which at least was a concession. Jerry's use of the word "framed" was a matter of opinion, since technically, his father had been convicted of the fake promotion scheme which Jerry charged to Van Dolphe.

"Anyway, they were partners," continued Jerry, as though allowing for Harry's doubt. "When Van Dolphe sold out the Mexican holdings, half of what he made belonged to my father. Van Dolphe went to Colombia and took up mining platinum instead of silver. That's how he made the millions that now belong to his daughter Brenda."

"And therefore," supplied Harry, "you assume that half the Van Dolphe fortune should be yours."

"Why not?" demanded Jerry. "I might as well ask for as much as I can get!"

"But if your claim was based on a fraud –"

"Only it wasn't a fraud!" interjected Jerry. "That silver mine in Mexico can be made to pay. Van Dolphe was playing for quick money, that was all."

"Did he tell you this?"

With the query, Harry nudged toward the body of Gonzales and Jerry nodded in reply.

"He told me a lot, Gonzales did," avowed Jerry, "and I think most of it was reliable. There are two men who own most of the stock in the old Quetzal Silver Mine. They bought it cheap on speculation and then regretted it. But they'd be glad enough if somebody came in with them, bringing enough cash to finance a new operation."

"And you'd like to furnish the cash," conjectured Harry, "at the expense of the Van Dolphe Estate."

"That's right."

"But to get the cash, you'd have to prove your father's innocence by making the Quetzal Mine pay."

"That's the trouble," nodded Jerry. "To get the cash first, I have to prove one claim ahead of the other. However" – Jerry's face tightened grimly – "I think I can find some way to manage it."

"You've had a pretty bad setback," observed Harry coolly, "considering that Gonzales was your only key."

Had Harry Vincent emphasized that final word, "key"? Instinctively Jerry Reeth gave his new friend a sharp, suspicious look, as though wondering if the term "friend" actually applied to him. Whether Harry caught the significance or not, he was quick to switch the subject.

"About the Van Dolphe money," Harry reminded. "You say you might collect some of it. Have you tried?"

"Of course," replied Jerry. "For one thing, I've seen Simon Severidge. He's the attorney for the Van Dolphe Estate."

"Any luck with Severidge?"

"No," admitted Jerry, "but if you ever met Severidge, you'd know why. He's as cold as they come. He'd be capable of anything, provided it wasn't too human."

The very statement made Jerry think. What if Vincent happened to be working for Severidge? This was a new notion and a disturbing one. It seemed to link with Gonzales lying dead on the floor; next, Jerry was thinking it might connect with the encounter beside the Long Island tracks. His own appraisal of Severidge was producing plenty of possibilities.

Again, Harry brought Jerry back to the immediate subject and deftly, both with cool tone and gun gesture.

"What else did you try, Reeth?"

"I wrote to Brenda Van Dolphe," Jerry was speaking mechanically. "All I received were some letters from a secretary named Cedric Treat. He writes like Severidge talks."

"So you decided you'd better see Brenda Van Dolphe."

"That's right." Jerry halted suddenly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because that's why you went to the air field, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"And you saw her?"

The smile that took over Jerry's lips didn't flicker there. It was an inward smile. He wasn't to be caught by a question like that one. Abruptly, Jerry put a question of his own.

"What makes you think I saw her?"

"You ran into some trouble on the road," returned Harry. "It was over a camera, wasn't it?"

"A dummy camera." Jerry's laugh sounded forced, but it was genuine. "Some photographer shoved it on me. I guess he took a shot of beautiful Brenda and switched cameras so he could get away with the plate."

"You saw him take the picture?"

"In all that fog? Not a chance. I was way back, hoping Brenda would come along, but she must have gone the other direction. Instead, the fellow with the camera came running at me and gave me the thing. Next, I was tangled with the cops."

Cannily, Jerry had woven false threads into the true fabric of his story. He wasn't letting this chap Vincent know that he'd even gotten a look at Brenda Van Dolphe. From now on, Jerry wasn't trusting anybody but himself.

"Ten minutes," declared Jerry, abruptly. "That's what the fellow said over the phone." He gestured to the instrument, which was still draped with Harry's handkerchief. "Time's about up. Suppose we get going."

"Not yet."

ALIBI TRAIL

Time wasn't up for Harry, a fact that brought Jerry to a tension pitch. The seconds that passed seemed slow, yet fast; slow because of the strain, rapid because each was another step to an approaching crisis. During those moments, Jerry became convinced that the warning across the phone had come from an actual friend; that Harry was really an enemy.

And then the phone rang again.

Two things were explained: first, why Harry had been surprised at the previous call; second, why he had left his handkerchief on the telephone. Keeping his gun trained on Jerry, Harry picked up the telephone.

Across came a weird, whispered voice that Harry recognized but which Jerry, away from the telephone, could not distinguish.

It was the voice of The Shadow!

All Jerry heard was Harry's end of the conversation; terse statements detailing the situation here, mentioning both the death of Gonzales and Jerry's return. There was a final pause on Harry's part while he received instructions from his chief.

Then, clamping the telephone back in place, Harry whipped away his handkerchief, draped it over his free hand in order to turn the door knob. Gesturing Jerry along with his gun, Harry ordered crisply:

"Come along. We're getting out of here."

A wise decision, one that won Jerry's accord and would have reinstated Harry where Jerry was concerned, but for the sounds that came from below. They were creeping sounds, accompanied by creaks of the stairs up which they came.

Footsteps, a batch of them, representing the menace that the warning voice had promised at the end of the ten minute time limit!

CHAPTER V

IT was Harry Vincent who acted. The privilege was Harry's, inasmuch as he still held his gun with the business end covering Jerry Reeth.

No nudge this time, but a shove of the automatic sent Jerry deeper into the little living room before he realized that he might have made a successful snatch at Harry's automatic.

For Harry was busy with other operations. He was closing the door, throwing its latch and finally reaching for the light switch.

All that with one hand, the hand encumbered by the pocket handkerchief that eliminated any betraying fingerprints.

A click and the lights were off.

Then Harry's voice, in a tone reduced to a sharp whisper:

"Move into the other room, Reeth. Take it easy and don't stumble over Gonzales."

ALIBI TRAIL

They circled the body, one on either side, and in the thick darkness, Jerry heard Harry's tone ordering him to hurry along. Purposely stalling, Jerry hoped Harry hadn't guessed it, but couldn't take further chances. Jerry's own creaking footsteps were giving away his position too plainly.

If an enemy, Harry wouldn't hesitate to shoot should Jerry trend toward making trouble. As a friend, Harry would be helpful, therefore Jerry would benefit by obeying him.

Though he had by no means lost his distrust of Harry, Jerry was giving him the benefit of doubt until the men from the stairs found the apartment locked and decided to go away.

Jerry's brain needed a few less cob-webs. A locked door hadn't helped Gonzales.

Again, a locked door proved its inefficiency. Hardly had Harry hooked Jerry forcibly and thrust him into the inner room, before a key clattered in the outer door and the light from the hallway entered, bringing men with it.

Instead of closing the door of Jerry's tiny bedroom, Harry left it slightly ajar and allowed Jerry the privilege of peering through to see what happened.

There were three arrivals in all. One of them pulled the cord of a lamp while another closed the door. To Jerry, the group looked more than vaguely familiar. From their actions he felt reasonably certain that they were members of the crew that had waylaid him on Long Island.

Dull light combined with pulled down hats to hide the faces of these unsavory gentry. They went around in stooped fashion like a cross between a bevy of gorillas and a minority of Snow White's little dwarfs. They were stooped because it helped their present operation.

What they did was open a large trunk in the corner, dump out what few of Jerry's belongings were still in it, then gather up Gonzales' body and slump it into the trunk. The trunk received Gonzales in bunched fashion, all except his feet, which were finally shoved within.

Next, they planted the trunk tray back in place, closed the lid and locked it. While one man was shoving the clamps shut, another attached a baggage check to the trunk handle. Then two of them hoisted the trunk like a pair of baggage movers and started for the door with it.

They were efficient too, this trip. As though they had rehearsed the act, they included precautionary tactics. Always, before taking over a task, one man waited until another had concluded his. The odd man invariably had a gun and kept himself beyond the trunk at a spot from which he could cover either door and at the same time be shielded.

In their departure, the odd man moved ahead to the hallway door, while looking straight toward the inner room from which Harry and Jerry watched. At the door, the gunner paused to listen; then drew the door ajar. He let the trunk carriers pass him; then stepped to the lamp, pulled its cord, and wheeled to the door to follow. By then, the other pair had reached the stairs with the trunk, which meant that the man with the gun would be able to cover their trip from above.

None of this had escaped Harry's notice, but Jerry hadn't studied the details too closely. Such bold appropriation of Jerry's own property, plus the wanton handling of Gonzales' body, was the sort of process to fire anyone's antagonism. That Harry should remain cool, caused a new surge of Jerry's old suspicions.

ALIBI TRAIL

What the crooks were framing was a puzzle to Jerry and he didn't like the riddle. Moreover, he didn't like Harry for letting them get away with it. If they were to be stopped, now was the time, while the odd man was turning in the darkness to reach the hallway door.

It didn't occur to Jerry that Harry was waiting just the instant to take a proper bead on that lone gunman and clip him at the proper moment. Nor did Harry, tense in his own right, suspect that Jerry had reached a berserk pitch. But that was the way it was.

On impulse, Jerry let ride with a sweeping fist that cleared Harry's gun hand and clipped the jaw above it. Staggered, Harry rolled sideways, clearing the door for Jerry, who plunged right through. The clatter caused the thug at the outer door to turn and let fire with his gun, but his shots were blind and therefore too high.

Jerry was coming forward with a low drive and Harry was half-sagged to the floor. Two bullets missed them and before the gunman could deliver a third, Jerry hit him and bowled him out into the hall. Triumphant, Jerry pounced further, expecting to overpower his foe. He was totally discounting the two men with the trunk.

That was Jerry's mistake.

They'd probably rehearsed the trunk act, too.

They let go of the trunk and the lower man sidestepped it while the man above was turning. Then both were charging up the stairs, swinging the guns that they snatched from their pockets. Jerry was struggling with their companion, trying to get the fellow's gun, but he didn't have a chance.

Jerry was just a set-up.

Slugging guns would have rocked him then and there, but for the same intervention that had aided him before. It came in a fierce, strident peal from the hallway down below the stairs.

The laugh of The Shadow!

Crooks dived wide when they heard that challenge rising above the banging crash of the trunk that was bouncing down the stairs. They didn't stop to reason that The Shadow couldn't be on his way up, not with Gonzales' improvised coffin coming at him like an avalanche. The man with whom Jerry struggled was just as ardent as the other, so ardent that he flung off Jerry like a batch of straw and started to follow the others back into the apartment.

There they met Harry, coming gun first. They met him in a wild drive, with Jerry springing after them. Still groggy from Jerry's punch, Harry didn't find his trigger until his gun was driven up. His gun sputtered, so did another, likewise shoved high as Jerry clutched its owner's hand. Again, The Shadow's laugh.

He was coming up the stairs, The Shadow, and from behind him echoed the clatter of the trunk as it continued out through the door and down the steps to the street. To Jerry, all those sounds were mostly echo, for he was on his way out. Jerry wasn't deserting Harry, for he still wasn't sure that Harry was a friend. What impelled Jerry was the fact that he didn't belong in any league where all the players, except himself, were sporting firearms.

The route that Jerry took was the shortest; straight through the little bedroom and out its broad window which he crashed in a single lunge. Out back was a low, slanted roof and Jerry slid right down it to the ground below. There he took a leap that was very like a bounce and cleared a high board fence in the cat fashion that he had learned during his army training.

ALIBI TRAIL

That window crash was an invitation to others. The three thugs who heard it all thought that one of their number had paved the way. They followed and came sliding from the roof like a row of diagonal marks in a game of tic-tac-toe. But they didn't bounce across the fence; their catlike tactics were of the alley variety. They saw an opening to the side street and took it, post haste.

Up in Jerry's living room, Harry Vincent was surging for the only figure that he saw, slugging blindly with his gun. The figure met him coming through the doorway, took him in a grapple that suppressed him, gun and all. What jarred Harry to his senses was a hissed tone in his ear.

It was The Shadow, bringing his rather bewildered agent back into line.

There was no use in taking the back window route. The Shadow recognized that the crooks were thinking of flight, not of pursuing Jerry. From the standpoint of evidence, the thing to reclaim was the trunk that had gone downstairs. The Shadow didn't have to be told that it contained Gonzales' body, because he could see that the body – already reported by Harry – was no longer on the living room floor.

Hauling Harry with him, The Shadow led a sweeping course down the front stairs, but by the time they reached the street another opportunity was gone. An inert thing like a trunk couldn't depart of its own accord, but arrangements had been made for its departure and the trunk had announced its own arrival on the street.

From half a block away, a parked delivery truck had come to life, swept up to the house and dropped a two-man crew that scooped up the trunk and threw themselves on board with it. They didn't know what had happened in the house, but it wasn't their business to wait and learn.

They were wise, too, in that decision.

Shots blasted as the truck rounded the corner but a projecting pair of steps intercepted The Shadow's bullets. The truck was away and a police whistle was shrilling in echo to The Shadow's blasts. Somebody had reported the earlier gunfire and the law was already on the job.

Alone, The Shadow might have hailed a cab that he had waiting around the corner, but with Harry as an added and slightly uncertain factor, it wouldn't do to begin a slowed pursuit. So instead, The Shadow rushed Harry to the corner, rolled him into the cab, and told its driver, a quick-witted chap named Shrevvy, to head the other way.

The Shadow was staying on the ground to learn what else he could. His parting laugh, low and fear-provoking, was swallowed like himself into the surrounding thickness of the night!

CHAPTER VI

FOR a man who was either dead or missing, Jerry preferred to be the latter, considering that the locale was New York City.

There were advantages in being missed in Manhattan. It missed you, but you didn't miss it.

In a vest-pocket hotel called the Colonnade, Jerry was enjoying a newspaper along with his breakfast and admiring a retouched front-page photograph of a G.I. who happened to be himself. It was anything but a reasonable facsimile. Jerry could only hope that Brenda Van Dolphe didn't see the picture. He looked for hers, hoping that he'd find it somewhere in the newspaper, but it wasn't included. Maybe it wouldn't be any more flattering than Jerry's, but Jerry would have to wait to find out.

ALIBI TRAIL

Nobody would ever find Jerry by his photograph, of that Jerry felt quite certain. Here at the Hotel Colonnade, where he was registered under another name, he felt reasonably secure. If the police really instigated a hunt, it would probably carry out of town; meanwhile, Jerry would just sit tight.

And sitting tight seemed very wise.

From the news accounts, which carried the statement "Missing Van Dolphe Claimant Sought," Jerry gained the inkling that the authorities might be holding out on something. Perhaps they'd gained evidence of foul play and if so, they would assume that Jerry was the victim. In which case, Jerry might be quite embarrassed if he showed up at the Bureau of Missing Persons to report himself restored to the realm of the found. It would be pretty difficult answering a police quiz on the subject of Gonzales.

As a missing person, Jerry's policy was solid. He couldn't be blamed too much for dropping out of sight, considering that he had met mysterious enemies. Meanwhile he could await developments and keep certain people guessing. One person who would be on the guessing list, and specifically, was Simon Severidge, the over-smart attorney for the Van Dolphe Estate.

In their few meetings, Jerry had talked too much and too frankly to Severidge, even to the point of mentioning Gonzales and the men who might be interested in reclaiming the old Quetzal Silver Mine. Jerry had told Severidge the address where the lawyer could reach him, and Jerry certainly had been reached last night at that address, namely his apartment.

Only on his last visit to Severidge's office had Jerry gained anything worthwhile. That was when he saw a memo on a desk in the outer office, mentioning that Brenda Van Dolphe was coming into the obscure Long Island air field. That was yesterday afternoon and Jerry hadn't waited to talk to Severidge. Right now, Jerry was well convinced that Severidge had guessed why.

So Severidge was off Jerry's calling list.

As for futures, Jerry was mentally checking two other names. One was Kirk Grimshaw, the importer; the other, Alvin Lancaster, the promoter. They were the two men who controlled the Quetzal Mine and Jerry had met each separately and briefly at Gonzales' suggestion.

Each had said the same thing. If enough cash could be raised to resume operations at the Quetzal, they'd be interested. But there wasn't any use in the partners talking it over unless Jerry came through with the finances. So for the present, there was no need in seeing either Grimshaw or Lancaster.

The person that Jerry Reeth still wanted to see was Brenda Van Dolphe.

From his vest pocket, Jerry took a key. It was an old key, thin and peculiarly shaped. This key, in Jerry's pocket all the time, was the cause for his sudden suspicion when the word "key" had been mentioned, perhaps inadvertently, by Harry Vincent.

This key was highly important to Jerry Reeth. It might prove to be the exact passport that he needed to hold a confidential interview with Brenda Van Dolphe.

Some twenty blocks distant from the Colonnade, there loomed a Gargantuan brownstone mansion which could practically have swallowed the little hotel that now had Jerry as a guest. This oversized by-product of old New York happened to be the Van Dolphe Manhattan residence.

ALIBI TRAIL

In a dining room the size of a foyer, beautiful Brenda, attired in a lavish negligee, was breakfasting with her uncle, Judge Jeffrey, and Senora Hidalgo, the duenna from Colombia. The only servant present, in fact the only one visible on the premises, was Claxon, an old retainer who had been sent ahead to open the house.

Of course Cedric Treat was also present, and very busy indeed. A lot of arrangements had gone awry, which was Treat's fault, but putting them right would be his business and Treat was indeed adept. The sharp-faced secretary was a past master at setting things straight, which was why he had been valued by Brenda's father, Craig Van Dolphe, who had purposely preferred to keep his affairs muddled until the right time.

Right now, Treat was checking things for Senora Hidalgo and Claxon, both of whom wished they were back in Colombia and would soon be part way there. Mixing his conversation with bits of Spanish, Treat made matters fully understandable.

"Don't worry about the servants, Claxon," Treat told the old retainer. "I haven't dismissed them. I simply told them to take time off, with pay. You hired them in a hurry to open the house and they've done that much. Tomorrow, I shall have the new butler interview them and decide which we want to keep."

Claxon nodded, glad to be relieved of the responsibility.

"And tomorrow," added Treat, "Manana, you will leave for Havana to occupy the house I rented there. Senora Hidalgo will go along with you."

At that, the duenna broke into an excited stream of Spanish, which Treat understood and took quite methodically.

"Do not worry about Senorita Van Dolphe," returned Treat. "She needs no duenna here in Nueva York. She will have a chaperone or companion in her great-cousin Genevieve, who will arrive within a few days."

To that, Judge Jeffrey nodded his approval.

"And until then," asserted the judge, "Brenda will remain here in the house. I agree with Treat that the less people who meet her, the better. Particularly" – Judge Jeffrey slapped a newspaper vehemently – "while this fol-de-rol about a claimant is afoot."

To that, Brenda put a question in pure Castilian Spanish, then realizing that her uncle did not understand, she laughed lightly and asked in perfect English:

"What is a claimant, my uncle?"

"In this case," replied Jeffrey, "it is an upstart named Jerry Reeth, who is seeking notoriety by faking a disappearance. He wants to rouse sympathy because he pretends that he has a right to some of your father's currency."

Brenda rippled her negligee with an indifferent shrug.

"Quien sabe?" was her comment. "You have said yourself that I need not worry about my father's money, since I have other millions which my mother left in trust."

"I'll do the worrying," the judge asserted. "Or rather Severidge will. When will Simon be here, Treat?"

ALIBI TRAIL

"I arranged for you to meet him at his office," returned Treat. "He is detained there by appointments on account of the Reeth affair."

"But I'm leaving for Washington at noon!" exploded Judge Jeffrey. "From there, I must fly directly to Manila on a governmental mission. I was to go over the documents that Brenda must sign."

"They are all waiting at Severidge's office," explained Treat. "You can stop there, sir, on your way to the airport. Mr. Severidge says that you can approve them and have your signature notarized. Captain Platt has already done so."

"He will not be here?" queried Brenda, in surprise. "My cousin, el Capitan?"

"He flew to Paris yesterday," put in Jeffrey, "He's to serve on the staff of a commission going to Syria. Your cousin Jim simply did us a favor by saying he'd be here to meet you today. It was Treat's idea."

Treat supplied a shrewd, self-approving smile, a specialty with him.

"To prevent newspaper interviews," stated Treat. "It worked splendidly. Not a reporter was at the air field."

"There was a photographer, though," objected Jeffrey. "He tried to take Brenda's picture, which is another reason she should avoid appearing in public until her affairs are settled. That won't be long" – the judge turned to Brenda, reassuringly – "because within the week, Brenda, you will come of age."

Brenda didn't seem to be interested. She was annoyed because she was to miss seeing Captain Jim Platt.

"You are all my family that I have met," the girl protested. "Only you, Uncle Judge and Captain Jim."

"You'll like Cousin Genevieve," Jeffrey promised. "She will find friends for you, Brenda."

All the while, Treat was retaining his canny smile, but it vanished suddenly when the door opened behind him. Wheeling quickly, Treat faced a man in chauffeur's uniform who had entered.

"What are you doing here, Herkimer?" snapped Treat. "I told you I would summon you."

Herkimer didn't answer for the moment. He was intrigued at the sight of Brenda.

Though he was the chauffeur who had driven the limousine the night before, he hadn't gained a good look at the fur-clad beauty. From his narrowed eyes and smug smile, it was apparent that Herkimer felt that his job entitled him to feast his gaze on the mysterious Miss Van Dolphe, the fabulous young lady from Colombia.

"Speak up, Herkimer!"

"Sorry, Mr. Treat." The chauffeur shook his gaze from Brenda, who was eyeing him quite curiously. "You said Judge Jeffrey was going to the lawyer's office."

"So I am." The judge arose from the table. "Good-bye, Brenda."

Herkimer watched the judge give the girl a fatherly kiss and gave Treat a half-wink. Then, in leaving, the chauffeur made a half salute which was obviously meant for Brenda and moved his lips in a muffled "So long, Toots." Sharp as usual, Treat didn't miss that one.

At the door of the room, the secretary halted Judge Jeffrey and nudged toward the outer door, where Herkimer had headed.

"That chauffeur," specified Treat. "Perhaps he tipped off the camera man. What's more, he has the look of an adventurer, the very type we should keep away from Miss Van Dolphe."

"Use your own judgment, Treat," approved the judge. "If any questions perplex you, particularly legal ones, you may communicate with Severidge. I shall remind him that you are in full charge of matters here at the house."

Bowing a grateful acknowledgment, Treat watched Judge Jeffrey go out through the great front door. It was then that the secretary's smile returned, far more crafty than before.

This time, however, Treat's lips formed a cold, merciless curve that boded ill for someone!

CHAPTER VII

SIMON SEVERIDGE sat in his old-fashioned private office and studied a group of visitors in stolid, close-mouthed fashion. In fact, Severidge, even when viewed by impartial observers, produced much the same effect that he had impressed upon Jerry Reeth.

The term "spider crab" suited Severidge perfectly. He had the manner of a spider and this room, with its entanglement of musty law books and ancient file cases, gave the semblance of a web. Severidge also had the look of a crab, the way he hunched at his great desk, his arms folded in front of him, his fingers frequently in slow, itchy motion, as if he were an automaton rather than a human.

Perhaps he'd grown that way, like his withering face and thinning hair, during the thirty odd years he had spent in finally becoming the senior member of the law firm of Crittenden, Severidge, Hurd and Fortesque, four names of which Simon Severidge was the only survivor. At any rate, Severidge now owned the business and was continuing it in its quaint old way.

How he liked representing very wealthy estates that could have bought and sold him, was a question that only Severidge could answer – and didn't. But that question now was in the minds of the lawyer's visitors.

These visitors consisted of Police Commissioner Ralph Weston, a very brusque, important individual, who had brought along a friend who knew a great deal about Latin America. The friend's name was Lamont Cranston and in his other life, he was The Shadow, a fact which he never publicly proclaimed. In contrast to Weston, Cranston was calm-mannered, impassive of features; quite as much a human enigma as was Severidge.

Two other men were present: Kirk Grimshaw and Alvin Lancaster. They too were a contrast. Grimshaw was stolid, long-faced, with whitish hair that seemed the result of habitual worry. Lancaster had roundish features, pleasant as those of a jack-o'-lantern and just about as sincere. From his double chin to the top of his baldish head, his pumpkin face was a succession of upward curves that marked him as a professional optimist.

They looked like what they were: Grimshaw an importer; Lancaster a promoter.

"Tell us more about young Reeth," Weston was saying. "You say he came here to see you several times."

"Several times," repeated Severidge. "Always to press his claim on the Van Dolphe Estate."

"And was his claim good enough?"

"Good enough for blackmail, if that happened to be his purpose."

"You mean you accused him of blackmail?"

"I accused him of nothing. I told him simply that I was not interested in hearsay, rumor or canards."

"And you say he asked for money?"

"He asked for money that he thought was due him. I doubted that there was any such."

There was a pause while Weston gathered himself to put more questions, hoping that he could sidestep Severidge's system of beginning all sentences with a paraphrase of what another person had just said. Finally, the commissioner asked:

"Since the claim was invalid and Reeth insisted he was not engaged in blackmail, what did he expect to gain?"

"He may have felt he had a nuisance value," replied Severidge. "Large estates have been known to settle for small sums when their attorneys do not like being bothered." Severidge paused, closed his mouth in his tight fashion, then opened it to add: "I make it my business to be bothered."

If that happened to be meant for Weston, the commissioner ignored it. Turning to Grimshaw and Lancaster, he plied them with questions.

"How long did you two know Reeth?"

"I only met him once," replied Grimshaw. "He talked money, but didn't show it."

"The same here," responded Lancaster. "I said for him to settle his business with the Van Dolphe Estate. Then we'd probably listen."

"Listen to what?" queried Weston. "A mining proposition?"

"Yes. The reopening of the Quetzal Silver Mine," declared Lancaster. "I'd like to unload my stock at somewhere near par. I suppose the same applies to Grimshaw."

Grimshaw nodded that it did.

"Did Reeth say why he thought the mine was good?"

"He'd been getting information from Mexico," replied Grimshaw, to Weston's question. "But he didn't mention the exact source."

Lancaster shook his head to indicate that the same applied to his interview with Jerry.

"The source was a man named Gonzales," stated Severidge, across the desk. "A Mexican, I believe. But Reeth talked about the things Gonzales was going to tell him, rather than what he already had."

"This Gonzales?" queried Weston. "Where was he?"

ALIBI TRAIL

"In Mexico, I presume," rejoined Severidge, dryly. "That would be logical, since Reeth never produced him here. Of course, we have no proof that this Gonzales exists."

Severidge's eyes had become piercing in their search, as though seeking a face that they could thoroughly probe. They stopped on Cranston and stayed, as though Severidge had found a fascination from those immobile, unyielding features. Then came an interruption in the form of a buzzer. Severidge picked up a telephone.

"Hello... Judge Jeffrey is here?... Tell him I shall meet him in the conference room..."

Before Severidge could hang up, Weston interrupted.

"I'd like to speak to Judge Jeffrey."

"I shall talk to the judge in here," amended Severidge across the phone. "Bring in the papers at the same time."

Ushered into Severidge's office, the distinguished judge was surprised to see the assemblage. He recognized both Cranston and Weston before Severidge introduced them and the lawyer didn't bother to introduce Grimshaw or Lancaster.

"It's about Reeth," Severidge told Jeffrey. "The commissioner is quite disturbed because of his disappearance."

"Say rather the circumstances of his disappearance," corrected Weston. "There was gunplay at Reeth's apartment last night and later his car was found abandoned on a Long Island highway."

At that, Judge Jeffrey raised his heavy eyebrows.

"Near the air field where our plane landed?"

That brought a nod from Weston.

"Simply explained," put in Severidge crisply. "Reeth must have started out there to meet Miss Van Dolphe. He left late, that was all."

Judge Jeffrey slowly shook his head.

"We saw no abandoned car while driving into town," he declared. "We were watching carefully, too, because _"

"And that proves my statement," interposed Severidge. "Reeth left late, or you would have encountered him. He must have picked up some partial information, or some stray news report, regarding the landing of an unidentified plane."

As if that settled it, Severidge laid out the papers pertaining to Brenda Van Dolphe and invited Judge Jeffrey to go over them. Finding they were no longer needed, Grimshaw and Lancaster filed out, which left Weston and Cranston standing in a corner.

"That photographer puzzles me," muttered Weston. "I'm going to ask the judge about him."

ALIBI TRAIL

Cranston nodded. He was listening to comments exchanged between Jeffrey and Severidge. The judge was explaining that Treat, the secretary, would handle all the details at the house until Brenda's great-cousin Genevieve arrived. On the day when Brenda came of age, Severidge could call and have her sign the necessary papers, those that were now being certified by Jeffrey, and from then on, her affairs would be in her own hands.

"Of course you will be retained as counsel," assured Jeffrey, "particularly to handle such matters as the Reeth claim. That is all, Severidge. I find these papers quite satisfactory."

As the judge turned to the door, the commissioner intercepted him.

"About last night, judge," reminded Weston. "The photographer you mentioned –"

"Some boulder who tried to crash the police cordon," completed Jeffrey. "They took his camera away, I believe. Of course if he managed to keep a picture, he will capitalize on it."

"He couldn't have been connected with Reeth?"

"I wouldn't know, but I doubt it. He wasn't a newspaper photographer, or the photograph would have appeared by now. If he tries to sell us the picture, rather than having it published, Severidge can handle the matter."

"You drove straight into town last night?"

"Directly to the house, all of us. Any other questions, commissioner?"

Nodding, Weston brought out an envelope and from it produced a few odd items, such as a theater stub, half a torn envelope, an empty matchpack.

"Do you recognize any of these?"

"No," replied the judge. "What are they?"

"We found them in Reeth's apartment," the commissioner explained. "We thought that through them we might be able to trace some other place where he had been. Has any one called at the Van Dolphe mansion since Brenda arrived?"

"No one at all."

With a bow, Weston decided to let Judge Jeffrey finish his business with Severidge. In fact, Weston bowed himself out of the office and Cranston went with him. Following to the door, Severidge spoke crisply to the parting visitors, particularly Weston.

"If I hear anything from Reeth, I shall let you know," the attorney declared. "The same applies to that photographer, whoever he was. I shall phone the Van Dolphe residence and instruct Treat, the secretary, to notify me if anything occurs there. I understand that Treat is highly reliable, although I have never met him."

There was a peculiarity to Severidge's tone that made it difficult to trace the thought behind it. The more straightforward his speech, the more it seemed tinged with insincerity. Perhaps that was the way he intended it.

And with that, Simon Severidge closed the door, leaving his status an unanswered question, even for The Shadow!

CHAPTER VIII

The final editions of the evening newspapers corroborated the fact that Commissioner Weston had stated regarding Jerry's car being found out on Long Inland. The account treated the matter as a mystery, which made it all the better from Jerry's standpoint.

It indicated that police and other searchers would be looking for Jerry Reeth everywhere except in Manhattan, which in turn would allow Jerry to roam at large, which was exactly what he intended to do.

Those newspaper accounts interested Brenda Van Dolphe when she read them. The newspapers were brought into the commodious library of the mansion by Herkimer, the chauffeur, who bowed politely and asked if there was anything else that Brenda wanted.

"There is," Brenda decided. "Tell me this, Herkimer. Since Treat was annoyed when you came into the house this morning, why has he suddenly allowed you the run of the place?"

The question took Herkimer aback. The chauffeur was a bold sort, who had made it only too plain that he wanted to impress the very important Miss Van Dolphe. In trying to act independent and at the same time work himself into good graces, Herkimer had to be ready to gamble at almost every turn.

Herkimer knew that effrontery would pay dividends – but only to a certain point. If Treat had put him a blunt question, Herkimer would have had a smart reply. But such a question coming from Brenda, completely nonplussed him.

Besides, Herkimer couldn't quite understand the manner that prompted the question. He didn't realize, that although Brenda spoke English perfectly, she had used it comparatively little. Therefore remarks that she put abruptly or pointedly, were often intended purely as frank inquiry, which applied in this case.

If Herkimer had found words to reply, he might have talked himself right out of the house; but while the chauffeur hesitated, his dilemma was solved by someone else, of all people, Treat.

The secretary was entering the library at that moment and he picked up where Herkimer left off.

"I can answer that question, Miss Van Dolphe," declared Treat, smoothly. "We need servants who are capable and reliable. Until we find them, as we shall, the household will operate on a modified basis."

"With no servants at all?" exclaimed Brenda.

"Some will come in and out," replied Treat, "such as the chef or the housemaids. But there is no reason why you should see any of them, Miss Van Dolphe, until we are sure that they will prove satisfactory."

"But what about Herkimer?" asked Brenda, in her frank style. "Why are you keeping him?"

By now, Herkimer was realizing that Brenda did not put her queries as a matter of personal affront, nor even as a suggestion of policy. The chauffeur folded his arms and waited hopefully as he watched Treat.

"Herkimer is enterprising," decided Treat, "therefore we shall give him a fair opportunity to prove his loyalty and worth. Since you have met him, Miss Van Dolphe, we may as well count him as the first of the

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permanent servants." Treat turned to Herkimer. "Of course that depends, Herkimer," added Treat, "on whether you fulfill your duties. I gave you several today; have you a report on them?"

From his jacket, Herkimer produced a list and handed it to Treat, who ran through it, nodded, and placed the list in his pocket.

"Very good," approved Treat. "I shall summon you later, Herkimer."

It was nearly dark outdoors when Herkimer came from the huge mansion. This was summer and daylight persisted late, which seemed to annoy Herkimer. However, the chauffeur's face took on a pleased grin as he stood beside the Van Dolphe limousine and glanced at his wrist watch. Then, in a deliberate manner, Herkimer stepped into the big car.

Right then, darkness did a curious thing.

There was plenty of darkness, squatting in front of the overhanging bulk of the great, old-fashioned homestead. It was the sort of darkness made to order for lurkers; perhaps that was why the front windows of the capacious house were adequately barred.

Proof that a lurker was actually present came when a portion of the darkness wavered, detached itself from the mansion's front and stretched across the sidewalk, as though the thickening dusk were playing queer tricks with the shadows east by the nearest street lamps.

Except that the term "shadows" should not have been plural.

This was a singular shadow.

So singular that it was called The Shadow.

The proceeding blackness reached itself clear to the rear door of the limousine, seemed to gather up the stretch of darkness that lay behind it. Briefly it became a tall human shape in a black cloak and slouch hat; then it disappeared again.

This time it vanished into the Van Dolphe limousine.

Herkimer didn't hear the door open and close behind the mysterious figure. The chauffeur was at that moment making too much noise with the starter.

During a drive of a few blocks, Herkimer didn't even look back into the rear seat where he wouldn't have seen his lone passenger if he had looked back.

The Shadow was perfectly blended with the interior of the big car. So far as Herkimer was concerned, The Shadow was invisible.

Stopping at a little cigar store, Herkimer went in to make a phone call. The interior of the store was quite dim; the phone booth was near the front. Not seeing anyone around, Herkimer didn't close the booth door completely.

If he'd glanced out, Herkimer would have mistaken the blackness near the door as the shadow of the phone booth. It happened to be The Shadow himself, keeping tabs on Herkimer's activities.

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The chauffeur was calling the garage where he kept the car. He gave them instructions that should Treat call, they were to say that Herkimer had stepped out for a few minutes and would call back when he returned. Herkimer added that he would keep contacting the garage, to check on whether Treat called.

Again with his mysterious passenger, who this time had preceded him to the limousine, Herkimer drove some thirty-odd blocks to a decrepit sector of the East Side, where the fancy car made a striking contrast to the shabby appearance of the neighborhood. There Herkimer entered a pawn shop, that was even dimmer than the cigar store.

The pawnbroker knew Herkimer and gave a friendly nod; then craned his neck to look at the car outside, as though hoping that Herkimer intended to hock some of the spare parts belonging to the luxurious job.

"Look, unk." Herkimer became confidential. "You know me well enough. You've just taken a look at the car I'm driving, so you know I'm drawing salary. I've got an idea, see? Only it may take a grand or so to swing it."

The wizened pawnbroker raised the part of his face where he should have had eyebrows.

"You mean leaving that car for security? You want I should get pinched?"

"No security." Herkimer shook his head. "Just a sure shot, with a fifty-fifty on the dough."

"You want I should play a horse?"

"I want you in on a photo-finish," chuckled Herkimer, thinking affability would help. "It's this, unk. The dame I work for is in the big money. Her name is Van Dolphe, daughter of the guy who used to get South American mining concessions by paying off the national debt for some of those countries down there."

"You should see her" – Herkimer blew a kiss. "A blonde and gorgeous. That's what worries her family. They don't want pictures taken of her or all the smart boys in New York will be after her. Only last night, a guy got a photograph."

Unk shrugged.

"Hocking photographs now," he said. "No good. Worse than wedding rings."

"This isn't a hock job," argued Herkimer. "Listen, unk. Today, my job was chasing around to find out who that photographer was. His name is Russ Wilbert and I know where to reach him. Only I've got to get there before the Van Dolphe lawyer does."

"And why? If they want the picture, let them buy it."

"So Wilbert can get the price they'll pay? I bet he'd settle for half a grand, only I want to be heeled in case he doubles it. Because five G's would be minimum from the lawyer, Simon Severidge, who represents the Van Dolphe estate."

Unk began to shake his head.

"I heard the secretary talking to him over the phone," insisted Herkimer. "The secretary is named Cedric Treat – see? I've got to play smart with Treat, to hold the job, but if I can get to Russ Wilbert in a hurry –"

More head-shakes. Turning on his heel, Herkimer strode to the door, turned there and stormed back.

"You're a cluck, unk! I know other guys who will listen if you don't."

Blackness was evaporating ahead of Herkimer; again, that blackness represented The Shadow. Only this time it didn't enter the limousine before Herkimer drove savagely away. The Shadow waited until the car had gone. Then, his black figure glided from the darkness near the front of the pawn shop.

A whispered laugh stirred the darkness, telling that The Shadow had found the trail he wanted!

CHAPTER IX

IT was very dark now, outside the Van Dolphe mansion, so dark that Jerry Reeth particularly liked it. He was sure as he moved rather furtively along the street, that no one would be able to spot him.

There, Jerry was wrong. The Shadow would have noted him instantly. But The Shadow, at that moment, was away over on the East Side, just preparing to begin a trail that would bring him back in this general direction, but with a long way to go.

However, The Shadow had capable assistants. Harry Vincent had proven that fact the night before; now another of The Shadow's competent aides was taking over a vigil that his chief could not at the present keep.

This watcher answered to the name of Hawkeye, whenever he answered to a name. Usually the phrase "Hey, you!" was enough to influence Hawkeye, because in appearance and action he was as shambly a figure as anyone could expect to see. It was a part of Hawkeye's business to slink in and out of places as though he didn't belong there or anywhere else. This made him very valuable as a checker-upper on various matters that The Shadow was too busy to handle.

Hawkeye's one trouble was that he lacked The Shadow's range. Where the cloaked master could glide swiftly and almost invisibly, Hawkeye found it necessary to slouch from one place to another. The Shadow knew how to pass unnoticed; Hawkeye was able only to render himself inconspicuous and at times this meant a world of difference.

Around the Van Dolphe mansion was such a difference. Upon spotting Jerry, Hawkeye tried to trail him, but was forced to seek shelter in a doorway across the street.

The reason was this:

A car had pulled up in front of the mighty mausoleum that the Van Dolphe's termed a mansion. Out of that car alighted a brace of stocky personages that even at this distance smelled of police to Hawkeye. They were looking around in a typically professional style, which meant that they overlooked a respectable person like Jerry as he straightened up and took the corner in gentlemanly fashion. But these fly-cops as Hawkeye classed them, would have been quick to spot and nab a slinker.

So Hawkeye didn't slink.

Instead, Hawkeye just watched and waited, wondering who these headquarters men were and why they were visiting the Van Dolphe place. As a result Hawkeye wasn't able to tag along after Jerry.

Around the corner, Jerry made a quick sidle into a passage behind the tremendous mansion. Well down that alley, he found a recess at the back of the house and took to that shelter. Anxiously, nervously, he brought out

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the odd key that was his prized possession. Running his hand in and out the ivy and hoping it wasn't poison, Jerry came to what he wanted, a fissure in the stone wall.

That fissure had a key-hole, which Jerry discovered. Drawing his breath furiously, fearing that at any moment hefty hands might come from the dark and lay themselves upon his shoulder, Jerry inserted the key. Without a groan, well-oiled hinges responded to the twist of Jerry's key.

A chunk of the wall came open like a door and Jerry gratefully ascended a short pair of iron steps, pleased when he heard the barrier click shut behind him, with even its ivy rustling into place. Ahead was a wall that Jerry barely glimpsed in the brief show of light that followed him before the outer stone closed. That wall was wood, as Jerry discovered when he probed it. During the probe he found another key-hole, made for the key he carried. Jerry unlocked the inner door.

This brought him to the landing of an old, little-used staircase, that led up from a corner of the downstairs hallway, though probably people had often wondered why, since the hallway already had a grand staircase leading up to the second floor. At least this side stairway could be admired as a showpiece, because all the way up, its wainscoting was beautifully and ornately paneled.

That was one thing that didn't mystify Jerry after he closed the secret door. He saw how neatly the paneling fitted, much like the designed squares of a Chinese puzzle. On this side, even the key-hole was invisible, buried deep in the petals of a carved rosette.

The landing itself was neatly isolated. The stairs came up from one direction and turned in another. A person could step back against the wall and remain unnoticed in the gloom by anyone who passed. In addition, the landing gave its occupant the advantage of observing both the floor below and that above, by merely shifting position.

There were voices from below, so Jerry peered around the corner to learn whose they were. He saw Treat, the secretary, bowing politely to the two stocky men who had come in the front door. Then Treat turned and introduced Claxon, the old servitor who was slated for a trip to Havana with Senora Hidalgo, the duenna.

Catching shreds of conversation, Jerry learned who these two visitors were. They weren't headquarters men as Hawkeye had supposed; they were a pair of private operatives from a strictly high-class detective agency. Why Treat had hired them was also rendered plain.

"We are short on servants," Jerry heard the secretary explain, "Until the new butler is here, I can not hire regular help. Today our chauffeur, Herkimer, a man we supposed to be reliable, acted both boldly and suspiciously.

"Possibly Herkimer was responsible for the unpleasant incident at the air field, where someone informed a photographer that Miss Van Dolphe was to arrive by plane. I am giving Herkimer a chance to prove his loyalty, but I cannot burden myself with the same risk where other servants are concerned.

"Tonight, I would like you gentlemen to make sure that every door is locked; that no intruder enters this house. Specifically, I am worried about an upstart named Jerry Reeth, who has recently disappeared, perhaps for the express purpose of annoying Miss Van Dolphe.

"So you will patrol the house and particularly the ground floor to make sure that there are no such interlopers. I shall stay in the library, where you may report to me hourly. Claxon will now show you about the premises."

That was enough for Jerry. If the private detectives were going to inspect the ground floor first, it was time that Jerry was on his way to the second, for his interview with Brenda Van Dolphe. Shifting across the landing, Jerry stole up to the next floor, to find himself confronted by a maze of doors, anyone of which might represent Brenda's suite.

As he paused near one door, Jerry heard a sound beyond it. He had hardly identified the sound as that of a telephone bell, when a girl's voice interrupted it with the word:

"Hallo?"

Turning the knob, Jerry found the door open and a moment later was listening to voluble Spanish, which suddenly changed to perfect English. He heard the girl laugh; then her tone became serious.

"The picture?" she inquired. "But no, we do not want the picture!... Your name?... Russ Wilbert? Yes... I shall remember..."

Now, through the open door, Jerry was watching Brenda at a telephone table, as she wrote an address that she was taking across the wire. The girl was wrapped in a Turkish bathrobe that looked as lavish as the alpaca coat and her back was turned partly toward the door.

"Of course I shall tell my secretary," Brenda continued, "but he should have answered for himself... Yes, I suppose he is busy somewhere, but he will tell you the same as I... the picture is something that we do not want. Adios, Senor Wilbert."

Hanging up the telephone, Brenda arose languidly, gathering the loose folds of her deluxe bath-robe. It was then that Jerry decided to attract her attention more forcibly and to better avail than by a mere telephone call. He closed the door carefully, but just emphatically enough to produce an audible thump.

Turning at the sound, Brenda Van Dolphe supplied a startled gaze that made her surprise of last night seem mild. And Jerry, facing from the doorway, showed a grim, triumphant expression that the girl apparently interpreted as representing more of a purpose than a mere interview.

To a degree, Brenda was right. A question of honor was at stake. Jerry was here to make demands that would clear his father's name!

And from Brenda Van Dolphe alone, did Jerry Reeth believe that he could gain the rights that were his due!

CHAPTER X

IT wasn't much to Brenda's credit that she didn't scream, the main reason being that she was quite too frightened to become immediately vocal. How far a cry would have carried in this big, thick-walled house, was another question that should have dissuaded her.

However, Jerry wasn't certain on that point himself. At any rate, he didn't intend to have Brenda try, not with a couple of private cops prowling the premises. Remembering Harry's technique of the night before, how the mere threat of an automatic had enabled him to keep Jerry in hand, it seemed that a similar system would be wise with Brenda.

Having no gun, Jerry at least could fake a substitute. Using his right hand inside his coat pocket, he kept the coat punched up, with an interior finger pointing Brenda's way. Copying the surly tone of the road mob, Jerry announced:

"No squawks. I've got a gat here and I'm likely to let blast!"

Though Brenda's knowledge of English was adequate, it didn't include some of Jerry's terms. Nevertheless, she interpreted the remarks correctly. Her hands loosened their clutch and began to tremble slowly upward, while the shudder of her shoulders became quite apparent as the robe slipped down over them. Brenda's arms weren't in the dangling sleeves, hence she hesitated at raising them.

If anything, Jerry's ruse had worked too well and he was quick to realize it. He wanted Brenda to talk and to add embarrassment to her fright would only double his problem. So Jerry nonchalantly withdrew his hands from his pockets, spread them to show them empty and gestured Brenda to the chair beside the telephone table.

The girl sat down both gratefully and gracefully, since the maneuver enabled her to slide back under the shoulders of the robe as her hands reclaimed the slipping folds. Looking up at Jerry, she lost her fright at the humor of the situation and furnished a rather delightful, though slightly nervous laugh.

Smiling in return, Jerry became his more courteous self, deciding that he couldn't hold a grudge toward such a charming creature even if she happened to be the daughter of Craig Van Dolphe. As the son of Felix Reeth, Jerry had rather resented being a scapegoat on his father's account, whether the Reeth name deserved blemish or not. At least Brenda deserved a hearing under circumstances like these, where any strong-arm retainers were out of calling distance.

But Jerry was to have a hearing first and he had achieved what he wanted, finding Brenda in a situation where about her only choice was to listen.

"I'm Jerry Reeth," he announced. "Maybe you've heard of me."

Brenda nodded emphatically, giving a shimmer to a wealth of blonde hair that added just that much more to her already satisfactory looks.

"What have you heard about me?"

"You have a claim," replied Brenda, simply, "and you disappeared."

"You know what that claim means?"

"Money, I suppose." Brenda gave a shrug that brought one shoulder into the open. Then, stretching a hand to draw the robe back in place, she added: "If it is money, we should pay it of course."

"It's more than money," insisted Jerry. "Your father and mine were partners. They had a silver mine in Mexico."

"In Mexico?" Brenda's thin eyebrows lifted in surprise. "But that was long ago, before my father made his money!"

"That's how he began to make his money," corrected Jerry. "He closed out on Quetzal Silver after my father was arrested for trying to peddle the stock. Since they were partners, half of what your father left you, should come to me."

A frown clouded Brenda's face and Jerry went grim. The girl's scare was past and she was becoming herself, probably strictly Van Dolphe. Which put Jerry in a tough spot, because being a Reeth, he would probably

explain things as unsatisfactorily as his father had.

And there'd be a lot to explain if Brenda grabbed that telephone or screamed to bring a couple of strong-arm detectives. Missing men didn't make mysterious calls on young ladies in their boudoirs, without at least having a certified invitation. Despite himself, Jerry was edging toward the door, preferring a swift flight, when Brenda finished her frown.

"Half my father's money?" she inquired. "Perhaps maybe all should be yours!"

That was something Jerry couldn't believe. He just stood and gaped.

"My father's money," continued Brenda, with a shrug that she confined to the shoulders of the gown, "nobody seems to like it. They say it is bad, my uncle and my cousin; the judge and the captain."

"I suppose my great-cousin, Miss Genevieve, will say the same when I meet her. Maybe, too, the lawyer that I have never met will also feel that it is bad. I have asked Senora Hidalgo and she says nothing, which probably means she does not like it either."

Jerry couldn't credit Severidge with having any qualms about money, whatever its origin, but he was willing to concede the opinion of the others. So he decided to let Brenda continue.

"If it is bad for me," declared Brenda, in a naive tone, "it might be bad for you, which would be very bad, because I like you. But maybe it is bad for me because I have other money. Do you?"

Jerry shook his head.

"Then we can decide together," nodded Brenda, "But we must wait until I can do what I wish with the money. That will be in one, two, three" – she started to count on her fingers, but finding that the robe was relaxing, she gripped it instead – "in a few days," she added. "That will be when I am twenty-one years old."

"I'll make a deal with you right now," put Jerry, with full sincerity. "Buy up the old Quetzal Mine and give me half the profits, if there are any. That will square accounts."

"It will?" Brenda was much pleased. "I think that would be wonderful! I shall speak to my lawyer when I meet him –"

"Don't speak to anybody," interposed Jerry. "That goes not only for Severidge, but your secretary Treat. I don't want him to know I even came here."

"But Claxon will tell him, won't he?"

"Claxon doesn't know I'm here." Jerry produced his key. "I came in by my own special way, the one my father used when he and your father were partners."

This detail both puzzled and intrigued Brenda. Then, almost whimsically, the girl exclaimed:

"It's curious that since this house has a secret entrance, I have not learned about it! Or maybe that is something I shall find among my father's records when I receive my inheritance. Still, I'm surprised that you didn't run into Treat. He always seems to be everywhere."

"He's in the library right now," stated Jerry, "taking a nap, I suppose, while Claxon is posting some guards around the house."

"Then that's why he didn't answer the phone call," recalled Brenda. "My phone here just happened to be connected with the outside line —"

She paused to pick up the paper on which she had noted the name of Russ Wilbert. Showing it to Jerry, Brenda asked:

"Have you ever heard of this man?"

Whether Brenda's gaze was merely inquiring or a trifle suspicious, Jerry didn't try to analyze. He had his own idea about handling this.

"I know about the photograph," conceded Jerry. "Would you like me to get it for you?"

Brenda nodded, quite eagerly.

"All right," said Jerry, "I'll do it, now that we're partners."

With that, Jerry bowed out. Stealing along the hallway he reached the side stairs; looking back, he saw Brenda watching from her doorway as he dipped from sight. Reaching the landing, Jerry found the right rosette and did a quick job with the special key.

Hardly had Jerry gone, before Brenda arrived at the top of the main stairway. Looking down, she saw old Claxon coming through the lower hall, past the bottom of the very stairs where Jerry had gone. The girl called down and asked if Claxon had seen anyone go out.

"Of course not, Senorita," replied Claxon. "Every door in the house is bolted. We have two men watching them and besides, there is no one to go out. Senora Hidalgo is asleep and Mr. Treat is in the library."

Wondering, Brenda went back to her room, half-inclined to regard Jerry's visit as something that she had imagined. However it was too vivid to have been a mere dream, so finally her speculation centered on the question of Jerry's disappearance. To Brenda, it seemed that Jerry must have the ability to travel places unseen.

Maybe Jerry was getting such notions himself, for he became careless when he strolled from the side passage in back of the great house. If he hadn't been so indifferent to surroundings, he might easily have slipped the notice of a man who was watching for his return. As it was, Jerry was spotted on departure.

The spotter was Hawkeye, The Shadow's keen-eyed agent. Instantly Hawkeye took up Jerry's trail, a route that was to lead to The Shadow's own destination!

CHAPTER XI

THE man in the little room was very busy with his work. The little room was a dark room and his work consisted in examining a developed photographic plate. A single light was shining just above his head and he was very pleased with the negative that he held between his hands.

That negative showed Brenda Van Dolphe in the startled pose that she had struck just after her arrival at the Long Island air field.

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The man who surveyed the picture with a satisfied chuckle was Russ Wilbert, the photographer who had so recently phoned Brenda, to offer her first opportunity to buy this exclusive camera shot.

To Wilbert's credit it needed to be said that blackmail was not part and parcel of his business. Any national magazine would be pleased to publish this shot as the picture of the week and that was why Wilbert had taken it. But the emphasis which the newspapers had placed upon a mysterious camera man, the fact that even the possession of the picture might run him into complications with the law, had induced Wilbert to phone the Van Dolphe manse and offer the exclusive at what he regarded as top price.

There was another reason for Wilbert's chuckle. If the police had been going to ask him questions, they would have done so quite a while ago. For Russ Wilbert rated among the top-notchers in his profession. A thorough checking of last night's assignments among the photographic elite, would have proven that Wilbert had been in no place specially and therefore could have been the mysterious camera man of the air field.

However, having foreseen that, Russ had faked an out of town job. He'd chosen Chicago for its locale, hence he couldn't have returned to New York by this time. Except that he hadn't left New York at all.

So the police, if looking for anyone, were probably scouting out a lot of small-time camera fans. They certainly hadn't been around this neighborhood, because Russ had been looking for them whenever he went out to eat. Only once had anybody noticed him sneaking back into his apartment house and the man in question certainly couldn't have been a detective.

However they disguised themselves, New York detectives wouldn't go in for fancy chauffeur uniforms. The man that Russ had seen was wearing that sort of regalia and had probably been looking for another address in the block.

Such were Wilbert's thoughts at what was to prove the most crucial moment in his life. That moment arrived as the photographer held the plate to the light. It didn't occur to Wilbert that there might be even the slightest connection between the girl in the photograph and the chauffeur who had been around this neighborhood. Wilbert hadn't the slightest notion of what was to happen.

When it happened, it happened swiftly.

A gun spoke sharply, its echoes loud within the confines of the little dark room. Those echoes were accompanied by the tinkling clatter of glass.

Wilbert, for the moment, was looking at space. The gun, fired at close range, had shattered the photographic plate that he was holding to the light!

Instinctively the photographer turned. That was bad judgment, for Wilbert's haggard face met that of the man whose gun had wrecked the plate. That man could not afford to let his identity become known, any more than he could allow the photograph of Brenda Van Dolphe to exist.

What met Wilbert was a gun muzzle, below the eyes that glared into his. The gun spoke twice; with the second shot, Wilbert coiled to the floor.

The dark room then became really dark, for with his gun, the murderer slashed the hanging light, cracking its bulb into as many pieces as the photographic plate that he had destroyed several moments before.

Light entered the room, but briefly, as the door opened and closed again. The killer was moving out from this scene of muffled murder, but in departure he let something flutter to the floor. The light came from the end of

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a little passageway, which ran from a living room to the improvised dark room, for this was all part of Wilbert's apartment.

However, the killer did not proceed through to the living room. Instead, he found a door behind a curtain, a side door that led out into the main hallway. Cautiously, avoiding all noise, the unknown murderer opened that door, closed it again, and was gone.

His departure was none too soon.

A mysterious blackness was creeping along the passage that led from Wilbert's living room to his dark room. As it materialized, it exterminated most of the dim light. That figure became the cloaked form of The Shadow.

He had entered by the front way, this black Knight of Darkness, at just the moment the murderer was taking the back way out.

A few moments later, The Shadow's gloved hand was turning the handle of the dark room door. Next, a flashlight was slicing that gloom to plant its beam on Wilbert's body.

Often had The Shadow analyzed crimes like this. His was the sort of mind that could absorb and correlate details almost at a glance. The pungent odor of powder indicated that the shots had been very recent; a sweep of The Shadow's flashlight showed him that the room was so nearly sound-proof that it was not surprising that he had failed to hear the gunfire.

The fragments of the photographic plate, the broken glass from the electric bulb, were further items that The Shadow tallied mentally. They told their story as graphically as if The Shadow had witnessed it; but the thing that brought the grim laugh from The Shadow's hidden lips was an added item, lying on the floor.

It was just inside the door, a peculiar playing card of a Spanish pattern, which bore three spots that looked like acorns, instead of the conventional sort found in American cards. It was a shabby card, apparently an odd one from a much-used deck, and on it, in a clumsy scrawl, appeared an address, in pencil.

With low, whispered mirth, The Shadow stooped and picked up this trophy which a murderer had dropped. The address on the card was that of this old apartment, where Russ Wilbert lived. Odd that a murderer should drop anything as important as this – unless intentionally. To The Shadow, that smacked of false evidence.

Carefully, deliberately, The Shadow tore this card in half so that the address was incomplete. He let one half flutter to the floor; the other went beneath his cloak.

At that moment, The Shadow was in the doorway of the dark room, hence was restricted by its soundproof tendency. A muffled rumble reached his ears; not only did he identify it, but it served him as a guide. It was the apartment house elevator, an automatic type, and from its receding sound, The Shadow decided that it was descending from this floor, the third.

There must be a reason why the sound was so audible in this little connecting passage, deep in Wilbert's apartment. Lifting a curtain close at hand, The Shadow saw the door beyond it, the door that the murderer had used. Opening the door, The Shadow stepped from the apartment passage into the third floor hall.

Close by was a stairway, a quick route to the ground floor. Almost as quick as the plodding elevator. In this instance, the stairs were the one alternative, because by the time The Shadow could bring up the automatic elevator, the murderer – if he happened to be the elevator passenger – would be gone.

The Shadow turned and made a quick sweep for the stairs, not at that moment caring that his cloaked form came into the full glow of the hallway light.

Already, The Shadow had drawn an automatic and in this quest of overtaking a killer, he perhaps looked the part of the man he was out to find. Even if viewed impartially, The Shadow produced a menacing effect, particularly when he delivered one of those low, whispered laughs that was his custom when he anticipated his trail.

Anybody on those darkened stairs, whether killer, lurker, investigator or mere visitor, might have classed The Shadow's sudden sweep as an attack, meant for anyone who was in his way.

Such an attack needed to be countered; and was. Hardly was The Shadow on the stairs before a figure shot up to meet him head on, locking instantly into a grapple that was a thing of fury!

CHAPTER XII

THERE were times when silence was The Shadow's specialty, but this wasn't one of those times.

Noiseless suppression of an unexpected antagonist could be accomplished, even on a stairway, but the delay would be unwise at a moment when a freshly murdered victim was lying in a dark room awaiting the arrival of investigating police. Of course the sooner the police came the better, provided The Shadow first could leave with proportionate speed, so by making this a rapid, noisy struggle, The Shadow would be accomplishing two things at once.

And of course there was still a third factor, The Shadow's desire to get to the ground floor soon enough to learn who was leaving the elevator.

All this might have worked out perfectly, except for a very reliable character who answered to the name of Hawkeye and who tonight happened to be operating so efficiently that he was almost on the heels of a man he had set out to trail.

That man was Jerry Reeth. It was Jerry who had launched the ardent spring from the stair top, upon seeing The Shadow. Out on the Long Island highway, again at his own apartment, Jerry hadn't any more than glimpsed the cloaked fighter who had twice come to his rescue.

And since those two episodes, Jerry wasn't in a mood to accept any stranger as anything but a foe.

Hawkeye realized this when from the bottom of the stairway he saw two figures whirling down his way forming a blinking, kaleidoscopic pattern against the light from the hall above. Hawkeye was on the second floor; he'd followed Jerry into the building and up that far. Where Hawkeye should have been was down on the first floor to spot the person coming from the elevator, but not knowing anything about that person, Hawkeye hadn't stayed below.

And now as the tumbling figures reached him, Hawkeye felt that he was needed right here. Sidestepping the revolving grapplers, Hawkeye saw his opportunity and took it. Bare-handed with the fighting spirit of a mongoose tackling a hooded cobra, Hawkeye flung a choking clamp on the neck he thought was Jerry's.

Of course that was the neck that wasn't in a cloak collar. Apparently, Jerry had kept his first advantage during the sprawl down the stairs, for even in the gloom, Hawkeye could distinguish The Shadow all muffled in his own cloak. At least that was what Hawkeye thought he saw, but he was either forgetting one of The Shadow's favorite tricks or else not crediting his chief with the ability to spring it during so few seconds.

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In the brief melee The Shadow had flung his cloak over Jerry's head, given it a twist to muffle and choke his antagonist. If Hawkeye hadn't intervened, The Shadow would have suppressed Jerry very promptly. Now, instead, The Shadow was on the verge of being suppressed himself.

Caught by a pair of gloved hands that came up over the uncloaked shoulders above them, Hawkeye was flayed in what seemed six directions at once. Fighting to hold his grip on what he thought was Jerry's neck, Hawkeye lost it and regained it twice. During the second slip, however, Hawkeye heard a sharp, compelling whisper; then, the fact that gloved hands were trying to break his clamp, drilled home the mistake that he had made.

Relaxing, Hawkeye found himself staring into Cranston's face. The cloak beside them was empty. Around the corner of the hall, making for the next flight of stairs below, Jerry Reeth was giving a good impersonation of a one-man stampede.

They took after Jerry, Hawkeye and The Shadow, the latter delaying long enough to regain his cloak and fling it over his shoulders while picking up the slouch hat that had rolled beside it.

Reaching the ground floor first, Jerry sped past the empty elevator and out through a rear door that he saw handy, for as a missing man, Jerry preferred back routes whenever available. Since Hawkeye kept right after Jerry, The Shadow took a different route. Tightening his cloak, he left by the front door, passed the building fronts on the isolated street and headed swiftly for the nearest corner.

What might seem a lengthy process, that of doubling around a block, could often prove the shortest route to an objective, particularly if that objective happened to be human. Fugitives like Jerry Reeth had the habit of doubling around the block in order to avoid pursuers, and this time was no exception.

As The Shadow reached the rear street, traveling the long way, he met Jerry coming from the other direction. Not far behind him was Hawkeye and to all intents, Jerry was trapped.

There was no reason, however, why The Shadow should want to trap Jerry at all.

This was one of those mistaken chases that never should have begun. All during it, The Shadow was seeking another trail, that of the missing murderer. In meeting up with Jerry, he was only defeating his own purpose again, or at least so it seemed. But The Shadow, as usual, was either playing in luck or having one of his hunches prove itself.

The challenging laugh that stopped Jerry in his tracks brought a response from across the way. There, a gun spoke savagely from the dark, aiming at the wildest of targets, the spot from which The Shadow's laugh issued.

The shots brought results, but they were in The Shadow's favor. Hawkeye dived for cover while Jerry turned and made a dash across the street. That left The Shadow free to deal with the man he wanted, the man who had so unwisely opened fire.

To reach him, The Shadow wheeled out into the darkened street, watching for another tell-tale gun jab. To encourage such a spurt of flame, one that would give away his enemy's position, The Shadow delivered another of those fierce, provoking laughs. No shots responded; instead, a new attack came from a different direction.

Out of blackness glared a pair of headlights, as if flung from nowhere. With them came the car to which they belonged, whipping forward with a wild whine of its gears. How the man with the gun could have gotten into

that car so fast was a mystery in itself, though there was nothing to prove that he was the same man. However, The Shadow didn't have time to consider the mystery at this moment.

What the gun had failed to do, the car was accomplishing. It was aiming straight for The Shadow, in a much larger way. Yet with its speed, the car could not begin to match a bullet's pace. Briefly was The Shadow silhouetted like a giant moth in the glare, increasing in proportions as the lights hurtled toward him. Then, with a sweeping dive, he vanished, clearing the curb.

The car kept right ahead, its driver preferring flight to any attempt to go back after The Shadow. As it slewed around the corner, the car revealed itself as a shiny, sleek limousine very like the one that Herkimer, the Van Dolphe chauffeur, used for his own purposes during spare time.

One thing had been accomplished, whether planned or not. Like the fugitive car, the missing murderer had gotten away and so had Jerry Reeth. Those two factors in the present case were gone, despite The Shadow. Yet the last laugh, such as it was, still was The Shadow's own.

He gave it, a strange grim tone of parting mirth, telling Hawkeye to follow his example and decamp from this scene where neither The Shadow nor his agent would be needed further.

CHAPTER XIII

IT was afternoon and a considerable crowd was gathered in front of the old Van Dolphe mansion as though expecting something extraordinary to happen there. Police were on hand and they had roped off the street to hold back the curious. The only vehicle that had been allowed to enter the block was a big sleek limousine that bore the initials V. D.

In the limousine sat a nervous chauffeur who was trying to hide his mood under a scowl. Watching the crowd, Herkimer seemed to be annoyed by the way they had hemmed him in and apparently was wondering whether the police would clear a proper path for the limousine's departure. Actually, Herkimer was on the alert for camera men and of the dozen that he saw, he expected one or more of them to come springing forward, shaking an accusing fist.

None did, nor did the police bother Herkimer, which was considerable help, since Herkimer had become allergic to police as well as photographers. However, no one had yet gotten around to connecting the death of Russ Wilbert with the fact that he had taken a photograph of Brenda Van Dolphe; at least not officially.

The crowd was here to get a look at the fabulous Brenda, that was all. However, the girl did not appear and a sigh of disappointment rose from the throng at sight of the persons who did arrive from the house. Only a stoop-shouldered old servant, Claxon, and a squatty lady, Senora Hidalgo, came from the big door and down the steps to the waiting car.

They were on their way to the airport to take the next plane to Havana.

If any smart photographers had the notion that they might pile into the house, ferret out Brenda and get her picture, they needed another guess.

Two stocky men emerged from the front door, took their places on either side and made a show of badges which they wore beneath their coats. They were the private cops who had acted as inside guards the night before.

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Within the house, Brenda and Treat were in the large library which adjoined the flight of side stairs leading down to the great hall. One reason why the landing of that stairway had made a good observation post for Jerry, the night before, was because the lower steps flanked an ornate, finely carved wall, beyond which lay the library.

Hence those stairs at least had one value. You could come down them and enter the big door of the library without parading all the way across the great hall. That was why Treat had suggested that Brenda come down to the library. And now Treat was watching from the window, reporting to Brenda what went on outdoors.

It all made Brenda a trifle shuddery.

"What a strange city, this Nueva York!" the girl exclaimed. "And these Americanos, what strange people!"

Treat turned and his shrewd face relaxed into a sympathetic smile. When the girl reverted to a Latin mood, it meant that she was troubled. All her childhood had been spent in South American countries, chiefly Colombia, and she was used to the customs of those lands, whatever their shortcomings. Certainly there, she had never found herself regarded as a curiosity. The crowd outside made her think in terms of revolution. It didn't seem intelligent for so many people to gather just for a peaceable purpose.

"It is very stupid," remarked Treat. "But what else could we expect? With this man, Reeth, seeking notoriety by his disappearance, with the mystery about the photograph –"

A telephone bell cut Treat's comments. There was no phone here in the library, as Brenda knew. The bell was ringing from a corner of the hallway and Treat went there to answer it. He pressed a button on the box beside the phone to confine the incoming call to this line.

It was through lack of that button business that Brenda had taken Wilbert's call of the previous evening. Naturally, she was interested in the present call. Incongruously, however, Brenda thought it might be Wilbert again. She hadn't seen today's newspapers, hence did not know that the photographer had been murdered.

This wasn't the first phone call that Brenda had overheard Treat make during the past few days. When he made phone calls, however, Treat was a very cryptic gentleman. As usual, Brenda could only try to guess what this call was all about.

"Hello..." Treat's tone became one of recognition. "So you've talked with her? Fine... I was sure you would like her... She can get here this evening? Good... Yes, the sooner the better... Certainly. I can explain everything to her... Leave that all to me... Yes, I'll phone him right away..."

Hanging up the phone, Treat placed his finger to the dial to start another call. Then, in that crafty way of his, he turned and looked about. Over his shoulder, Treat saw Brenda, her face slightly puzzled as she stared from the doorway. Again, Treat was quite equal to the occasion.

Smoothly, without a trace of misplaced emphasis that might have aroused Brenda's suspicions, the oily secretary declared:

"It was your attorney, Simon Severidge. He says he has talked to your cousin, Genevieve Jeffrey. He hopes that she will arrive here tonight."

This made partial sense to Brenda, but some of it was still obscure, particularly what Trent had said about "explaining" things. Then, recalling Treat's closing words, Brenda queried:

"But who was it you said you were going to telephone?"

Treat began working the dial before Brenda finished her question. Then:

"I'll call Severidge back," decided Treat. "I have an idea."

Someone answered the phone and Treat spoke as follows:

"Hello... Yes, this is Treat... Yes, everything is arranged for tonight, but suppose I take her out there myself?... Certainly, that would be easiest... It will save us a lot of time..."

Still a bit baffled, Brenda decided it was her own fault that she didn't understand. Because when Treat hung up the telephone, he summed everything efficiently, though glibly.

"Your cousin Genevieve wasn't sure we would be ready to receive her," explained Treat. "So she stopped to visit some friends outside of town. They weren't going to bring her in here until tomorrow, so I think we should go out and get her."

"That would be splendid!" exclaimed Brenda. "I'm so tired of staying indoors. But" – she frowned and gestured back into the library, in the general direction of its big windows – "what about the crowd?"

"They'll all be gone." Treat was crossing the library as he answered. He looked from the window and added: "The crowd has pretty well cleared now. However" – Treat turned with a satisfied smile – "I think we can arrange to leave here without being observed. Of course we shall have to wait until after dark."

Sudden interest dawned in Brenda's eyes. She was thinking of Jerry's mysterious visit of the night before and the remarkable way he had vanished from the mansion. It might be that Treat knew some such secret too! Then, rather than betray her interest, Brenda simply gave a hopeful nod as though wishing that Treat might be right.

Another glance from the window and Treat furnished further comment.

"You had better go upstairs," he told Brenda. "I am going to call in the two detectives who are watching outside. Some camera man might just decide to slip past them. You won't have to worry about such things, not after tomorrow. You will see Mr. Severidge then and once your legal affairs are settled, you will no longer be under a guardian's instructions."

Nodding as she left the library, Brenda realized that tomorrow would be her birthday, which indeed was a help. She hoped she would like her great-cousin, Genevieve Jeffrey, now that all her relatives and friends had left with the sole exception of Treat.

Just how much of a friend Treat was, could have become a pressing question in Brenda's mind if she had stayed in the library and watched him at the window. Satisfied no one was observing him, Cedric Treat relaxed his shrewd features into a smile that could aptly have been termed Satanic.

Realizing what his smile must look like, Treat kept his face well back from the window. That was why a curtain intercepted his view of the corner across the street and prevented him from seeing something that would have interested him greatly.

Two young men had detached themselves from the dwindling throng and were turning the corner, one neatly picking up the other's trail. The first of that pair was Jerry Reeth; the man who had recognized Jerry and was

tracking him, happened to be Harry Vincent, agent of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIV

POLICE COMMISSIONER WESTON alighted from his official car in front of his famous rendezvous, the exclusive Cobalt Club. Two other men were with him: Lamont Cranston and Simon Severidge. They had been with the commissioner all afternoon, going over two scenes of crime.

Waiting in the club were two other men, Kirk Grimshaw and Alvin Lancaster, who had arrived there separately. They sensed they had been summoned for something important, hence they were quite intrigued when the commissioner opened an immediate conference.

"It is this, gentlemen," declared Weston in his brusque style. "We believe that there is a connection between the disappearance of Jerry Reeth and the murder of Russ Wilbert."

Looks of surprise passed between Grimshaw and Lancaster. It was Grimshaw who spoke first, his long, horsey face showing surprise amid its expression of habitual worry. All the importer asked was:

"But why?"

Before Weston could answer, Lancaster interrupted in true promoter's style.

"Wait a moment, commissioner." Lancaster's roundish face was lighting like a harvest moon. "Maybe I can answer it! There was a deal on between them, out at the air field. Reeth was to help Wilbert get that photograph. They were to split on whatever price they could get for it. Reeth was afraid Wilbert wouldn't come through, so he went around and shot him!"

Weston furnished a trifling smile, though it didn't entirely lack approval.

"You've been reading the five star finals," asserted Weston, gesturing to one such newspaper that lay on a chair beside Lancaster. "They have begun to guess that Wilbert was the photographer who took that picture of Miss Van Dolphe. Probably they are right, though we have no absolute proof. If so, it is possible that Reeth is guilty of murder, provided he is still alive."

At that, Grimshaw's face went as hollow as his gaping mouth. His tone sounded like an echo.

"You mean – you think Reeth was murdered too?"

"Very possibly," nodded Weston, "and in that case, the killer – of both Reeth and Wilbert – may be a man known as Gonzales. That is why I asked you here, to find out what you know about Gonzales."

For answer, Grimshaw and Lancaster could only shake their heads. They'd never met Gonzales; they'd told the commissioner once before that they doubted if the man existed. It was Severidge, who in his tight-mouthed style, was able to show some evidence on the Gonzales question. Silently, the lawyer produced it, tossed it across the table, a torn sheet of paper which bore a clumsy scrawl:

If you pay well, maybe you will find out something about the

Quetzal Mine. Put an ad in paper saying: I would like to hear from G.

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While Grimshaw and Lancaster were studying that rough note, Weston produced some other items of evidence, stating:

"People living at Reeth's place say they saw a man who looked Like a Mexican go in there several times. Among the items that we found at Reeth's was this."

The thing Weston meant by "this" was the half of a torn envelope.

"Half a sheet of paper," mused Weston, "plus half a blank envelope, may mean nothing. But when we found another torn object at Wilbert's, the half of an odd and curious playing card, it completed the trail. Particularly when the card bore part of Wilbert's address, in a scrawl identical with the one used by 'G' – who may be Gonzales."

With that, Weston tossed the evidence on the table and the two men stared at the half of a Spanish playing card, the half that The Shadow had left as the law's share of a clue that a murderer had dropped in Wilbert's dark room.

Severidge, the lawyer, was cannily studying the new surprise that showed itself in individual fashion on the respective faces of Grimshaw and Lancaster; but Cranston was no longer present to view that result.

An attendant had entered to tell Mr. Cranston that he was wanted on the telephone and Cranston had left the conference room.

The call was from Harry Vincent.

Reporting, Harry announced that he had successfully trailed Jerry Reeth to a little hotel called the Colonnade. Harry had done a neat trailing job, ready to play smart if Jerry spotted him. In that case, Harry would have popped right up to Jerry as though having seen him accidentally. But since Jerry hadn't noticed Harry, there had been no reason to resume the old acquaintanceship.

Approving Harry's policy, Cranston told him to keep watch at the Colonnade. Then, calmly, Cranston added:

"My congratulations, Vincent, on that clue you left at Reeth's."

"You mean the half envelope?" Harry's tone was sheepish across the wire. "I was going to use it to muffle the telephone bell –"

"But you didn't," interposed Cranston, "and you laid it down and forgot it. You still have the other half of course."

"Yes. You told me to keep it, after I mentioned it to you."

"Good. Carry it with you so that you can give it to me the next time we meet. I am using it as the first link in a continuous trail."

Having thus explained the riddle of the half envelope, Cranston ended the phone call and returned to the conference room. In doing things by halves, Cranston, as The Shadow, was forging them into a whole. Just by chance – through Harry's oversight – had The Shadow managed to acquire half of an object that had been on the scene of crime at Jerry's. That was why The Shadow had personally taken half a planted clue – by tearing a Spanish playing card – on the scene of Wilbert's death.

Luck had caused those two artificial links to fall in with the note that Severidge had received from someone who might be Gonzales. Personally, The Shadow suspected the authenticity of that note; hence his own clues were quite in keeping with it. Sometimes it took a fake to expose a fake. This The Shadow knew.

Arriving back in the conference room, Cranston found Weston summing the Jerry question.

"There is a chance that Reeth met with foul play," asserted Weston. "There was shooting at his apartment and the place was ransacked. It is possible that Gonzales murdered Reeth. On the other hand" – Weston shrugged as though discussing a slighter prospect – "Reeth could have murdered Gonzales."

"Over that photograph?" demanded Severidge. "The one that we couldn't find at Wilbert's?"

"If Wilbert took such a picture," continued Severidge, "it was probably destroyed."

"Unless the murderer purposely created that false impression," asserted Weston, cannily. "If he kept the picture, he probably hopes to sell it to you, as attorney for the Van Dolphe estate."

"Not to me." Severidge supplied a tight-lipped smile. "Whatever Miss Van Dolphe looks like, they are welcome to print all the pictures of her that they wish. Besides" – Severidge spread his hands as if in relief – "when I meet Miss Van Dolphe for the first time, tomorrow, it may be the last time. The estate then will be fully hers, to do with it whatever she wishes."

Others were taking this as a matter of mere fact, but the steady look in Cranston's eyes, his close but unobserved scrutiny of Severidge, told that he was placing a singular import on all that the lawyer said. Hoping to hear more, Cranston was not disappointed.

"Tomorrow, Miss Genevieve Jeffrey arrives," resumed Severidge. "She will take the place of Madame Hidalgo, the duenna, who left today with the old servant, Claxon. After Miss Jeffrey meets Miss Van Dolphe, they can plan on whatever they wish. I suppose they will keep Treat, the secretary, to handle most of Brenda's affairs. Besides, he has been doing a good job, keeping private detectives on the job, probably for the very purpose of brushing off such visitors as young Reeth."

Weston thwacked a fist to his other palm.

"You have something there!" asserted the commissioner. "Suppose we phone Treat, Severidge, and learn if any suspicious characters have been seen around the Van Dolphe house!"

They made the phone call and talked not only to Cedric Treat but to the two reliable operatives that he had hired. They thus received triple assurance that all was well within the Van Dolphe manse, because all the reports were alike. Positively, no one had gone in or out of the house the night before. As an added bonus, Treat put Herkimer on the phone to give the same assurance, the chauffeur having just returned from the airport.

The report ended, Weston hung up and turned to Severidge.

"No need for police surveillance," decided Weston. "If Gonzales – or even Reeth – should attempt an entry at the house, the private detectives would apprehend such an intruder, as would be their right. If blackmail or some similar business is afoot, it is preferable that it should be handled that way."

Two other listeners nodded their acquiescence along with Severidge. Those listeners were Grimshaw and Lancaster. They were all, for Cranston was gone.

Outdoors, darkness had fallen. It was time for Lamont Cranston to become The Shadow!

CHAPTER XV

IN the Van Dolphe house, Herkimer, alert but nervous, was watching the two detectives make their final patrol to see that the house was tightly locked. Most of the chauffeur's nervous manner, however, was due to the presence of Treat.

When Treat turned toward the library, Herkimer followed. In the doorway, the chauffeur overtook the secretary and undertoned:

"Say, Treat, about that business I looked into for you yesterday. You know I didn't —"

A low hiss was Treat's interruption, accompanied by a warning gesture as he turned about. He motioned Herkimer back, then turned toward the old side stairway, just as footfalls came down from the landing. On the steps, Brenda Van Dolphe halted, about to turn back, until she recognized that Trent's companion was only Herkimer.

Immediately, Treat became his smug, fawning self.

"There was a phone call from Mr. Severidge," Treat explained to Brenda. "He was afraid that Reeth, or possibly someone else, might try to come here tonight. Therefore he wanted us to stay in the house."

Brenda's face became more than annoyed; it showed impatience. "I couldn't mention meeting Miss Genevieve," added Treat. "So I think we can arrange it anyway." Then, as Brenda brightened, Treat gestured toward the library: "In here, Miss Van Dolphe," he added quickly. "It is not wise that you should even meet the two detectives. They are returning now."

Voices and heavy footsteps were entering the other side of the great hall, but Brenda was safely inside the library with the door closed when the two detectives arrived. Herkimer, a wise look on his over-handsome face, was figuring that he had gained an edge on the smart secretary, Treat. But Herkimer decided that he would play along, which was just what Treat expected him to do.

"Herkimer is going out," Treat told the operatives. "I shall lock the front door when he leaves; after that I shall retire to the study. Miss Van Dolphe is in her room upstairs and is not to be disturbed."

The two private ops nodded.

"Take any phone messages," added Treat, "but do not annoy me with them, as I wish to nap until midnight. Then you can awaken me, so I can take over while you get some sleep."

Showing Herkimer to the front door, Treat undertoned special instructions to the chauffeur.

"Bring the car around to the side of the house," ordered Treat. "Park at the rear passage. Leave on the dim lights, but if you see anyone, cut down to the parking lights. Understand?"

Understanding, Herkimer nodded. Treat waved him out, then locked and bolted the front door, after which he returned to the study.

Pulling around to the side of the huge house, Herkimer wondered how Treat and Brenda could possibly arrive there without betraying their departure to those human watchdogs, the private ops that Treat had apparently

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hired just to give himself a lot of trouble. However, that was Treat's business, so Herkimer simply waited, at the same time remembering the admonition to look around for prowlers.

Herkimer saw none. That was because he didn't look well enough.

Perhaps Herkimer wasn't much to blame.

The one man actually in sight was keeping low along the curb, almost under shelter of the rear of the car. He was Harry Vincent and he was on the stalk for Jerry Reeth, who had left the Hotel Colonnade a short while ago and had come directly here.

Harry had spotted Jerry about to enter a passage behind the Van Dolphe house. Then the limousine had come along, forcing Harry to duck to the wall, then out again, to begin his present tactics.

The closer Harry came to the car, the less chance he had of being seen by the chauffeur. The ruddy glow of the sizable tail-lights wouldn't matter where Herkimer was concerned. But Harry had forgotten about Jerry, or at least had supposed that Jerry was well along his way somewhere else, which Jerry wasn't.

A lurch came from the darkness of the passage and Jerry, like a fighting wild-cat, launched himself upon Harry, who couldn't come up in time to meet him. But as Harry sprawled, another figure came scooting across the street. Dynamite in a pint-sized dose, this new fighter, otherwise Hawkeye, proved to be the difference that counted.

All this happened before Herkimer was really aware of it. Before the chauffeur could switch his lights, two figures came from the alley that Jerry had left and were in the car a moment later. The arrivals were Brenda and Treat; at the secretary's order, Herkimer shot the car into life and away.

There was plenty of pick-up to that limousine. It had the same zang as the car that had borne down on The Shadow, outside of Wilbert's, the night before. And Brenda, realizing that there had been some excitement back by the house, was thrilled by the adventure, until the horrifying thought struck her that Jerry might have been involved.

By then, the limousine was a few blocks away and it was too late to talk of going back, particularly since Brenda didn't think it would be wise as yet to tell Treat about Jerry.

From then on, the ride seemed only occasionally eventful to Brenda until they had crossed a great bridge and were somewhere outside the city. It was then that Treat spoke through the speaking tube to Herkimer.

"I don't like the way that cab is following us, Herkimer," said Treat. "It may be another of those troublesome photographers. Pull into the first road you see on the right and we can watch what happens."

Herkimer did as instructed. The cab came along and slowed, but probably only because of the road, because it continued along the main highway without stopping. At Treat's order, Herkimer backed the limousine onto the highway, continued along and took the next turn to the left.

There was a peculiar difference in the limousine, however, which none of its passengers noticed. The taillights seemed to blink and blot at moments, as though a blackish film came across them. As the road became rougher, the jounces of the car gave an occasional impression of something lifting, like the cover of the trunk rack.

Except that the trunk was tightly locked; therefore the only other explanation was that an object, human perhaps, had attached itself there and was riding along.

This illusion dispelled itself after the limousine swung between a pair of stone gates and pulled up in front of a great brick building which looked slightly like an old-fashioned hotel. Brenda studied the place rather curiously as Treat escorted her into the place, saying it was the inn where her great-cousin Genevieve was stopping.

Odd, these American inns.

Instead of finding a clerk at a desk, Treat ushered Brenda directly into an office, which bore the name on the door:

DR. THEOPHILUS BORNEAU

Inside was Doctor Borneau himself, a thin-haired, sharp-faced man, who did not even rise from his desk. Standing nearby were two hefty, matronly women, both plainly dressed, and Brenda stared at them, wondering if one might be her great-cousin Genevieve.

Then Treat was stepping forward, spreading papers in front of Borneau and saying things that suddenly amazed Brenda.

"Here are the commitment papers, doctor," announced Treat. "All quite in order. Of course you understand that the patient's delusions may be only temporary."

"I understand," Borneau's tone was as sharp, as grating as his looks. "Such cases are to be expected, every time a name comes suddenly into the news."

"It isn't entirely that," explained Treat, in a very serious tone. "This girl, Sarah Prentiss, actually worked for Miss Van Dolphe. Due to the fact that we allowed no one to see Miss Van Dolphe –"

"Of course, of course," inserted Borneau, in crackly style. "She acquired a fixation that reached a stage of dementia."

Brenda was staring about, wondering where the girl Sarah was.

"And then," added Treat, "Sarah took to posing as Miss Van Dolphe, even borrowing her clothes and jewelry. She had studied Spanish, which Miss Van Dolphe speaks fluently –"

"What is this, Treat?" broke in Brenda, noting that the others all wore Treat's serious expression. "Has everybody here gone crazy?"

Treat spread his hands hopelessly and Borneau gave a wise nod.

"Very usual," declared the doctor, crisply. "Accusing others of one's own condition. A little quiet, proper treatment –"

He was looking at Brenda and the glint in those eyes of Borneau's was hypnotic. If ever a face seemed distorted, evil, it was that of the man who posed as a doctor in charge of what Brenda now realized must be an asylum, whether real or fake. Then, before Brenda could finish a single scream, Borneau was giving an imperious wave and the girl was in the clutch of the Amazons.

Wildly though she struggled, Brenda didn't begin to be a match for the two husky women who had grabbed her. They pinned her arms behind her, stifled her screams, and carried her bodily from the room. Brenda's shoes came flying back as she tried to kick her captors and when the door closed, Treat calmly picked up the shoes, saying he would return them to Miss Van Dolphe.

With that, Treat bowed out. Doctor Borneau remained at his desk, a smile on his crisp, dry face as he tilted his head and listened until he heard the limousine pull away.

It was then that a laugh disturbed Borneau, a tone of whispered mirth that brought him full about to stare across the desk. Bulging straight at the alleged doctor was a huge automatic, above it a pair of cold, stern eyes, that made Borneau's glare seem childish. Above those eyes was a slouch hat, its brim turned down, hiding the remaining features of Borneau's challenger.

With a snarl, Borneau performed a savage but useless action. With incredible speed, he whipped a revolver from an open drawer beside him, and came up from his chair, swinging to aim, hoping to beat The Shadow to the trigger. But The Shadow didn't bother with his gun trigger.

Instead, he swept his gun hand forward, upward and outward, turning it knuckles up. Borneau's chin came right into the arc of The Shadow's piston-powered hand. Weighted with an automatic, The Shadow's fist carried a terrific power. His swing seemed almost lazy, but it carried through without a pause.

That fist lifted Borneau with his own jaw, carried him up and over the back of his swivel chair, where he landed so hard that his head, cracking the wall, jarred his fake diploma from above him and brought it crashing down upon him, frame, glass and all.

Approaching Borneau, The Shadow studied the man's distorted face that was tilted up into the light. Removing his slouch hat, The Shadow produced a make-up kit from beneath his cloak and began to pattern his own visage to resemble the unsavory features of the unconscious faker who called himself a doctor. A few surveys in a mirror and the result was satisfactory.

Finding some keys in Borneau's pocket, The Shadow chose the proper one, then picked up the unconscious man and carried him out of the office and down a long, dim corridor. Reaching some formidable doors, The Shadow tried them with the key until he found the right one.

Opening the door, The Shadow dumped Borneau into one of his own padded cells and returned to the office. There, putting cloak and hat into a closet, The Shadow sat down behind the desk and canted his head in exact imitation of Borneau.

Picking up the telephone, The Shadow jiggled the receiver. When the switchboard responded, he spoke, in Borneau's crisp, grating tone:

"Give me the outside operator. I am making a call to New York!"

CHAPTER XVI

MOST of the way back to Manhattan, Cedric Treat maintained a strict silence. At last, however, he picked up the speaking tube and told Herkimer:

"Miss Van Dolphe decided to stay at the inn overnight. We are going to stop for her cousin, Miss Genevieve, and take her to the house. Here is the address –"

ALIBI TRAIL

While listening to the address that Treat gave, Herkimer was careful to keep his grin out of the mirror. He knew that the inn was a phony and he was willing to bet that Cousin Genevieve would be the same. When they reached the address named and found a much muffled woman waiting there, Herkimer was a trifle nonplussed; but once the lady was in the car, with her veil drawn back, the chauffeur began to understand.

In the passing street lamps, he caught enough light to see reflected faces in the mirror. Treat's companion was a girl with plenty of looks, and just about Brenda's age, though darkish.

The girl had dropped the veil again, when Herkimer stopped the big car at the side of the Van Dolphe mansion. This time Herkimer really looked to see if the coast was clear and Treat did the same. Then, through the speaking tube, Treat said:

"Wait at the garage for half an hour, Herkimer. I shall phone you if I need you."

Treat and his companion made a quick trip through the passage behind the house and the limousine promptly pulled away. That was when Hawkeye again came into sight, from the shelter of some old house steps across the way. Furtively but efficiently, the little spotter reached a telephone and put in a prompt call.

The man who received that call was Harry Vincent. He was sitting in a little back room with Jerry Reeth, who was beginning to trust this friend again, though not too implicitly, Jerry's main reason being that Harry had a gun.

So far, Jerry hadn't furnished Harry with a single word of worthwhile information and Harry hadn't pressed him, for he wanted Jerry's full confidence. And now, to prove what was in his mind, also to follow complete instructions as recently received from The Shadow, Harry brought out his automatic and weighed it while he looked at Jerry.

"How are you with a gun?" inquired Harry. "Intelligent?"

Jerry gave a puzzled stare, then returned:

"Do you mean am I a good shot?"

"I mean can you keep your head," replied Harry. "if I steered you to a man who could tell you a lot you needed to know, would you make him talk?"

For the first time, Jerry grinned.

"I get it," he said. "You mean would I use a few of those encouraging nudges that seem to be your specialty, without getting impatient with the trigger?"

"That's right."

"You can count on me," assured Jerry. "Who's the man?"

"The Van Dolphe chauffeur," returned Harry. "His name is Herkimer. He's just left the house to put the car away. I think there's a lot that he can tell you."

Jerry was thinking too, and grimly. Figuring the time element and all, it could have been Herkimer who murdered Gonzales on that first occasion and Wilbert on another. Eyeing Harry's gun, Jerry nodded to indicate that he'd like to make Herkimer talk.

All that Harry said was:

"Let's go."

It was a little after half past eleven and it took them slightly more than ten minutes to reach the garage, which was just a few blocks from the Van Dolphe residence. Harry had received data regarding the garage from Hawkeye who had snooped briefly around the premises and all came up to specifications. There was only one man on duty after eleven o'clock and he was usually fixing flats in a work-room. The only thing that would bring him out of there were the honks of an automobile horn or the roar of a motor.

Herkimer kept the Van Dolphe limousine in a corner remote from the work-room and usually gave it a superficial polish before leaving the garage. So all Harry had to do was point Jerry to where he should go, plus, of course, the act of giving him the .45 automatic. When Harry did that, Jerry grunted his thanks and sauntered into the garage. As soon as Jerry was out of sight beyond some cars, Harry followed, but kept a distance.

This was indeed a crucial test. The idea was to have Jerry square himself where any murder charge was concerned. A bold course, letting Jerry go in with a gun, but knowing Jerry's mettle, it was the best. There was one thing, however, that Harry hadn't told Jerry.

Tonight, solid evidence had been gained of Herkimer working hand in glove with Treat. It wouldn't do to tell Jerry that, because he'd prefer to go after the secretary instead of the chauffeur. That would be breaking the game too fast. The real system was to work on Herkimer first, getting him to squeal all he knew, which would certainly be enough to clear Jerry with the law.

All part of The Shadow's plan, but even the plans of that master could sometimes go awry!

Sighting the Van Dolphe limousine, Jerry sneaked up past it, expecting to catch Herkimer unaware. To his surprise, he found no sign of the chauffeur, other than a polishing rag, lying on a fender of the car. Moving around the rear, Jerry discovered a door in the wall of the garage, through which a streak of light trickled.

This might be the answer.

It was.

Close to the door, Jerry heard Herkimer's voice; from its tone, he realized that the chauffeur was using a telephone.

"Yeah," Herkimer was saying. "Bywood. That's the name of the place I want... Yeah... Who? The head duck... That's who I want to talk to... His name?... Just say the head guy..."

Through the crack of the door, Jerry could now see Herkimer at the telephone, a pay box on the wall, because Jerry had widened the crack to push the automatic muzzle through. He was waiting, though, to hear what more Herkimer had to say, when the chauffeur became angry.

"What's that?" Herkimer was snapping at the operator. "I'll have to call information?... All right... I'll get it..."

Herkimer slapped the receiver on the hook and reached for the nickel that the operator returned. Jerry was undecided whether to wait until the chauffeur talked to information and that moment of indecision ended all chances completely.

ALIBI TRAIL

Somebody else had decided not to wait.

Down from above Herkimer's head, swinging hard past the hanging electric bulb that illuminated the space by the pay-phone, came a hand containing a powerful weapon in the shape of an oversized monkey wrench.

The wrench did to Herkimer's head what Jerry had seen a tank do to a pill-box. It just didn't leave much of it.

Again, a murderer had struck!

Savagely, Jerry flung the door inward and drove forward, the automatic ahead of him. The door hit against some steps, that led upward, steps that Jerry didn't know about, but which the killer did, because he was on them. Back came the door, shoved by the other man's shoulder and the wrench, hand and all, came swinging at a wide angle.

Either Jerry's lunge was too low for the wrench to reach him, or it wasn't meant for him at all. The latter was likely, because it did find a target, the hanging light. As at Wilbert's, that blow crashed the light and furnished complete darkness.

Other footsteps were pounding Jerry's way and rather than beat around in the darkness, Jerry drove back through the door again, toward the man who was coming his way. That man was Harry Vincent and Jerry Reeth no longer gave him benefit of doubt. It was Harry who had shoved Jerry into what was either a trap or a frame.

He'd made just one mistake, Harry had. That was trusting Jerry with a gun, either thinking he wouldn't have time to use it, or hoping it would incriminate him. If that was what Harry wanted, Jerry's incrimination, he could have it. Aiming the gun point blank at Harry, Jerry let go with the trigger.

The gun didn't fire. It was empty.

Before Jerry could switch to slugging tactics, Harry grabbed him. Jerry countered and ferociously heaving Harry so hard against the door behind the car that Harry's head knocked it open and received it again when it came back from the steps beyond. Profiting by Harry's slump, Jerry went tearing out through the front of the garage, followed by the shouts of the night man who was coming out of the work room.

Half-groggy, Harry came to his feet, drew an automatic that had bullets in it, and flung a flashlight's beam into the place where Herkimer's body lay. Dimly, Harry recalled some footsteps that had come dashing up a flight of stairs, so he turned the flashlight that direction.

The killer had fled and Harry was about to follow, when he remembered The Shadow's discussion regarding some previous scenes of crime. Looking to the floor, Harry saw an object lying there, something which the murderer must have dropped purposely, as before. Picking the thing up, Harry found it to be a baggage check.

Then, using his other hand with a handkerchief covering it, Harry tore the check in half, dropped the segment which he knew did not bear his fingerprints and rushed up the stairs in hope of finding the killer.

All Harry found was a roof, with a fire ladder attached to the wall next door. That was the route the murderer had taken, so Harry decided to use it too, even though he knew he could no longer trace the killer.

Not many minutes later, Harry was clear of this neighborhood. Amid the clangs of a big clock that was chiming midnight, he could hear the whine of a police siren, telling that the night man at the garage had summoned the law to another scene of murder.

Again, Jerry Reeth was at large, and he probably wouldn't return to the Hotel Colonnade where his trail could be picked up again. With Herkimer dead, Harry Vincent could think of only one other man who might in any sense, furnish some lead to affairs of current crime. That man was Cedric Treat.

At least, Treat wasn't worrying about it.

With the stroke of midnight, Treat was answering the rap on the library door. Coming out, he nodded sleepily to the two private operatives, asking them if all had gone well. When they said that nothing had disturbed the evening, another voice thanked them.

It was a girl's voice, speaking with a Spanish accent, from the bottom of the main stairway. Turning, the detectives saw a very gorgeous brunette in a still more gorgeous negligee that trailed like a royal robe.

Treat gave an immediate bow and turned to the two detectives.

"We must congratulate Miss Van Dolphe," announced Treat. "This is her birthday. She is now of age and no longer subject to the regulations of the stupid duenna who would not allow her to meet Americanos."

Like Treat, the detectives bowed to the girl who was not Brenda Van Dolphe.

CHAPTER XVII

MORNING brought Simon Severidge to the Van Dolphe mansion and with him he brought all the certified documents that Brenda's closest relatives, Judge Jeffrey and Captain Platt, had checked over prior to their departure on governmental missions to foreign lands.

Another arrival was Brenda's great-cousin Genevieve Jeffrey, who proved great in size as well as relationship, being a jolly personage who insisted upon referring to her weight as fifteen stone, English style, because it sounded better than two hundred and ten pounds.

On this, their first meeting with Brenda, both Severidge and Genevieve were much charmed by the girl. Of course, Severidge's business covered the legal phases of the documents he brought with him and there were many detailed questions, all of which Brenda answered comprehensively in a mixture of English and Spanish that was quite quaint.

Not once did the brunette give any inkling to the fact that she was not Brenda Van Dolphe. Knowing all the answers, Cedric Treat had coached the impostor too well.

The nearest thing to a bad break took place when Commissioner Weston arrived as an unexpected visitor, accompanied by Lamont Cranston and insisted upon holding a conference in the library. Introduced to Brenda Van Dolphe, the commissioner bowed courteously, then launched squarely into the business at hand.

"It's about your chauffeur, Miss Van Dolphe," asserted the commissioner, abruptly. "He was murdered last night after he returned to the garage with your car."

"Murdered!" The girl's horror was real. "You mean Herbert – murdered –"

"Herkimer," corrected Treat. "Miss Van Dolphe has trouble remembering these American names. She scarcely saw Herkimer at all after the night he drove us in from the air field. I heard about Herkimer's death, commissioner, because they phoned me from the garage."

ALIBI TRAIL

Realizing that Treat would know more about the case than Brenda, Weston concentrated on the secretary. Cranston's gaze, however, was fixed on the girl and he saw that she was less at ease than ever.

"When was Herkimer last at the house?" quizzed Weston.

"Early in the evening," replied Treat. "The two guards I have here may be able to tell you the exact time."

"He was killed shortly before midnight," declared Weston, "and he had only just come in with the car." Treat nodded, very soberly.

"I expected as much," he declared. "Too frequently Herkimer was not at the garage when he was supposed to be. He always claimed he was performing necessary errands, but he never specified them."

"About those errands," put Weston. "Would one of them have been looking up the photographer who took Miss Van Dolphe's picture at the air field?"

Treat showed immediate surprise.

"Have you found out who that photographer was, commissioner?"

"We are practically sure it was Wilbert," affirmed Weston. "And what would you say, Treat, if I told you that the Van Dolphe car – or one much like it – had been seen in Wilbert's neighborhood before his death?"

"I would say that it confirms all our suspicions!" exclaimed Treat. "Miss Van Dolphe will tell you that her uncle, the judge, breached the theory that only Herkimer could have informed the camera man of our arrival."

The fake Brenda supplied a nod, like an actress taking a cue.

"We should have dismissed Herkimer along with the other servants," decided Treat, "but since he was an outside man, it did not seem necessary. Apparently he was associated with the wrong people. I wonder" – Treat's eyes narrowed cagily – "if he could have known Jerry Reeth."

"He may have," said Weston. "Which reminds me: what does Miss Van Dolphe intend to do?"

"Absolutely nothing," replied Treat. "She has left the matter in my hands. In turn, I agree with Mr. Severidge that we should have nothing at all to do with the Quetzal proposition."

Again, the new Brenda took the cue and nodded, which seemed to please Severidge who was standing by. That ended Weston's business, but as the commissioner was leaving, Treat overtook him.

"Miss Van Dolphe is holding a reception," stated Treat. "We should be glad to have you attend, commissioner. Should anything new develop before then, we shall certainly let you know."

IMMEDIATELY after Weston and his friend Cranston had left, Treat found opportunity to phone the Bywood Sanitarium and ask for Doctor Borneau. He learned that the head of the asylum had gone out for the day but had left word that the patient was doing nicely and receiving the proper attention.

That settled, Treat went back to the library and buried himself in business matters including the establishing of huge bank accounts, the hiring of servants, arrangements for the reception, and dozens of other details referring to Brenda Van Dolphe.

ALIBI TRAIL

Severidge had left, taking along all the documents that the girl had signed; now Treat was busy getting the signature of Brenda Van Dolphe on checks. He was particularly anxious also to arrange the purchase of certain properties and push the sale of others, since all such matters had remained in abeyance until the estate was fully under Brenda's control.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Weston, riding in his big official car, was confiding in his friend Cranston.

"That chap Treat impresses me," declared Weston. "He analyzed Herkimer better than he supposed. We checked on Herkimer's record and found that he knew several unsavory characters. He even approached one, a pawn shop proprietor of doubtful status, on the subject of lending money to buy that photograph from Wilbert."

Showing proper surprise, Cranston queried:

"You mean Herkimer intended to shake down Treat?"

"Either Treat or Severidge," replied Weston, "according to what they would pay for the picture."

"But Wilbert was murdered –"

"And Herkimer probably guessed by whom. That was why he was murdered too."

While Weston was bringing an official envelope from his pocket, Cranston broached a query.

"I wonder if Herkimer ever had a good look at Brenda Van Dolphe?"

"A curious question, Cranston," returned the commissioner. "Why do you ask?"

"Nobody else did, until today," Cranston replied. "At least nobody except Treat. She hadn't met Severidge or even her cousin, Genevieve."

"All of which has nothing to do with the case," chided Weston. "Here is something really important, Cranston. This baggage check."

Correctly, it was half of a baggage check, another of those partial clues picked up on a scene of murder. Cranston immediately linked it with former clues.

"This was found with Herkimer?"

"That's right," acknowledged Weston. "It's more tangible than the half of a blank envelope found at Reeth's, or the portion of a playing card that was with Wilbert's body. It's only half a check, but from it, I am sure we can soon trace the luggage that it represents. Perhaps that will enable us to prove the guilt of murder."

"On Reeth or Gonzales?"

"On whichever of the two is still alive. I feel sure that one of them was murdered."

Weston was hitting closer than he knew and the evidence represented by the baggage check was much more important than he realized. However, Cranston made no comment on that score.

"Now to see Grimshaw and Lancaster," declared Weston, checking a list he carried. "I suppose they will be invited to the Van Dolphe reception if only to be told that they will have to manage their own silver mine. I don't suppose they will be greatly disappointed."

"Why not?"

"Because they have been planning other enterprises. They have been together every evening, so they tell me, listing imports that can be promoted. They are good business men, both of them. They have been very helpful too, in whatever testimony or advice they could give toward solving this chain of mysterious murders."

Cranston offered no amendment, though he might have. A chain of murders that was still in progress could hardly be termed solved. As for the links that those deaths formed, Cranston could see a simple answer to all of them. In fact, he had tossed the answer right at Weston, but the commissioner hadn't caught it.

Of one thing, Cranston was certain. The series of crimes had served its intended purpose. But behind it stalked another crime that the law did not even suspect, the kidnapping of the actual Brenda Van Dolphe.

As *The Shadow*, Lamont Cranston had not only solved that crime for himself, but had nullified it. All that remained was to turn it into a boomerang that would bring crime home. When that was done, certain astonishing facts would be revealed.

Perhaps that was why Lamont Cranston, after parting with Commissioner Weston, delivered a whispered laugh that was very much *The Shadow's*!

CHAPTER XVIII

DUSK was settling over the great, grim building known as the Bywood Sanitarium when a somewhat bedraggled man pushed his way from the nearby trees and reached a doorway unobserved. Finding the door unlocked, he entered, and in the dim light of a corridor, his face became plain.

The man was Jerry Reeth. He was following a lone, last clue, the lead he had gained by listening to Herkimer's discussion with a telephone operator just before death finished the double-crossing chauffeur.

Jerry was linking suppositions wildly but correctly. He was sure that Brenda Van Dolphe had left the mansion in the family limousine. He was also certain that the car had come out here. Knowing Herkimer to be a double-crosser, Jerry was sure that something had happened at this place and the only logical answer was that Brenda had been kept there. Jerry was positive that Herkimer had phoned to demand a price for silence.

Herkimer had paid his own price for silence, but that didn't help Brenda's dilemma.

It would have puzzled Jerry to know that Brenda Van Dolphe was holding a reception at her New York home this very evening; in fact such knowledge might have knocked his theory. But Jerry hadn't read any newspapers today and a few radio newscasts that he had overheard had not mentioned the Van Dolphe reception. Therefore Jerry, keeping to the countryside, supposed that as usual, visitors were taboo at the Van Dolphe mansion, hence nobody could know that Brenda was missing.

Once inside the sanitarium, Jerry began looking for the headquarters of the head man that Herkimer had mentioned, but not by name. He soon found a door bearing the name of Doctor Borneau and that looked official enough. Opening the door slightly, Jerry peered into the office.

ALIBI TRAIL

Behind a big desk sat a man who must be Borneau and Jerry didn't like his looks. Gripping the gun that Harry Vincent had given him, a gun that still lacked cartridges, Jerry was undecided whether to accost the crisp-faced man. As in Herkimer's case, Jerry's gun began to creep ahead of him, opening the door a trifle more.

So slight was the creak of the door that Jerry was sure Borneau could not have heard it. In fact, the genuine Borneau could not have heard it, even if he had been here in his office instead of still enjoying the privacy of a tight-locked padded cell. But the man behind the desk had the highly acute sense of hearing that belonged to The Shadow.

Without changing the direction of his gaze, The Shadow noted the projecting gun muzzle and immediately identified the man behind it. This was perfect, one of those added strokes of luck on which The Shadow never depended, but had hoped might strike. Tracking down Jerry Reeth would have been difficult after last night, but the chance that Jerry might have grasped a clue that would bring him into voluntary circulation was the type of long shot that often came through and in this case had.

The Shadow played the next move perfectly in strict Borneau style.

Picking up the telephone, The Shadow called the switchboard and snapped an order in Borneau's sharp style.

"Arrange transfer of patient Sarah Prentiss," was the order. "From East Wing, Section Two to West Wing, Section Four. Then connect me with the supervisor."

There was a pause, during which the connection was completed. Jerry heard Borneau's crisp voice asking for a report on Sarah Prentiss. Then:

"So she still claims she is Brenda Van Dolphe." Borneau's tone carried a sneer. "She must be cured of that delusion... Yes, I shall recommend the treatment, beginning tomorrow... Meanwhile, I am having her transferred immediately..."

As he spoke, The Shadow was making penciled notes, but his hand was very near Borneau's favorite drawer. In a trice, The Shadow would have produced a gun to match Jerry's, had the young man made a further move. From a report received from Harry Vincent, Jerry Reeth could become quite dangerous under stress. But this time, Jerry was taking it calmly and not just because he knew his gun wasn't loaded. The muzzle receded and the door eased shut.

Immediately, Doctor Borneau sprang from his chair, reached a closet door, and a moment later swung back into sight as The Shadow, in his usual black regalia. Then, stalking along the corridor of this place where he could have posed as master and indeed had, The Shadow took up Jerry's trail.

Why he did so became apparent shortly.

When Jerry reached a stairway with an arrow pointing to Section Two, he was spotted by a stocky, heavy-browed attendant, who immediately moved after him, not knowing that Jerry was already being trailed. Before the attendant could overtake Jerry, blackness moved up in back of him, hooked his neck, and gave him that expert form of wrenching pressure familiarly styled the Javanese Jolt.

The attendant crumpled and slumped nicely behind the stairway, where The Shadow released him.

By the time Jerry reached Section Two, Brenda was already on the way to Section Four, conveyed by the two Amazons who had taken her in charge the night before. They were being very polite, this pair, because

ALIBI TRAIL

Doctor Borneau had so ordered it shortly after Treat had left. In fact that was why Brenda had been put in Section Two, which was a ward for mild patients.

Jerry spotted the procession far down the corridor and started that direction just as they turned a corner. He didn't see the blackness that moved in from an angle. When he reached the turn, Jerry was surprised to see Brenda walking ahead alone; in fact, Brenda was halting, rather surprised herself.

The Shadow had simply picked off the Amazons one by one, whisking each into a room so suddenly and rapidly that they'd landed in a dazed heap, each too bewildered to hear a door bolt from the outside. And now, Jerry had reached Brenda and was hurrying her down a stairway, telling her he'd explain the rest later.

By the time they had reached an outer door, Brenda was trying to explain things herself.

"I'm all right," she was saying, breathlessly. "He spoke to me last night and told me I was safe."

"Who?" demanded Jerry.

"The Shadow," explained Brenda. "That's what he called himself. He said I'd be out of here when the right time came."

"This is the right time," assured Jerry. "I know where there's a bus line that will take us into town. We're going right to your house and have it out with Treat!"

That was all The Shadow heard because he paused in the darkened outer door through which Jerry and Brenda went. It was all right with The Shadow, because it fitted with his plans. Having a car of his own available, The Shadow could reach the Van Dolphe mansion ahead of Brenda and Jerry.

And he still had time for a phone call. Naturally, The Shadow returned to the office and made it in Borneau's style, until it was relayed past the switchboard. That call was to New York and it brought a response in an even-toned voice:

"Burbank speaking."

Burbank was The Shadow's regular contact man, who kept tab on all the latest developments. Expecting some, The Shadow gave the single word:

"Report."

The report was brief, but when Burbank finished, The Shadow's closing response was a strangely whispered laugh. Crime's climax was coming more swiftly than The Shadow had expected, but not too swiftly for his plans.

Burbank's report concerned a discovery that the police had made. They had traced the half of the baggage check and had brought in a trunk from a ferry station, a trunk belonging to Jerry Reeth.

In that trunk they had found the much hunched body of a man that they had identified as a Mexican named Gonzales.

CHAPTER XIX

THE Van Dolphe mansion was anything but a grim old mausoleum when Jerry and Brenda arrived there. In fact, they were totally astonished to find it brilliantly lighted, with a party in full progress.

Though somewhat baffled, Jerry didn't change the plan that he had made.

"We'll go in by the secret door," he told Brenda. "Of course when we reach the landing, we may be stumped."

"Why?" asked Brenda. "We can use your key and unlock the next panel, the one leading down into the library."

Jerry halted in surprise; they were near the darkened passage leading in back of the house.

"You mean there's a further route into the library?"

"Of course," replied Brenda. "It's the way Treat brought me out. From the library to the landing, then through the outside wall."

"And Treat has the key to it?"

"Of course. My father's key. He didn't know your father had one too and of course I didn't tell him."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Only The Shadow."

They were well into the passage when Jerry heard that and he stopped short, momentarily alarmed. Then, from that very darkness came a whispered tone. It spoke two words:

"The key."

Jerry hesitated. Still believing that every friend might be a foe, he was rising to a fighting mood. But he couldn't locate that sinister yet confident whisper. It spoke again, from a new direction.

"The key to the secret door."

Something much like a gun muzzle pressed cold against Jerry's neck. Brenda didn't know that such was happening, but she saw the logic in the request for the key.

"It's The Shadow, Jerry." Brenda's tone was a plea. "He is our friend. Give him the key."

Reluctantly, Jerry dropped the key into a gloved palm that came magically from the blackness.

"Brenda will go in the front way," spoke The Shadow, in his whispered tone. "She will particularly seek out a girl pretending to be Brenda Van Dolphe and will talk of mutual acquaintances in Colombia. Her purpose will be to tangle this impostor until she needs help."

That suited Brenda beautifully, now that she was beginning to understand what was really going on.

"What name shall I use?" asked Brenda.

ALIBI TRAIL

"Any that you choose," replied The Shadow. "Your part will be simple, as the advantage will all be yours."

They were moving out toward the street. A tiny flashlight blinked from The Shadow's hand. Its signal brought another man, vaguely familiar to Jerry, even in the dark. Again The Shadow spoke; these instructions were for Jerry.

"Here is Vincent," said The Shadow. "Trust him this time and fully. You will wait out front together until the right moment arrives."

With that, The Shadow was gone. His course carried him through the gloom of the rear passage and to the secret door which his key unlocked. Reaching the landing, The Shadow closed its ornamental paneling behind him, then turned to the wall that opened into the library.

Below were guests, dozens of them, and some were so close to the obscure stairway that they might have observed an average intruder upon the little landing. But the gloom of that landing, with its angled background of fumed oak, was a perfect setting for The Shadow. He was to all intents invisible.

Then, The Shadow was gone, through the inner wall that closed behind him, down some steps to a book-case that opened smoothly, silently, and brought him into the presence of a man who did not see him: Cedric Treat.

Hard-working Treat was at his patient task, that of putting the Van Dolphe affairs in order. Tonight, however, it was a task he relished, here behind the locked door of the library. Treat was chuckling to himself, but audibly, as he made entries in ledgers and account books. Beside him were stacks of bills, title deeds, and other papers, all ready for their turn.

Blackness drew closer and closer to Treat but he did not recognize its ominous approach. Reaching for a check book, Treat tore out a check, which already bore the signature of Brenda Van Dolphe, like all the other checks in that same book.

Treat made out the check to cash. The amount that he inscribed was fifty thousand dollars, mere spending money where a Van Dolphe check was concerned. Again Treat chuckled, but this time his chortle died.

Blackness had not only arrived; it had solidified in the shape of two gloved hands that came over Treat's shoulders. Cloaked arms pinned Treat where he was, as the hands took the check from his and tore it in half. One half fluttered to the desk, while a gloved hand moved away with the other.

Then, turning mechanically, Treat saw what had happened to the free gloved hand. It had gone beneath The Shadow's cloak to produce an automatic. Treat was getting a look right down the muzzle of that gun. But when the muzzle swung toward the desk, Treat's frozen eyes followed it, to the half check that The Shadow had dropped there.

Then came as strange a sardonic a laugh as any ears had ever heard.

"There was half an envelope left at Reeth's apartment," spoke The Shadow, in a slow tone, that to Treat had the stroke of a death-knell. "The playing card found at Wilbert's was torn in two, with one half gone. The baggage check found with Herkimer's body was also torn, with one half missing. And now this check, with you, Treat."

Treat's hand was clawing nervously, toward a desk drawer.

ALIBI TRAIL

"You were the man with the perfect alibi," continued The Shadow. "You had witnesses, two capable private detectives, to prove that you never left this house. They knew nothing of the secret route that you had learned about from the records of Craig Van Dolphe.

"Of course, you told Brenda, last night. It was a way to win her confidence. You put her where you thought she would never tell, until you gave the order for her release, if you ever gave it. You wanted time, of course, to rifle the Van Dolphe fortune."

Treat opened his lips, fish fashion, but they wouldn't speak.

"The original idea was to use Jerry Reeth as a tool," declared The Shadow, "until you realized what a chance existed, with Brenda's uncle and cousin, the only relatives who knew her, leaving the city very suddenly. You shipped Claxon and Senora Hidalgo, thus getting everyone away who could possibly identify Brenda Van Dolphe."

The Shadow paused to let those words sink home. Then:

"You knew Gonzales would be at Reeth's. He was part of the game, Gonzales. You disposed of him, with the aid of a crew that had been hired beforehand. You had an alibi that night, because Judge Jeffrey thought you were here in the library."

Treat's eyes were popping, as though they, like his wide and wavering mouth, were drinking in these accusations too.

"You had to find the photographer who took that picture of Brenda," added The Shadow, "and you used Herkimer to help you. It was Herkimer who discovered Wilbert and paved your way to a second murder. Since Herkimer had seen Brenda, he was next in line; therefore he proved an excellent tool."

As plainly as though The Shadow had stated it, Treat realized that this cloaked accuser must have talked with Brenda and pieced the facts of the story.

"All the while you were planting a trail to Jerry Reeth," continued The Shadow, "because you had forced him to become a fugitive. The Spanish playing card, from a greasy deck in Gonzales' pocket, the baggage check used to ship the trunk containing Gonzales' body –"

There was no need for more. Wildly forgetful of The Shadow's automatic, Treat had ripped open the desk drawer and snatched out another piece of evidence as yet unplanted on Jerry, the gun that had been used to murder Wilbert.

No shot greeted Treat, only a grim laugh. In the gloom of the great library, Treat could not tell where it came from. Then, The Shadow's voice:

"It is useless, Treat. Three murders are on your hands. Three murders, all readily proven."

The revolver was turning in Treat's hand, as his frantic eyes sought the voice that he could not locate. Again came The Shadow's sibilant tone:

"Bullets will not aid you, Treat, except to save you from a later doom. You will only waste those shots if you seek to find me with them. Your game is ended, Treat –"

The game was ended.

With a shriek, Cedric Treat came to his feet, placed the revolver muzzle to his own temple and pulled the trigger. His body wavered, fell forward, struck the desk and thudded to the floor.

Like an answering echo to that thud came the closing of the book case, marking the departure of The Shadow.

CHAPTER XX

AN amazing blonde named Carmen Del Oro had become the life of the Van Dolphe party. Voluble in Spanish as well as English, she had sought out Brenda Van Dolphe to talk about so many people that they had both known in Colombia. It was so strange, though, that Carmen could not remember having met Brenda.

Or had they met?

If so, it seemed that Brenda had changed. But there must be places, people that they both remembered. It was all so wonderful, this meeting.

Not wonderful for the girl who called herself Brenda Van Dolphe. If she could only find Treat!

But Treat was in the library and couldn't be disturbed, so the brunette Brenda, who wasn't Brenda, began tearing herself away from one group after another, always to be followed by the voluble Carmen Del Oro. Flying distress signals, the brunette at last attracted attention and managed to get in a few words to a long-faced man who met her in a corner.

That man was Kirk Grimshaw.

"Quick, get me out of this!" the brunette undertoned. "That girl knows too much about the Van Dolphes."

"Take it easy, Nita," returned Grimshaw. "Who is she, anyway?"

"Somebody named Carmen Del Oro. If she catches up with me again, I'll –"

"I'll take care of her."

Taking care of Carmen just didn't work. Hardly had Grimshaw introduced himself to the unknown, before Carmen placed him in the competent hands of Miss Genevieve Jeffrey, whom she introduced as Brenda's lovely cousin. Mentioning that Grimshaw must have certainly met Judge Jeffrey, the real Brenda left him helpless, because the portly Genevieve just loved to talk to people who knew the judge.

Meanwhile, Nita, seeing the blonde menace traveling in her wake, had contacted a new ally in the person of Alvin Lancaster. He promised to handle Carmen too, but failed as Grimshaw had. This time the interference was Cranston, who next was drawing Lancaster into a chat with the police commissioner. By then, the real Brenda had overtaken Nita and was circulating her right back to Weston's party.

"You must listen to Brenda," Carmen told Weston. "I have asked her to tell us all about that wonderful trip she took with her father across the Arroyo Grande, when they visited the platinum mines. That is, if she remembers!"

The girl called Nita was fading fast. In faltering style, she started to take up a story that she knew would fail. Meanwhile, Cranston had strolled away and was over near the door, asking for his coat and hat. He was there, when Grimshaw and Lancaster arrived, saying things between them.

ALIBI TRAIL

Only The Shadow could have caught those snatches of low, hasty conversation.

"We've got to get out of here, before Nita spills!" was Grimshaw's verdict. "She won't last long."

"If we could only get word to Treat," returned Lancaster. "Maybe he could help."

"Not a chance. He's in the library. It would be a give-away if we went there."

"Then let's clear and take a chance that Nita comes through."

They didn't clear. While they were bundling into their hats and coats, Cranston strolled over by the front door. His pause there was a signal to outside watchers. As Grimshaw and Lancaster were starting out the door, two men came barging in and stopped them cold.

Those two were Jerry Reeth and Harry Vincent. Instantly, Jerry was shouting accusations.

"So here you are!" he stormed. "You're the pair who tried to swindle me and when you couldn't, you framed me! I know everything now!"

Trying to shove past, Grimshaw and Lancaster were met by clouting fists. Next, Weston was over at the door, calling upon men to grab the intruders. Reeling, Grimshaw and Lancaster still hoped to get away, but this time it was Cranston who stopped them.

Good reason, too. They were to be needed as witnesses. Weston had just grabbed a murderer that they could help identify.

"Jerry Reeth!"

Again, it was Cranston who intervened, this time when the commissioner was about to lay a clamp on Jerry. Calmly, Cranston waited for events to take their course. The person who stopped the show was the amazing blonde who so far had answered to the name of Carmen del Oro.

"I can speak a good word for this man, commissioner," the blonde declared. "I am sure that he is not guilty of any of those murders. As sure, for example" – her tone was very steady – "as sure as I am positive that I'm Brenda Van Dolphe!"

Weston's eyes bulged in disbelief, until Brenda pointed to a much flustered brunette.

"If you don't believe me," added Brenda, "ask her!"

The brunette of course was Nita and she was doing a rapid sneak toward the library, throwing a frightened look back over her shoulder. Weston overtook her and shook her until she nodded, amid gasps stating that Brenda was telling the truth.

"And if you need more evidence," added Brenda. "Ask Cedric Treat!"

Turning, Weston gestured for the rest to come along. He hammered hard at the library door, but received no response. All the while, Brenda was giving details of her kidnapping and Jerry was getting in some details of how he thought he had been framed. When it came to the fact that Jerry had rescued Brenda tonight, Weston angrily called upon the two private operatives who were still around and told them to smash down the library door.

ALIBI TRAIL

"If that rat has a way out of there!" stormed Weston, in reference to Treat, "I'll know that he was the murderer!"

The door was latched, not bolted, hence anyone could have locked it by merely drawing it shut. That fact became apparent after the door was broken through. But once across the threshold, Weston halted, the purple fading from his face.

Sight of Treat, a gun lying beside his dead body, was proof that if the rat had a way out, he hadn't taken it. It was Cranston who called attention to the odd item lying on the desk, half a check, bearing the signature of the false Brenda Van Dolphe.

"Curious, the way those tokens were found after every murder," remarked Cranston, calmly. "It would seem almost as though they were required, perhaps by two partners in crime, so that each could keep tally on the other and know that he had gone through with his part."

Steadily, Cranston was eyeing Grimshaw and Lancaster. His gaze went toward the pockets of their overcoats and they instinctively reached that way. Thinking they were going after guns, Weston shouted for the private operatives to stop them. They did, but when they felt for guns, they found none.

What they brought out of those pockets was even more incriminating. From Grimshaw's came half a blank envelope and half a baggage check. Lancaster's pockets disgorged the torn half of a Spanish playing card displaying a scrawl that had been attributed to Gonzales and a new and startling chunk of evidence, the other half of the torn check for fifty thousand dollars that lay on the desk beside the body of Cedric Treat!

With that, Grimshaw and Lancaster broke. They were confessing everything. They'd hired Treat to frame documents supporting Jerry's claim on the Van Dolphe estate. They'd intended to unload their Quetzal Silver stock on Jerry at a huge figure, knowing how anxious he was to clear the Reeth name.

Then Treat had given them a better idea, that of bringing in a false Brenda to replace the real Van Dolphe heiress, who was known to so few people. But he hadn't said he was going to murder Gonzales, the man who had been helping with the Mexican swindle.

Nor Wilbert, nor Herkimer – they were later innovations, Treat's own. They'd brought in Nita to replace Brenda, but they hadn't expected the real Brenda to be kidnapped. Treat had said he would only suggest that she take a trip out of town.

They were pouring truth, mostly, but with a few lies to cover certain things that they had actually known and countenanced. Cranston, Brenda and Jerry were believing them, as was Harry Vincent, but no one else was. For there was one thing that Treat had never told his sponsors in supercrime, that he had a secret way out of the Van Dolphe mansion.

Treat wouldn't have told that. He valued his own alibis too highly. And with that evidence unknown, Grimshaw and Lancaster, sponsors of planted crime, were learning how it felt the other way about. The Shadow's halves of evidence, which as Cranston he had neatly planted in their pockets at the cloak room, were marking three not only for three actual murders, but for Treat's suicide as well.

They were still crying their innocence of murder, when Commissioner Weston took them away, but with their protests, Kirk Grimshaw and Alvin Lancaster were admitting more and more the depth of the parts that they had played. And the more they talked, the more they were clearing Jerry Reeth of blame.

ALIBI TRAIL

One person didn't need that proof in Jerry's behalf. The smile that Brenda, the real Brenda, was giving him, proved that she had believed in Jerry ever since their first meeting.

There was another person who smiled but cryptically. That person was Lamont Cranston. As he watched the departure of Grimshaw and Lancaster, Cranston could have lessened their burden if he had told the full facts concerning that real man of murder, Cedric Treat, who had become his own final victim.

Would Lamont Cranston tell those facts?

Only The Shadow knew!

THE END