

THE BLACK DRAGON

Maxwell Grant

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THE BLACK DRAGON

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CHAPTER I. BLACK MADNESS

STEVE TRASK stared at the carved dragon that squatted in the shop window. It was a tiny object, not more than four inches high. Carved from solid jet, the dragon was a glossy black, save for two dots of jade that gave it the look of a green-eyed monster in miniature.

It might even be Miljohn's dragon!

Singular, how Steve had scoured Manhattan's Chinatown in vain, looking for just such a dragon, only to find one in the window of this obscure shop which bore no name and looked as though it was no longer doing business!

As Steve stared, something more singular happened. A saffron hand came through the curtain that backed the show window, gripped the jet dragon in its fist and disappeared as rapidly as it had arrived.

Springing to the door of the shop, Steve pounded with one hand, while using the other to grip the stubby revolver that he carried in his pocket. Shuffly footsteps answered from within; the door opened a crack and Steve received a minute inspection from a slanted eye.

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Then the door went wide and a yellow-faced man bowed Steve to a counter. Seeing Steve's eye upon his fist, the man inquired:

"You wantee buy dragon?"

As Steve nodded, a telephone bell rang. The shopkeeper answered, all the while keeping a wary eye upon the door. Across the wire, Steve heard a sharp voice that inquired:

"You, Sujan?"

The shopkeeper muttered quick words that ended the call. Turning to Steve, he spread his hand twice to indicate the price of the dragon as ten dollars, absurdly low for such a rare curio. With his free hand, Steve produced the money and pocketed the jet ornament, but he still gripped his gun as he stepped outdoors.

That ten-dollar price was proof that something was wrong in this shop. But it simply clinched an impression that Steve had gained earlier. It wasn't until the door slammed shut and bolts slid home that Steve put facts together.

The shopkeeper hadn't said "dtagon" as most Chinese would. He had correctly pronounced the word "dragon." Also, the name that had been spoken over the wire, Sujan, was distinctly not Chinese.

The man was a Japanese!

No wonder the shop bore no name and looked closed. It was a hideaway for Sujan and perhaps for other Japs.

Steve started to dismiss the thought as preposterous, until he reasoned how shrewd the game could be. Chinatown was the one place where Japanese could risk being seen by Americans, because there they could be mistaken for Chinese.

Naturally, they'd have to make sure that the Chinese did not spot them, but Sujan's actions proved that he was following just such a policy. He'd taken a chance when he saw that Steve was an American. But Steve had guessed the truth and maybe Sujan knew it. If so, there could be trouble!

THIS dimmed street was sinister. Looking about, Steve saw a mass of basement entries, so dark they looked like fox holes. The only place that promised Steve safety was a doorway across the street. It was deep, even though it ended in a door of heavy bronze, so formidable that quick entrance would prove impossible.

To the right of the house with the bronze door was an alley; on the far side, Steve saw a higher structure that looked like an old apartment building. Its second floor was fronted by a balcony with bulky ornamental posts.

Odd how the nearest of those posts looked like a huddled figure watching for some prey!

Shaking off the illusion, Steve glanced elsewhere. His eyes narrowed as they covered the cornice of the house roof above the bronze door. Even more ominous than the apartment balcony, that cornice jutted like something carved from blackness, yet with a clinging effect that reminded Steve of a living creature.

Turning his gaze across the narrow alley, Steve looked higher to the projecting caves of the apartment building, four floors up. If he'd wanted to let his fancy get the better of him, Steve could have imagined a stir beneath those eaves.

But Steve wasn't letting himself be deceived by shadows that looked like things alive!

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Dimmed lights were coming along this forgotten street. They marked an arriving taxicab, its driver looking for some address. As the cab pulled in front of the house with the bronzed door, Steve saw that it had a passenger who was about to get out.

This was real opportunity. All Steve had to do was get into the vacated cab and ride from this weird neighborhood. Once away, he could examine the black dragon and figure out what it meant. Probably owners of black dragons were regarded as members of a secret fraternity, something that Miljohn hadn't known. Those thoughts were flashing to Steve as he crossed the street, wisely going in back of the cab so that its dimmed headlights would not disclose him. But as he rounded the rear of the cab, Steve stopped short, face to face with the passenger who had just stepped to the sidewalk.

Fierce eyes met Steve's, ugly eyes that flared narrowly beneath bushy brows. He saw a sharp nose; beneath it yellow teeth that gritted from the sudden thrust of a heavy jaw that poked from a muffling overcoat collar. The man was an American, of tawny visage, but he wasn't welcoming Steve as a compatriot. An instant's glance at Steve, then those narrowed eyes tilted upward. With a half snarl, the tawny man swung his arm wide, as if in a signal. Steve didn't lunge, because the man was springing back into the cab. What Steve did was swing about, following the direction of the tawny man's gaze.

Shadows had come to life!

THE balcony post across the alley was lunging into human shape, if its grotesque lurch could be called human. Steve saw a saffron Japanese face push forward from the rail; with it came a clawed hand that furnished a downward whip. From those fingers came the glint of a knife that the creature was releasing – with Steve as the only target in its path!

Nothing could stop that hand of death, for its fling was complete. The intervention that saved Steve was of a more amazing sort.

A gun tongued from the cornice on Steve's side of the alley. Straight as the knife–fling and far swifter was the bullet that intercepted the blade of death. Literally, that leaden slug plucked the knife from the hand that hurled it. Steve heard the sharp ping and saw the knife go flying out into the street, while the clawing hand whipped back as though stung by the force that shattered the deadly dirk!

Steve's rescuer was the black shape that he had mistaken for a segment of the cornice. Timed to the recoil of its gun, that figure was rising to reveal itself as a cloaked form. Shadows had truly come to life.

This one was The Shadow!

Cloaked fighter who battled men of crime, The Shadow wasn't stopping with his first endeavor. He was swinging from the cornice to take another gun stab at the foiled assassin on the balcony across the alley. And Steve, knowing that this cloaked being must be a friend, was wheeling about to handle the glaring man who had sprung back into the cab.

That man was gone; so was the cab. Steve's hearty lunge carried him out into the street, where he sprawled. He heard the staccato punches of The Shadow's gun, saw the knifeless assassin scrambling along the balcony to avoid the fire. Then, rolling on both elbows, Steve was staring straight up, to witness something truly amazing.

Both sides could boast rescuers in this combat!

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TWO floors above The Shadow's head, a mere dozen feet across the alley, the eaves were disgorging another Japanese assassin who traveled along with the murderous stroke he hoped to deliver. This creature was swinging a weapon shaped like a cleaver, and the drive of the chopping blade was carrying it to its mark!

Before Steve could aim his gun, the cleaver man landed.

Weird was the laugh from the cornice. Steve's revolver was talking into the darkness. The Shadow had heard the clatter of the eaves and had literally rolled across the edge of the cornice to avoid the cleaver stroke. By a quick clutch back across the brink, The Shadow was hauling himself back to solid footing by seizing the scrawny opponent whose cleaver slash had gone wide!

His shots not being needed, Steve sprang across the street to see what happened next. As he reached the front of Sujan's shop, guns jabbed from all about. The basement doorways on this side of the street were alive with marksmen shooting at The Shadow!

On the cornice, The Shadow twisted his scrawny opponent as a shield against the gunfire. They twirled back across the roof, where the scrawny man wrenched free and scrambled to a higher ledge. Another defiant laugh resounded as The Shadow sprang after his slippery enemy, to regain him as a shield.

With a howl of indescribable glee, the wiry Jap jabbed his hands to The Shadow's throat. They twisted like a windmill painted black and yellow. Amid the kaleidoscopic spin, the human whirligig disappeared over the rear of the higher roof. Clutched by a tenacious strangler, The Shadow was bound on a three-story plunge to a solid courtyard behind the house with the bronze door!

Black madness gripped Steve Trask. He wanted the quickest route to reach The Shadow and wreak vengeance on the strangler who had gained the upper hand in the fatal plunge.

Steve's dash stopped as suddenly as it began. It stopped when he drove through the opposite doorway and met the bronze barrier shoulder-first. Grabbing the big door latch, Steve found it wouldn't yield. There wasn't any chance to pound the door; others were doing it for him.

They were pounding it with bullets, those marksmen from the basement fox holes. Having settled The Shadow, they were giving Steve their attention. Escaping the first wild shots, Steve at least had sense enough to respond with his own gun, but to even less avail than his enemies.

Steve's bullets might as well have been blanks, considering the way his adversaries ducked to shelter. Besides, his fire was rapidly exhausted. Steve was simply clicking a hammer on empty chambers. Why he kept tugging the useless revolver trigger, Steve didn't know, any more than why he should be keeping his other hand in his pocket, clutching the black dragon as a lucky token, but this was one spot where luck looked sure to fail.

Back against the bronze door, Steve braced as he saw revolvers thrust. Then came the jabs of flame accompanied by a unanimous roar. With it Steve caved; but he was pitching backward, not forward, a thing that he couldn't understand until he saw that the bronze door was swinging shut above him, echoing from the clang of bullets.

The barrier had yielded at the crucial instant, gulping the victim whose death had seemed so imminent. But Steve wasn't stopping just across the threshold; he was going down through a space where there wasn't any floor, into an abyss of engulfing blackness!

The bronze door slammed with a mighty clangor. Tuned to that strident clash, Steve struck the bottom of the pit below. He saw sunbursts outmatching the gun spurts that he had so luckily escaped. Then, as though jarred into oblivion by the brazen echoes, Steve's senses vanished.

Black madness had overwhelmed Steve Trask, just as it had taken his rescuer, The Shadow!

CHAPTER II. THE HOUSE OF LI HUANG

THE sound was sharp. Click! So close that it seemed to snap exactly in Steve's ear.

Coming to one elbow, he took his head between his hands. While his brain still swam, he realized that it wasn't the clicking sound that had roused him.

There were other sounds, very distant – the shrills of police whistles, the wails of sirens. They came from the street, a place Steve couldn't reach, for there was more than a brass door barring his exit from this pit. When Steve came to his feet and struck a match, he saw that a solid floor had closed above his head.

The match flame wavered along with Steve. It reached his fingers and he opened them suddenly. The match struck a stone floor and went out. Sagging to his knees, Steve struck another match and looked along the floor.

Something glittered in the corner; it was Steve's revolver. Clutching the gun with his left hand, Steve shook out the match flame with his right.

The moment he gripped the revolver, Steve remembered the click that he had heard. The walls about him seemed solid, like the floor; still it was from one of those walls that the sound had come. Steve didn't light another match. Instead, he swung to his feet again, shoved his back against the wall and found the nearest corner. He was forgetting that his gun was empty as he gestured it in the pitch darkness. At least he preferred darkness, since it enabled him to stay from sight.

Then, in a hoarse whisper, Steve demanded:

"Who's there?"

The question came back, hollow, like a sneer. Its repetition marked it as an echo, but Steve wasn't sure. It certainly didn't resemble his own voice. Still, the confines of this narrow pit could probably produce vocal illusions.

After listening for several seconds, Steve began to creep along the wall. He could hear other footfalls, timed to his own. Again, they seemed echoes, but of a distorted sort. Steve halted his caged pacing. When he did, the other sounds stopped, too.

The click hadn't been an echo. So Steve waited, hoping it would sound again. If it did, it would mean that his unseen companion was going out. So Steve was reasoning – when the sharp sound came straight across the pit. Gun ahead of him, Steve lunged.

There wasn't any wall when Steve arrived. He went right through, swinging his gun, hoping to overtake the person who was darting out ahead of him. Only nobody was going out, except Steve, and he didn't travel far.

What Steve met were men coming in. They stopped his gun swing, along with his surge, hurled him back and pinned him helpless against the far wall that he had left. A flashlight suddenly appeared and Steve found

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himself confronted by a yellow–brown face, flanked by two others belonging to the men who clutched him.

All three belonged to the group that stopped Steve's drive. Except for them, the pit was empty. Completely flabbergasted by the way his imagination had tricked him, Steve subsided without further resistance. His captors took his gun away and marched him out through the open wall, clicking it shut behind them.

THE brief parade ended in an upstairs room, where a thin–faced Chinaman was seated behind a teakwood desk. Though shrewd, the eyes that greeted Steve were somewhat friendly. The man, himself, looked Chinese, though the three servants did not.

They seemed more Mongolian, those three, when Steve gave them side glances. However, he wasn't well enough versed in Oriental nationalities to be sure of anything, except that the trio looked ugly and dumb – two points that did not apply to their thin–faced master.

The man behind the desk spoke first. "I am Li Huang," he declared in precise English. "This is my house. I am glad to receive you" – the lips gave a twitch which Steve decided was a smile – "but I regret the sudden method that necessity impelled. Perhaps Ming Dwan should explain the situation, since she was the person responsible."

Li Huang gestured toward the door of a room and Steve turned to see a Chinese girl enter. She was dark–haired, petite, more typically a native of Cathay than Li Huang himself. In what seemed a correct Chinese fashion, Ming Dwan looked straight past Steve and answered Li Huang directly.

"It was right that I should allow a friend to enter," declared Ming Dwan. "But it would have been wrong to let an enemy reach you, Li Huang. Not knowing which was outside our portal, I treated this stranger as both.

"I opened the door as to a friend. I pressed the switch that let the floor fall, that I might trap a foe." Li Huang actually smiled as Ming Dwan bowed. Crossing the room, the Chinese girl stopped beside the desk, folded her arms and turned toward Steve. Words of gratitude stopped on Steve's lips as his eyes met Ming Dwan's.

This Chinese girl was utterly impersonal. Her expression showed no interest in the man whose life she had saved. Rather, Ming Dwan regarded Steve coldly, as though no thanks on his part could make amends for the inconvenience he had caused.

At least Li Huang proved more affable.

"I have introduced myself," stated Li Huang blandly, "because I have nothing to conceal. My doorway was a trap, yes, but it is lawful for a man to protect his own premises, particularly when he is a retired merchant known to possess wealth.

"Your situation may be different." Li Huang fixed his eyes steadily, on Steve. "Therefore, I do not ask you to declare your name. It is but fair, however, that you should detail the events that occurred outdoors and give me some token of your circumstance."

Fairly spoken, those words of Li Huang. They stirred Steve's mind to a logical chain of thoughts. He remembered the events that brought him here.

THE chain began with the death of Steve's friend, Rufus Miljohn, once the owner of a black dragon carved from jet – a death that the police termed suicide, but which Steve classified as murder for the Black Dragon. It was on Miljohn's account that Steve had scoured Chinatown for a jet dragon like Miljohn's, and had finally found one in the shop of Sujun.

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Men of evil had sought to murder Steve. Therefore, the little black dragon could only represent a clan that favored justice. Looming in Steve's memory was the picture of a black-clad fighter who had saved him from doom, only to receive death's burden. The Shadow, cloaked master of justice, somehow symbolized the black-dragon token that Steve himself had acquired.

Li Huang was a just man, too. More than that, he understood. His words proved it, those final words that were still chiming through Steve's brain. He could almost hear those words again:

"Give me some token of your circumstance –" Steve saw the bland face of Li Huang, awaiting his reply. A friendly face, with sympathetic eyes that formed a counterpart of Li Huang's patient smile.

All Li Huang wanted was to hear the truth.

Steve opened his lips to speak the facts. It wasn't the gaze of Li Huang that stopped him. The stare that caught Steve's attention came from Dwan.

No longer did the girl's face lack expression. She was putting contempt and more into the glare that accompanied the twist of her lips. It wasn't that Ming Dwan would doubt whatever Steve might say. It went deeper than that; she wanted to hear his story. Behind that wish was nothing friendly, judging from the girl's expression. She was in a different camp than Li Huang; her very purpose in this house was to betray the placid Chinaman who owned it! That Ming Dwan represented the wrong people seemed clear enough to Steve from the girl's expectant gloat. That was Ming Dwan's one mistake; she'd given herself away too soon. It was up to Steve to play the smarter hand, in a way that would satisfy his friend, Li Huang, yet keep Ming Dwan totally at sea.

There was a perfect way to do it.

Silence was the answer; absolute silence, so far as Steve's name and mission were concerned. Yet with such silence he could declare himself. All he had to do was show Li Huang the dragon token, thus proving that he, Steve Trask, was a worthy guest, so worthy that there would be no need to know his name.

That was what Li Huang expected, and Ming Dwan, too. But the girl wanted the embellishments that Li Huang would not demand. So, in one stroke, Steve could handle both situations, winning the confidence of the honorable Li Huang and keeping the treacherous Ming Dwan baffled.

With a smile of his own, Steve Trask slid his hand into his coat pocket, intending to produce the jet dragon and place it on the desk in front of Li Huang. But Steve wasn't watching Li Huang; he was looking at Ming Dwan.

Steve's triumph never came. Astonishment swept him as his hand reappeared as of its own accord, bringing the lining of the pocket with it. Steve's hand was empty, and the pocket – turned inside out – was obviously empty too!

Somehow, somewhere, the jet dragon, token of security, had gone from Steve Trask's possession!

CHAPTER III. DEN OF DISASTER

LEANING forward on his desk, Li Huang lifted his eyes inquiringly toward Steve Trask. Though his lips were moving, Steve couldn't stammer the things he wanted to say. He was trying to tell Li Huang that he was a friend and could prove it, but he didn't want to commit himself to facts that would have to remain unsubstantiated.

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To claim that he carried a black dragon then fail to produce one, would be the worst step Steve could take. It was the sort of trick that an impostor would try. A name sprang to Steve's mind.

The Shadow!

It was a term that fitted the cloaked fighter on the roof, the rescuer whose efforts had plunged him to an undue disaster. But should Steve mention the friend whom he classified by that appropriate name, The Shadow?

It might help him with Li Huang. Steve felt sure as he studied the friendly, patient eyes across the desk. Li Huang, in his green, gold-braided robe, looked the part of a retired Oriental merchant, who had won his wealth through honesty.

But the eyes of Ming Dwan were different.

Stiff, prim, in a high-collared jacket of black and silver, the girl's poise resembled the poker-faced expression that she had renewed. But her eyes were eager with their narrowed gloat; they were watching for any betrayal on Steve's part. It struck Steve that such betrayal might apply to others than himself. For instance, The Shadow, who if not dead, was certainly lying helpless – a fatal thing if enemies should find him!

Li Huang was placidly watching Steve, glancing at the empty pocket as though wondering why his visitor had turned it inside out. Steve shot a defiant glare at Ming Dwan, then gave the first excuse that popped to mind.

"It's about my gun." Steve gestured toward the desk, where one of Li Huang's servants had laid the revolver. "I thought I had the permit with me." Pausing, Steve flipped his empty pocket and pushed it back where it belonged. "But I guess I forgot it."

Picking up Steve's revolver, Li Huang toyed with it. All the while a smile kept creeping to the Oriental lips, only to dwindle before it was half formed.

"Ah, yes, this gun," spoke Li Huang. "It is most embarrassing for both of us. It would not be wise for you to carry it without your permit." Li Huang's slow head-shake was a tribute to Steve's honesty as well as his own. The merchant was taking the attitude that Steve would be honor bound to truthfully answer any questions that the police might put. Stroking his chin, Li Huang found the answer for the dilemma. Rising, he approached Steve, placed a friendly hand on his shoulder and said:

"Come!"

INSTEAD of going to the front door, they arrived at a side portal, which was equally well-barred. One of the servants unbolted the door and Li Huang gestured through a passage, which ended in a gate.

"My servants will conduct you to a house on the next street," explained Li Huang. "I advise you to remain there about half an hour. You will have no trouble leaving if you are discreet."

The arrangement suited Steve as well as Li Huang. Shaking hands, Steve then turned and followed the two servants, who led the way. Hearing footsteps behind him, Steve looked about and gave an annoyed glare.

Those footsteps were Ming Dwan's.

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Why the Chinese girl was trailing along, seemed much too obvious to Steve. Ming Dwan wasn't interested in merely speeding the departing guest, as was Li Huang. But if she thought she could keep further tabs on Steve, she'd be mistaken. Steve felt he could personally attend to that when the time came.

Then the grating of the iron gate jarred Steve's thoughts to a case more pressing than his own. The gates that the servants were swinging, opened into a courtyard, the very space where The Shadow had made that farewell dive in the clutch of a merciless strangler!

Without ado, Steve pushed right through, as though anxious to reach his own destination, wherever it might be. Actually, he was taking this chance to scan the courtyard, and what he saw stiffened him.

At the very spot where he expected, Steve saw the crumpled figure of The Shadow heaped beneath its outspread cloak. The twist of the black-covered body was a worse token than its lack of motion. The Shadow wasn't merely stunned; he was practically mangled. If life still remained in that hulk of an intrepid fighter, it could be no more than a feeble spark.

What little Steve could do, he did. Turning, he caught the attention of Li Huang's servants before they looked toward The Shadow's body. It wasn't that the servants mattered; Steve was particularly anxious that Ming Dwan wouldn't spot the obscured huddle of immobile blackness. She'd be the sort to tell the wrong people of The Shadow's plight, the kind who would come here to destroy the cloaked fighter's last glimmer of survival.

Blocking Ming Dwan, Steve gave a shrug as though asking where he was to go next. The girl pointed to another gate across the courtyard, fortunately away from The Shadow's direction.

Past the gate were other passages that led, at length, to a basement stairs. Underground, Li Huang's servants seemed to be conducting a house-to-house canvass by the cellar route, until they stopped at a door they recognized. Opening it, they ushered Steve up a few stone steps into a narrow bunk-room, with curtained booths on both sides.

THE place was smoke-filled, and one whiff of the sweetish aroma told Steve that he had arrived in an opium den. One servant found an empty bunk for Steve; the other provided him with a lighted pipe, at the same time informing him that it was free of opium.

As they left, the first Mongol paused to whisper that Steve was to go out the front way, when he finished the half-hour spell that no one would disturb. With that, the flap of the bunk fell, cutting off outer world completely. It was then that Steve Trask remembered Ming Dwan.

After a few more puffs at the pipe, Steve poked back a corner of the curtain to see if the girl had left with the servants. His glance was timely. It gave him a flash of Ming Dwan in her silver-decorated costume. She was turning to follow others out through the rear door, but as the girl went, something flapped behind her.

It was the curtain of the last bunk in the row. Ming Dwan had tarried to speak to someone lurking in that booth, without the knowledge of Li Huang's servants!

This opium den had become a trap!

Not a trap of Li Huang's making, but of Ming Dwan's device. Back in his own bunk, savagely puffing the harmless pipe, Steve wondered how he'd make his safe exit now. The den was gloomy, but its two ceiling lights, spaced well apart, were sufficient to reveal the corridor between the rows of bunks.

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To start out through the front, Steve would have to make himself an open target for a watcher from the rear booth. The thought was disconcerting, until it suddenly became an inspiration.

The front way wasn't the route that Steve should take.

This was his opportunity to go back to the courtyard, to give aid to his friend, The Shadow – or what was left of him. Provided, of course, that Ming Dwan hadn't seen the huddled shape in the court and passed the word along. Even if she had, so much the better. Such was the final thought that drilled home to Steve.

For if Ming Dwan had passed the word along to anyone, the receiver must be the lurker in the rear booth, the very man who was posted to stop Steve's departure first!

A fighting spirit swept Steve. Here was his chance to deal a double blow. He'd crack that lurker in the other bunk and thereby clear a route to aid The Shadow. Even while the idea gripped him, Steve found himself acting upon it. He was out of his own bunk, letting the curtain flap behind him, and moving with long, loping paces toward the booth at the rear.

It was odd how those motions blended, how fast Steve was moving and yet so slow. The sickly opium odor no longer tanged his nostrils, but Steve didn't connect that fact with his dreamlike locomotion. He was feeling the effect of the drug that filled the atmosphere of this bunk-lined den, but it was giving him a false sense of energy, rather than producing stupor.

As Steve reached the curtain, its flap stirred before his hands could touch it. While Steve puzzled over that curious occurrence, a jarring clatter crashed through to his inner senses, causing him to turn so suddenly that he surprised himself.

The commotion was coming from the front of the opium den. There, Steve saw an arriving figure who stopped beyond the pair of low ceiling lights and darted a look between the rows of dingy bunks. Steve recognized the newcomer like a hideout monstrosity left over from a nightmare.

The den's new customer was Sujan!

OBVIOUSLY, the Japanese shopkeeper had come here by some underground route. That Sujan recognized Steve was evident by the shout the Jap gave. Like an "Open Sesame," it spread wide the mouths of caverns as represented by the bunks between Steve and the front door.

They were like things from under stones, these slimy Nipponese whose faces matched Sujan's. No mistaking their race when they arrived in a group. This opium den was a nest of Japanese, probably their chief lair.

These were the assassins that Steve had eluded by his precipitous trip into the house of Li Huang. The denizens of this place had returned to make it a den of disaster, with Steve as their victim. They had waited only for Sujan to identify the man they wanted!

In this new swirl of madness, Steve groped for the nearest refuge – the curtained bunk beside his shoulder. He was forgetting that it had an occupant, an unknown person who already rated as an enemy. It was simply that Steve's whirling senses were turning everything about, even to the mad belief that he could conjure up a rescuer from nowhere.

The rescuer arrived. Amazingly, he sprang from the very bunk that Steve had thought the lurking place of a foe. With one huge lunge, a tall figure unlimbered from behind the curtain, caught Steve as he was turning in that direction, and flung him into the security of the bunk.

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Steve hadn't time to glimpse his rescuer's face, as the man of the moment completed his spin so rapidly that a pair of hands came flinging into sight, each carrying an automatic. So swiftly was it all accomplished, that those big guns roared before a single revolver spoke or any knife was hurled.

But all this was mild, compared with the incredible challenge that the lone fighter added to his actions. Strident was the laugh that pealed through the opium den, promising disaster to those who expected to deliver it.

The same mirth that Steve had heard uttered from the roof top, but which he believed was silenced forever:

The laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER IV. THE SHADOW'S GIFT

BEWILDERING was The Shadow's self-transformation from a crumpled, lifeless figure in a forgotten courtyard to a master fighter ridding a notorious opium den of the human scum that infested it.

More astonishing, however, was the way in which The Shadow transformed the setting itself. He changed it from a lighted scene into the element that was his favorite fighting ground: darkness!

Two shots did it.

One from each gun, the jabs were aimed at the two ceiling bulbs that illuminated the den. Each roar was followed by an echoing explosion and a clatter of glass. Pitch-darkness followed, cloaking The Shadow with surrounding blackness.

Then stabs of flame were knifing the gloom. They counted no more than the real knives that flew with them. Gunshots and blades were missing The Shadow, a fact that his repeated laugh proclaimed. The location of The Shadow's weird challenge told why the opposing thrusts had failed.

The Shadow was delivering that laugh from the very midst of his startled antagonists!

He'd made a forward dive beneath the level of the barrage. Wildly, savagely, men wheeled and sledged the darkness with their guns.

This wasn't empty darkness!

Hard-dealt blows met receiving heads. Other swinging guns clashed with steel. The heads belonged to the very foemen who were trying to slug The Shadow. Killers were bludgeoning their own ilk in the darkness. The steel represented The Shadow's guns, swinging wide and hard, warding off any blows that came his way, directing them to the skulls that deserved such strokes.

Doubled in The Shadow's bunk, Steve heard the clash of battle and saw a few gun-spruts that accompanied it. Whenever a frenzied assassin let go with his trigger, he made himself a target for The Shadow's prompt reply. It didn't do the others any good to use The Shadow's gun jabs as a target, the way he was picking out theirs. He was no longer there by the time they aimed and fired!

Bunks were crashing under the sprawl of bodies as The Shadow, totally invisible in the darkness, pitched his staggered foemen from his path. Shrieks, groans, thuds, other evidences of a complete rout, were tribute to The Shadow's skill. And Steve was wondering what it would be like to run up against The Shadow in the dark, or vice versa, when he gained the experience.

THE BLACK DRAGON

Out of nowhere came a hand that hauled Steve from his lodging place. With it a whispered voice commanded "Come!"

Brought to his feet, Steve was traveling along the very route that he had originally planned – that cellar trail to the courtyard where he had hoped that he could render some assistance to The Shadow!

WHEN they reached the courtyard, Steve gained his first real look at his companion. For one thing, The Shadow wasn't cloaked, a thing that Steve had realized when his tall rescuer whirled from the bunk in the opium den. But at that time, Steve hadn't even gained a real impression of The Shadow's attire.

Now Steve saw, and gaped.

This fighter par excellence was wearing evening clothes! More than that, his flawless attire was scarcely ruffled. Momentarily, Steve saw The Shadow's face, but had no time to check its features. The visage impressed him as immobile, mask-like, with a trace of a hawk's profile. Then The Shadow had turned away and was stopping above a huddled shape beside the wall.

For a moment, the impression of unreality chilled Steve. This man in evening clothes had demonstrated that he must be The Shadow. Yet the form toward which he stooped was the same cloaked figure that Steve had observed earlier and was certain was The Shadow.

Was The Shadow a ghost, returning in another guise to gaze upon the remains of his own human form?

It wasn't the effect of the opium that threw this thought into Steve's mind. Steve's senses had cleared, so fully that he was dealing in cold facts; The Shadow, alive, was plucking the cloak from The Shadow, dead. That was fact – or seemed so – until the cloak was lifted.

The shape beneath told its own story. Upturned from the twisted shoulders of a grotesquely distorted figure, Steve saw the ugly face of the scrawny Japanese strangler who had tried to throttle The Shadow during the death plunge from the roof!

Whether through luck, skill or some uncanny power, The Shadow had settled that question of supremacy by landing uppermost. His Jap foe had taken the brunt of the blow with the natural results attending a thirty-foot dive to a bed of cement. Sole survivor of the plunge, The Shadow had used his cloak to cover the remains of his deceased antagonist.

Steve felt he could congratulate himself on having aided The Shadow to a slight degree. Steve had helped with the cover-up, by diverting attention from the huddled thing that The Shadow wanted to conceal.

Ming Dwan hadn't learned the secret of the courtyard!

That thought was merely a preliminary satisfaction. More things were due to happen, of a sort that pleased Steve. The Shadow was putting on the cloak and slouch hat that he had regained. He merged with the semi-darkness and was invisible, then his hand plucked Steve's arm.

Willingly, Steve went along, back through the house of Li Huang!

It was a wise choice on The Shadow's part, for a din was coming from the direction of the opium den, indicating that reserves were picking up the trail. The Shadow's low laugh indicated that he'd welcome them in a way they wouldn't like, but it also expressed some concern that Steve felt was meant for himself.

THE BLACK DRAGON

The Shadow wanted to take Steve to safety by the shortest route, and Li Huang's afforded it.

AS they reached the side door, Steve remembered that Li Huang kept it bolted. That meant nothing to The Shadow. He simply opened the door, drew Steve through and promptly barred the door behind him. So far, so easy, until a sharp voice offered challenge.

Steve turned and saw Ming Dwan.

The girl's face showed no trace of pallor. Rather, it displayed a creamy flush above the stubby, shiny revolver that matched the silver braid of her pajama costume. The words that Ming Dwan spoke were in Chinese, which The Shadow evidently understood.

No laugh came from The Shadow's hidden lips. Instead, Steve saw the glint of burning eyes beneath the slouch hat brim. Those eyes, the only visible portion of The Shadow's countenance, were fixed directly on Ming Dwan, the frail, delicate creature who dared to block the fighter who had trampled a dozen assassins from his path!

The Shadow recognized Ming Dwan's determination. He moved slowly, not rapidly, as he drew Steve along. Steve found himself wishing that The Shadow would wither this lotus flower with a scorch from one of those deadly automatics. The trouble seemed that The Shadow hadn't a chance to draw one, so sharp was Ming Dwan's watch.

Then they were stock-still, The Shadow and Steve Trask, their very motion hinging on Ming Dwan's bidding. Steve was looking for the triumphant gloat to end the girl's fixed expression, when one of Li Huang's servants shuffled into sight.

It was the very break that The Shadow awaited!

As Ming Dwan gestured, the servant lunged. But in gesturing, the girl let her gaze rove from The Shadow, who sprang into instant action. Before Ming Dwan could turn to aim anew, The Shadow caught the lunging Mongol, spun him like a toy top and flung him at Ming Dwan, who was forced to duck aside.

Next, The Shadow was thrusting Steve along a passage in a mad race toward the front door. From behind them came the flashes of Ming Dwan's gun, but a corner intervened. Then, as the girl reappeared to open direct fire, The Shadow hurled Steve ahead, right to the front door itself, giving the two-word command: "Unbolt it!"

Complying, Steve wondered why Ming Dwan was no longer shooting. Hearing commotion, he turned and saw the answer. Li Huang's other servants had arrived. One from each side, they were flinging themselves upon The Shadow, slashing knives at the cloaked fighter. At least, they were blocking Ming Dwan's aim; but to Steve, the knives were a greater menace.

Not so to The Shadow.

WITH a spin he let the blades slash his cloak as it fluttered in their paths. By then, Steve had the door unbarred and The Shadow was springing toward him with a forward gesture. Steve didn't accept the hint, because the Mongols were after The Shadow, poisoning their knives for a fling, and Steve wanted to help out.

The Shadow aided Steve, instead, with a shoulder lunge that spilled him right through the door. Sprawling, Steve saw The Shadow coming with him, only a few feet ahead of the deadly knives. But as he came, The Shadow flung a hand to the inside of the doorway and pressed a switch located there.

THE BLACK DRAGON

A clatter followed The Shadow's arrival on the sidewalk. Steve saw Li Huang's servants disappearing, knives with them. They were dropping right through the floor into the same pit that Steve had earlier tested. Clutching Steve's arm, The Shadow whipped him away from the open door just in time to avoid the shots that Ming Dwan fired from beyond the open floor. The trap was closing, but the girl wasn't taking chances with it while The Shadow was still close by. Then The Shadow was gone, and Steve with him, around the corner of Li Huang's house and through the narrow alley between that building and the eaved apartment.

As they went, they heard the bronze door clang, slammed shut by Ming Dwan. The Shadow added a whispered laugh to the brazen echoes, but kept Steve on a steady dash through the alley. Police whistles were shrilling from the front street.

How The Shadow would manage an escape was a puzzle to Steve, until the answer cropped up just when wanted. The answer was a taxicab that didn't have to be summoned. It was wheeling to the curb, its door wide open. The Shadow thrust Steve inside, then joined him.

Out from the streets of Chinatown, into a quiet area where gunfire and excitement were very far behind; there, The Shadow opened the door as the cab paused for a traffic light. The Shadow didn't have to state his purpose. It was obvious. He was going his own way, leaving this cab for Steve to do with as he chose.

It seemed that there should be some parting token, though Steve didn't quite know how to introduce the subject. Shaking hands with a friend who might vanish in the middle of the clasp was just a bit too eerie. Still, The Shadow's hand was coming toward Steve, so he reached out to accept it.

What the Shadow did was place an object squarely in Steve's hand. Then, as the cab started forward, the cloaked being whirled suddenly through the door, disappearing.

Squatting in Steve's palm was the miniature dragon carved from solid jet, the black talisman with green jade eyes that had so mysteriously disappeared from Steve's possession – to be returned by that incredible master of things unknown:

The Shadow!

CHAPTER V. THE LAW DECIDES

CLYDE BURKE waited until Steve Trask filled his pipe and lighted it. While Steve was drawing a long breath of smoke, Clyde said:

"Go on."

"That's about all there is," returned Steve. "I'll admit that my adventures sound fabulous, particularly when related in the broad daylight of this hotel room, but last night they were real enough."

Clyde shook his head. "The part about the opium den queers it, Trask. People would class it as a pipe dream."

"There's the jet dragon." Steve gestured toward the object. It was on a writing table in the corner. "It should prove something."

"It might prove that you went Sujan's shop, if he would admit selling you the thing. But Sujan won't do any talking. The police loaded him with lead when they were mopping up the hop joint."

"But the fact that Sujan was in the opium den! With other Japanese!"

THE BLACK DRAGON

"That's all been covered," argued Clyde. "The police have rounded up a lot of Japs in other places, and this makes just one more, The fact that they were hopheads makes this bunch look like a lot of no-accounts. Sorry, Trask, but your yarn won't make news, not even in a scandal-loving tabloid like the Classic, for which I work."

Steve was glad Burke wouldn't print his story. In fact, Clyde's decision gave Steve a deeper inkling into the real purpose of the reporter's visit.

It struck Steve that Clyde Burke was working for The Shadow rather than for the New York Classic. At least, the reporter's arrival at the hotel formed a connected chain. Having come from Chinatown in the cab supplied by The Shadow, Steve assumed that the driver of that cab had checked his identity and informed his cloaked chief. Today, The Shadow doubtless learned that Steve Trask was acquainted with Rufus Miljohn, whose recent death was marked as suicide.

For Clyde Burke, by way of introduction, had mentioned that the Classic was looking into the Miljohn case. The reporter hoped that Steve could shed some light on it; and Steve had, by recounting the whole story of the jet dragon, along with describing such participants as Sujun, Li Huang, Ming Dwan, and most important of all – The Shadow.

Now Clyde, in his casual reporter's style, was picking up the tiny black dragon and examining it. Reverting to their initial premise, Clyde queried:

"You saw a dragon like this in Miljohn's apartment?"

"I did," replied Steve. "Only an hour before Miljohn was found with a bullet through his brain and a gun in his fist!"

"And Miljohn had no reason for suicide?"

"None at all. He told me he'd cleaned up plenty while he was in the Orient."

Clyde produced a clipping and handed it to Steve, who read it between pipe puffs. The clipping classed Miljohn as a refugee who had lost an entire fortune when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong. Steve shook his head.

"That was Miljohn's bluff," he declared. "He was smart enough to pretend he'd lost everything, because he didn't want the wrong people on his neck. Trouble was, they guessed the truth, so they murdered Miljohn and framed it to look like suicide."

SO confident was Steve regarding his theory that he went further with it. Picking up the jet dragon, Steve tapped it with his pipe stem.

"Miljohn counted on one of these to protect him," argued Steve. "I'd say this token must represent some secret group that aided Miljohn's escape. Whoever carries one of these will find friends when he needs them. Maybe it slipped with Miljohn, but the rule worked with me. The person who proved it was The Shadow."

Clyde's lips straightened, suppressing a smile. Bluntly, the reporter inquired:

"Would you like to test the dragon further?"

THE BLACK DRAGON

Steve sucked deeply at his pipe, comparing the pleasant aroma of this afternoon's tobacco with the sickening smell of last night's opium. Somehow, the taste of the pipe gave Steve new confidence.

He nodded. Whereupon Clyde drew an afternoon newspaper from his pocket and unfolded it on the writing desk, beside the jet-black dragon.

"This happened last night," declared Clyde, "about the time when you were in Chinatown. Only they didn't discover it until this noon."

The newspaper account shrieked murder. The victim was Lewis Pendleton, a wealthy publisher just returned from the Orient. His case couldn't be suicide, for three bullets of varying caliber had been extracted from Pendleton's brain, after the police discovered him dead in his hotel room. Nor were any guns found on the premises.

"Why, this ties in with Miljohn's death!" exclaimed Steve. "Only, this time, the police know that it was murder."

"There's another difference," put in Clyde, referring to the newspaper. "Pendleton really suffered heavy financial losses, because his publishing plants were destroyed."

"Maybe he'd written off the costs," remarked Steve cagily. "From what Miljohn told me, smart men in the Orient saw things coming a long while before they happened."

Clyde pointed to another paragraph.

"It doesn't apply to Pendleton," the reporter stated. "He was going to start all over. He'd found a million-dollar backer, whose name is given right here – Miles Fenmore, one of New York's biggest financiers."

The mere name of Miles Fenmore was enough to take Steve's breath away, but the thing that Clyde suggested was even more gasp-producing. Picking up the carved dragon, Clyde plunked it in Steve's palm and queried:

"Why don't you take this to Miles Fenmore? Show him the dragon and tell him about Miljohn. Fenmore wants to find the men who murdered Pendleton. He'd listen to your story."

At first, the proposition staggered Steve, but gradually he regained his mental balance. Knocking the ashes from his pipe, he dropped the brier in one pocket and placed the carved dragon in the other.

"All right, Burke," Steve decided firmly. "I'll go."

DUSK was settling over the Fenmore mansion when Steve knocked at the front door. Admitted to the house that rated as one of Manhattan's show places, Steve stated bluntly that he wanted to see Miles Fenmore. To his surprise, his request was promptly granted.

There was some red tape along the way, the footman passing Steve to a secretary, who turned him over to another at the top of a grand staircase. Then there was a private secretary who wanted to know something about Steve's business, but this caused little delay. The moment Steve said that it concerned the Pendleton murder, the secretary spoke to Fenmore by telephone. Immediately, Steve was ushered through a final door into Fenmore's own study.

THE BLACK DRAGON

Broad-shouldered, with a face proportionally wide, Fenmore gazed at Steve with sharp, appraising eyes that flanked an aristocratic nose. Below that high-bridged centerpiece were wide lips, firm and tight, that showed neither smile nor greeting. The proof that Fenmore had weighed Steve satisfactorily came when the financier raised one hand and brushed back his short-clipped hair, as though to cover its streaks of gray.

Then, in blunt tone, Fenmore spoke. "Good afternoon, Mr. Trask. You have something to tell me about my friend Pendleton. Let me hear it."

Inasmuch as Steve's story began with Miljohn and wouldn't really include Pendleton, Steve started proceedings by producing the jet dragon and sliding it across Fenmore's glass-topped desk.

Immediately, Fenmore's eyes showed curiosity. He picked up the miniature dragon and proceeded to examine it while Steve talked.

Steve found himself contrasting this interview with the one he had held with Li Huang. Of course the circumstances were different; still, the contrast held good. With Li Huang, Steve had found it difficult to choose his words under the steady gaze of the merchant's eyes. In Fenmore's case, it was a case of telling everything to even gain the man's attention.

Indeed, Steve felt that Fenmore hadn't heard a tenth of what he said, until it was all finished. Then Fenmore laid the little dragon aside and looked up with that same sharp gaze. Aloud, he repeated the high-spots of Steve's story practically word for word, to prove how completely they had registered.

Nodding his corroboration, Steve brought out his pipe and tobacco pouch. Finding the pouch almost empty, he produced a flat tin of smoking mixture. Then, fearing that he might be offending Fenmore, Steve laid the tin on the desk and started to put his pipe away.

At that point, Fenmore actually smiled, and his lips were very genial. Opening a square ebony box that rested on the desk, he pushed it Steve's way, displaying a full supply of rich tobacco.

"Try my blend," suggested Fenmore. "Fill your pouch, too, Trask. My friends all like this special mixture."

Having thus classed Steve as a friend, Fenmore went further. He produced a meerschaum pipe and filled it after Steve had finished packing brier and pouch. They were both smoking away when Fenmore completed his summary and inquired:

"Am I correct on all the details?"

When Steve nodded, Fenmore asked if he would like to dictate the whole account to one of the secretaries. Steve agreed that he would, so Fenmore ushered him into a little room off the study.

When the secretary arrived, Fenmore left, closing the door behind him. Choosing his words carefully, Steve repeated his account as nearly verbatim as he could remember it.

AT the end of ten minutes, Steve returned to the study. From behind the desk, Fenmore gestured him to a chair. Picking up his tobacco tin, Steve dropped it in his pocket and brought out the pouch, to load his pipe for another smoke. He was reaching for the jet dragon when Fenmore stopped him.

"Inspector Cardona is outside," stated Fenmore. "He is the police official who is handling the Pendleton case."

THE BLACK DRAGON

Steve decided that the law could know the facts, so far as he'd dictated them. He'd left out the little matter of his revolver, now in the possession of Li Huang, whose whole behavior he had commended.

Pressing a buzzer, Fenmore smiled dryly and gestured toward the carved dragon.

"We'll let the inspector see this," said Fenmore. "If it excites his curiosity as it did mine, it will keep him occupied until the secretary finishes typing your statement."

Inspector Cardona entered. He was a stocky individual with a swarthy face that formed a perfect dead-pan. But his eyes couldn't restrain their sudden interest when they lighted on the jet dragon. While Steve and Fenmore were exchanging smiles, Cardona pounced upon the object as though intending to swallow it.

Turning the dragon from hand to hand, Cardona stopped abruptly and looked from Fenmore to Steve. Maybe the inspector detected the pride of ownership in Steve's expression, for he quickly demanded:

"Did you bring this here?"

Steve nodded, whereupon Cardona promptly tendered him the tiny dragon, gesturing for him to put it away. Steve was dropping it in his empty coat pocket, when he noted that Cardona was rubbing his hands as though they were sticky. Muttering something about a handkerchief, Cardona was reaching in his own hip pocket, when he added:

"Funny, the way that black polish comes off! Leaves your hands looking like a coal-heaver's!"

Steve brought his own hands palms-upward and stared at them. He couldn't see any traces of the black stain that Cardona mentioned. Still staring, Steve exclaimed:

"Why, I didn't get any of it, inspector –"

Cardona's hand was slashing forward with a glitter. Cold metal cracked against Steve's wrists and clamped there! Before Steve could realize that he was solidly handcuffed, Cardona was hauling him to his feet. Turning his prisoner toward the desk, the swarthy inspector displayed him like an exhibit. Staring in amazement, Miles Fenmore couldn't seem to understand the sudden turn of things any more than Steve.

Then came Cardona's gruff explanation, if it could be called such.

"Lucky I came along, liar. Fenmore," announced the inspector. "Whoever the fellow is, he's dangerous. We want him for the murder of Lewis Pendleton!"

CHAPTER VI. WHOLESALE MYSTERY

THINGS looked very black for Steve Trask, blacker, even, than the jet-hued dragon that nestled deep in the pocket from which it had once vanished – something that Steve wished it would do again. For the tiny dragon was looming more and more as an incriminating factor.

According to Cardona, Lewis Pendleton had owned just such a souvenir, because hotel employees had seen it in his room. With Pendleton's death the black dragon had vanished, exactly as Steve claimed it had in Miljohn's case.

Far from clearing Steve, that link only deepened the accusations against him. Cardona shot the question:

THE BLACK DRAGON

"Do you know what the black dragon represents?"

"It must stand for some organization," replied Steve. "The members carry black dragons as tokens, I suppose. Somebody is preying on them –"

As nearly as it could, Cardona's face formed an interrupting sneer. Steve stopped talking, puzzled.

"You would play innocent!" scoffed Cardona. "You'll be telling me next that the Black Dragon crowd is made up of Chinese."

"Isn't it?" Steve asked.

"Hear that?" Cardona turned to put his question to Fenmore. Then, seeing that the financier looked really puzzled, the inspector said: "Sorry, Mr. Fenmore. Naturally, you wouldn't know. The Black Dragon Society is made up of Oriental thugs who are Japanese-controlled. There are mighty few Chinese who belong to it, and these are renegades."

"Then why would Miljohn and Pendleton have Dragon tokens?" demanded Fenmore. "They must have suffered at the hands of that organization."

"They were murdered by it!" expressed Cardona, "Don't you get it yet, Mr. Fenmore? Those carved dragons aren't membership badges, not by a long shot, They're death certificates. Whoever gets one is marked for murder, unless he delivers whatever the Black Dragon wants!"

Steve's thoughts exploded.

So that was why Miljohn had been murdered! He'd ignored the warning from the Black Dragon. The same applied to Pendleton, and even Steve's own case was covered. The Dragon Clan hadn't come after him; he'd gone after it, and gained a due reward. Sujun, planted in Chinatown for just such a purpose, had given Steve a jet dragon when he'd asked for one.

Therefore, Steve had been tagged for death, from which The Shadow saved him!

THE trouble was, Cardona didn't see it that way. The ace police inspector was figuring things to his own convenience. He thought that Steve had murdered both Miljohn and Pendleton, each time picking up the dragon token that the victim hadn't heeded. The clincher in Cardona's estimate was Steve's absurd alibi of a fantastic Chinatown adventure at the very hour of Pendleton's death.

"Smart stuff, Trask," jabbed Cardona, "coming here with the dragon you brought from Pendleton's and saying Miljohn had one like it! You wanted us to know that Miljohn's death was murder, instead of suicide, you thought we'd never accuse you of the very thing you so obligingly revealed!"

He added:

"You figured, too, that by chattering about one crime, you could dodge questions on another. We'd just ride over the Pendleton case and forget it, where you were concerned – at least, that's how you doped it. But we've tagged you for both jobs, and what's more, today you were delivering another death threat.

"That's what you did when you handed the black dragon to Mr. Fenmore."

Steve was sweating under the third degree. A light blinded his eyes.

THE BLACK DRAGON

Then came a welcome pause, produced by new arrivals, persons who stopped beyond the light. Whoever they were, Cardona saw fit to greet them; and Steve, given a chance to speak for himself, made the most of it.

"Call Li Huang!" blurted Steve. "He'll tell you that I was in his house."

Paper crinkled beyond the glaring light. It was Steve's typewritten statement, being passed from hand to hand. Then Cardona's voice:

"All right. We'll phone Li Huang."

Steve heard Cardona make the call, and though he couldn't see the telephone, he took it for granted that the inspector wasn't faking. Finishing, Cardona gave a short, harsh laugh.

"Li Huang never heard of you!" the inspector sneered.

Steve broke into a frenzied protest. Of course Li Huang wouldn't know who Steve was, because Steve hadn't identified himself. Cardona's whole handling of the matter was unfair, done in a manner that Li Huang would mistake for a trick. If they'd take Steve to Li Huang's, the Chinaman would remember him.

Cardona extinguished the glaring light. After a minute of blinking Steve made out other faces. One that wore a military mustache—belonged to Police Commissioner Ralph Weston. Steve heard Cardona address the commissioner by his title.

Accompanying Weston was a man named Cranston, whose face was dignified, reserved and quite impassive. Indeed, Steve might have identified Cranston with The Shadow, but for the fact that the commissioner's companion was leisurely in action and utterly indifferent to the business under discussion. Every time Weston addressed him, Cranston appeared bored.

"Trask admits knowing Miljohn," asserted Weston brusquely. "The question now is whether he knew Pendleton, which is something that he won't admit. Perhaps some of Pendleton's friends can tell us."

"Pendleton just returned from the Orient," objected Fenmore. "He has very few friends in New York. Even I knew him only by reputation."

"What about Sauber, the importer?" queried Weston. "His business with the Orient was huge. He must have advertised in some of Pendleton's journals. They should have known each other quite well."

Steve saw Fenmore shake his head.

"I am afraid Pendleton knew Sauber too well," said Fenmore. "Two years ago, Pendleton canceled Sauber's advertising because it was misrepresented. Nevertheless, Sauber might be the very man to supply information concerning an insidious organization like the Dragon Clan."

MARCHED from Fenmore's mansion, Steve found himself planted between Cardona and Weston in the commissioner's official car.

Cranston wasn't accompanying them. Either he felt that the trip would bore him, or people like Sauber didn't belong in Cranston's social set. Then, as the car rolled away from Fenmore's, Steve had a hunch. Maybe the choosy Mr. Cranston didn't care to ride in a car that contained a common criminal like Steve!

THE BLACK DRAGON

That was enough for Steve to dismiss Cranston completely and think of what Sauber might be like. Steve was left to his own conjectures, for Weston and Cardona were remaining strictly silent.

The big, official car was nosing its way through a slum area, which struck Steve as an odd district for a wealthy importer's residence. Then Steve noted that large warehouses, sprouting up among the squatty tenements, were largely occupied by importing concerns.

Swinging a corner, the car stopped near an archway that opened into a secluded court, a short street of its own. There were trees as well as houses beyond the archway, marking the court as an exclusive residential sector.

One of the houses was Sauber's, because Weston and Cardona alighted, drawing Steve with them. Passing through the archway, Steve looked to his right and saw a similar arch, leading to another street. It was very dark, that archway, like the boxes surrounding the trees and the narrow cul-de-sacs that flanked the houses.

A servant answered Cardona's ring, but it was Weston who introduced himself and asked for Sauber. Before the servant could summon the importer, a querulous voice arrived, followed by Sauber himself. At first, the importer was just a blocky figure, but when he reached the vestibule, his face showed plainly, as though a veil had been swept from it.

The reason, of course, was the light in the vestibule. Sauber had stepped right into its focus. But that only made the thing the more startling to Steve. It was like something snatched from a forgotten dream and brought into reality.

Beady eyes, bushy brows, sharp nose above yellowed teeth – those features, and the thrust of the jaw beneath them, jabbed Steve's memory like a pin puncturing a balloon.

Sauber was the man that Steve had met outside of Li Huang's, the figure who had arrived by cab only to dart away when shadows came to life!

If the evil Dragon Clan owned a local chief, Carlton Sauber was a logical candidate for the insidious title of Black Dragon!

Briefly stating the object of the visit, Cardona asked if Sauber could identify Steve as a person who had known Pendleton. Briefly, those beady eyes showed recognition; then, with a sudden head-shake, Sauber drew back into the vestibule.

"No, no!" began Sauber hoarsely. "I never saw this man before. I never met Miljohn or Pendleton. I know nothing about the Black Dragon, except that it should be avoided. I am an importer. At least, I used to be until the business closed, but I have never been to China, nor any part of the Orient –"

"Except Chinatown!" With that interruption, Steve shoved his handcuffed fists toward Sauber. "You were there last night, outside of Li Huang's, and you're going to tell us why!"

Madly, Sauber was trying to thrust Steve back and slam the door in his face. Weston and Cardona aided by hauling their prisoner down the steps. They were at the bottom, Steve halfway up, and Sauber at the top, all etched against the light, when Sauber gave a warding gesture in his wide-arm fashion of the night before.

The signal that had unleashed a horde of villainous fighters, followers of the notorious Black Dragon!

THE BLACK DRAGON

Steve was lunging for a grab at Sauber's arm when the door slammed hard. But it wasn't the combined pull of Weston and Cardona that brought Steve down. Instead, the force was living blackness that swooped from nowhere up between the two men whose clutches couldn't hold Steve back.

Again, The Shadow!

SOMERSAULTING as the black swirl swept him, Steve heard whizzing sounds above him. Those whirs ended in thuds as a pair of knives drove deep into Sauber's door and stopped there, quivering. There were startled shouts from Weston and Cardona as they sprang off to the sides of the steps, pulling their police revolvers.

Finishing against a tree, Steve was hauled to his feet by the human tornado that had swept him from murder's path. Next, he was reeling through the side arch leading from the court. Guided by The Shadow, Steve could feel sudden jolts along the route. They were produced by the recoils from the gun with which The Shadow was jabbing shots at seemingly invisible foemen.

Steve's whirl increased as he landed in a waiting cab, the same timely vehicle as the night before. The door slammed and Steve was spinning away.

Back in the double-arched court, Weston and Cardona were making for the commissioner's car, jabbing useless shots at hidden lurkers who were beginning to respond with guns. Seeing his chauffeur, Weston yelled for the fellow to summon assistance, and the big car sped away to its assignment.

Then new guns were talking from the very center of the court. The Shadow was back again, revolving like a battle turret, tuning his evasive laugh to the stabs of his deadly automatics. Each .45 seemed to snatch lurkers from their hiding spots. Tonight, they preferred flight to mortal combat with The Shadow.

Four were coming straight for Weston, when Cardona hauled him around the outer corner of the archway and down into a basement entry. Whistling knives went past and clattered across the street; then motley men were scattering away from the shots that The Shadow was free to fire, since Weston and Cardona were out of the way.

Coming up from cover, Cardona glimpsed The Shadow wheeling back into the court. Then he was gone, that shape of blackness, pursuing a pair of stragglers who were making for the other archway. It seemed a sure finish for the Dragon Clan despite their mad flight, for The Shadow was scattering the human chaff where the police could gather it.

From various directions, Cardona, heard the shrill of whistles, the blare of sirens, and finally the roaring motors of patrol cars. Weston's official car was back, speeding from one street to another, to summon more reserves. The glare of searchlights spotted in from every street, picking out every niche and cranny along the house walls, blocking off all escape.

And in the middle stood Inspector Joe Cardona, more astonished than he had ever been before. Steve Trask was gone: that was bad enough. The Shadow had disappeared: that was to be expected.

But along with The Shadow, master of invisible methods, had vanished the entire tribe that served the Black Dragon, producing utter mystery on a wholesale scale!

CHAPTER VII. THE DRAGON IN BLACK

THE same thing was happening on two streets in Manhattan. That was, a unique event was occurring in two separate places, which was really extraordinary!

One thing involved Commissioner Weston's official car. It was coming back from its task. Patrol cars swung to the curb to let it pass. There wasn't a cop in town who didn't know the commissioner's oversized crate by sight. Indeed, that was the reason why the roving chauffeur had been able to gather so many police in so short a time.

When the big car pulled up in front of Gotham Court, where Carlton Sauber was a resident, Commissioner Weston stepped forward to congratulate the chauffeur. But Weston's tone of commendation changed when Inspector Cardona arrived to report the wholesale disappearance of at least a half dozen unidentified thugs, who by this time might be east of Suez for all Cardona knew.

"Find them!" bawled Weston. "Search everywhere! Hunt through the court!"

"That's one place they can't be!" insisted Cardona. "The Shadow drove them out."

"Search, anyway, to make sure that Sauber is safe. Those killers were trying to get him. The moment Trask attacked Sauber, the whole tribe popped out!"

Weston still had the wrong slant on Steve. In fact, the commissioner wasn't really certain of anything except that his car had returned and was parked outside Gotham Court.

Curious, therefore, that the big vehicle should also be rolling along a side street, outward-bound, a dozen blocks from the commissioner's present base! However, it was – and patrol cars were making way for it. The same thing, in the shape of Weston's car, was in two different places!

Nobody realized that two editions of that vehicle were at large: the genuine and this counterfeit.

No one except The Shadow.

He was a passenger on board the duplicate car. Actually "on board" because he wasn't inside it. The Shadow was stretched on the top, his presence unsuspected by the huddled men who crammed the interior. This was the getaway car for the Black Dragon's six-man crew!

Clever of the Black Dragon to have a replica of the commissioner's well-known car outside of Sauber's. It had literally whisked his assorted followers from the vortex of the converging police. In planning crime, the Black Dragon could launch it best wherever the commissioner might be. Whoever he was, the Black Dragon was surely endowed with foresight.

HOWEVER, the Black Dragon hadn't made allowance for the unpredictable methods of The Shadow. In choosing this car for his own travel, The Shadow was running little risk of discovery. The driver was following dark, secluded streets.

The motley mob disembarked in a gloomy, blind alley behind an old loft building. The place was midway between Sauber's and Chinatown, convenient to both.

When the varied sextet poured from the fake official car, The Shadow noted limping members of the group, proof that he had winged a few targets. The limpers huddled by an obscure door leading into the building,

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while the rest made a brief inspection tour to make sure they hadn't been followed.

They were thinking in terms of The Shadow, probing every cranny for traces of their cloaked foe, and all the while he was perched in their very midst on top of the car that they were using as the base from which they made their search!

There was one rule that The Shadow had never known to fail. It was the axiom that confidence would produce carelessness. So sure were these Orientals that The Shadow couldn't be anywhere about, that the way was paved for an even bolder course.

Easing down from the car top, The Shadow actually joined his recent enemies as they moved in through the doorway. The shrouding blackness hid him perfectly, and he knew this tribe wouldn't be using lights. Keeping with the tribe, The Shadow went right past the guards.

The loose-knit crew climbed a flight of stairs, reached a door that opened to receive them. The room beyond was lighted, but its glow came from past some concrete pillars of the bulky sort so common in loft buildings. Shielded by the advancing dragon men themselves, The Shadow followed them into the meeting place, then side-stepped to a pillar as they continued onward.

At least two dozen of the Dragon Clan were already assembled, but their total was unimportant. Numbers dwindled when compared to the individual who presided over this meeting. This wasn't just a batch of underlings, holding a get-together.

Seated on a raised throne near the far wall, directly facing the assembled throng, was the master of the show:

The Black Dragon!

LONG had The Shadow sought the human monstrosity who represented the insidious Japanese clan. Finding him, The Shadow saw that the Black Dragon was indulging in suitable theatricals. Sinister though the Dragon's followers considered themselves, they shrank to pitiful proportions in the presence of their powerful leader.

The Black Dragon saw to that. It fitted his style to play the role of an Oriental potentate, before whom his creatures could grovel. Likewise his identity was concealed; not merely as a precaution – a thing which he might be expected to disdain – but because the very title of the Black Dragon constituted a personality in itself, and therefore should be kept as such.

All that was manifested by the device which kept the Black Dragon unknown. He was attired in a Japanese robe, its jacket golden, its sleeves silver. Circling upward from the hem of the robe was an embroidered dragon, so huge, so fanciful, that it was forced to coil several times around the costume.

The embroidered dragon was jet-black, and every time its wearer moved the coils produced a writhing effect. But that was not the most remarkable feature of the costume, nor the most lifelike. It happened that the robe wasn't large enough to include the entire dragon, so it had an extension in the form of a hood, which made the dragon's head.

Coming up from the back, the embroidered head was artfully arranged to show a yawning mouth with jagged black teeth fronting its golden throat. There were green eyes, of course, but they were atop the hood. The eye-holes, through which the Black Dragon peered, were fangs belonging to the embroidered dragon's mouth.

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Squatting deep in his gilded throne, the Black Dragon might have been anyone. Since the hood hid his face, it was impossible to discern whether his complexion was the yellow that belonged to Li Huang or the tawny color so conspicuous in Sauber's countenance.

The Dragon's hands were no clue. They were doubled idly on the throne arms and the fingers were encrusted with rings that gave off a jeweled glitter. The Dragon's voice was forced, like the restless undulation of his body, a motion which he continued mechanically in order to preserve the living illusion of the dragon coils that encircled him.

The tilts and turns of the Dragon's head added to the weird effect of a living monster. If the Black Dragon had suddenly gone lashing all about the meeting room, it would have been a logical climax to his serpentine act.

INSTEAD, the Black Dragon contented himself with hissing epithets at the men who had just arrived. From the wounded among them, he knew that they had failed in their recent mission.

"Twice you have failed!" accused the Black Dragon. "Last night you saw the man who carried the death token when Sujan pointed him out. Instead of settling the score, you left members of your own band dying on the scene, Sujan among them!"

The Dragon was speaking in English, but interspersing his terms with Japanese words.

"Another opportunity!" The Dragon raised his doubled fists, letting their gems strike the light. As the embroidered coils writhed, from the fangs of the dragon head came the repeated accusation: "Again you failed!"

There was a thud as one of the crippled murder crew sagged to the floor. The Dragon's head bobbed like a cobra's as his fang-eyes looked at the sprawled follower whose strength had given out. Meanwhile, The Shadow was studying other faces.

A mixed lot, these, but in nearly every visage The Shadow could detect Nipponese traces. Obviously these men had been sent from the Orient to serve the Black Dragon while posing as something other than Japanese. Only a few, who looked something like dead Sujan, had faces that gave them completely away.

Now the Black Dragon was proving something by his stare. He was proving that he was not Li Huang. For the Dragon's eyes were fixed upon a cringing member of the throng, beckoning him into the light. As the cowering man advanced, he proved to be Li Huang!

"You, too, have failed!" stormed the Black Dragon. "Years ago, Li Huang, we brought you from Manchukuo to live in Chinatown and be ready when we needed you. We even provided you with servants" – the Dragon gestured toward the three Mongols who stood behind Li Huang – "in the hope that you could deceive the local Chinese into thinking they could trust you. Last night, you failed when needed!"

"Only because my visitor did not produce the death token," pleaded Li Huang. "However, because of my suspicions, I placed him where Sujan could identify him. Tonight the police phoned me to say that they are holding a suspect named Trask, unquestionably the man I interviewed. He expects me to support his alibi."

"Which you will not do, Li Huang!"

"I have already disclaimed it, master," assured Li Huang. "But, from now on, my house cannot serve as a meeting place, the way we originally intended. Even my membership in this organization may endanger others. Therefore I beseech that you dispense with my future services, since the police may be watching me."

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"Your apprehension seems well-founded," decided the Black Dragon. "Your request is granted – with one condition. I shall give you a final task, the delivery of a death token to a person whose name will be stated at the proper time."

Li Huang bowed, greatly relieved. The Black Dragon placed a doubled hand into a pocket formed by a dragon coil. Promptly, The Shadow's hand slid beneath his cloak. Returning ahead of the Dragon's move, The Shadow's fist leveled an automatic past the edge of the concrete pillar, straight for the monstrous creature in the throne.

The Shadow was waiting to see the jeweled fist open wide to reveal a tiny dragon carved of jet. That would be the timely moment for a shot that would bring the Black Dragon sprawling from the throne with one of his own death tokens in his clutch. Such a climax would mark The Shadow as the real master of this show, with due effect upon the superstitious members of the clan.

The wait was costly. It spoiled The Shadow's chance for an immediate triumph. Instead of opening his hand palm upward, the Black Dragon gave a downward fling. Something left his fist and struck the floor. The object wasn't a miniature dragon token.

It was a missile that exploded instantly, with a sharp puff that produced a bursting cloud of smoke that enveloped the throne completely. The white swirl writhed as though the dragon coils had stirred it, and during those brief moments The Shadow kept steady aim, waiting to sight his target.

Then, as the vapor filtered itself away, The Shadow found himself staring at an empty throne. Amid the puff of smoke, the Black Dragon had completely vanished!

CHAPTER VIII. TRAILS CROSS

IT wasn't in The Shadow's nature to be startled by sudden disappearances. The art of vanishing on instant's notice was one of his own specialties; hence he wasn't even surprised to witness the result of the Black Dragon's puff ball.

The Shadow looked for visible effects, as evidenced by the Dragon Clan. They took it as a matter of course, proving that the vanish was their master's usual routine. One man had pitched forward on the floor, as though overcome by the startling sight, but The Shadow discerned that he was merely another gun-fray victim, succumbing like a previous companion.

Lifting the collapsed pair, the rest of the dragon men carried them from the meeting room, passing right between the concrete pillars. The Shadow remained unnoticed by the simple expedient of stepping to the far side of his pillar, but it was doubtful that he would have been detected.

Blended with the pillar's blackness, The Shadow was indeed invisible. After the procession passed, the space behind the pillar was vacant. Somehow, The Shadow had followed in the wake, for his gliding form appeared briefly in the outside corridor, then faded from all chance of view.

The Shadow was picking one figure among the departing throng – that of Li Huang. Lacking traces of the Black Dragon, The Shadow was concerned with the treacherous merchant as the next-best choice. Only if something better should show up, would The Shadow change that course.

Something better did appear, coincident with The Shadow's thought on the subject.

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The person in question was Ming Dwan. The Chinese girl should have been back in Li Huang's house, but she wasn't. Hardly had the motley dragon tribe gone down the stairs before Ming Dwan came darting from a side hall. She made directly toward the stairs, then hearing footsteps coming up, turned and hurried in The Shadow's direction.

Ming Dwan wasn't treacherous, as Steve had supposed, unless spying on the Dragon Clan came under that head. But the girl was running into serious difficulty, through having followed Li Huang here. Guards were coming back to close the meeting room. Flashlights gleaming ahead of them, they'd be sure spot Ming Dwan.

Just as the revealing beams stabbed the hallway, Ming Dwan was enveloped in darkness, so swiftly that she couldn't even gasp. Lost in the folds of a sweeping cloak, the girl was whirled into the meeting room itself, since it formed the only outlet close at hand. The girl saw the swirl of blackness that represented The Shadow, but it seem to dissolve under the light of the flashlights.

Still, they were coming toward the meeting room. A clash seemed imminent, considering that The Shadow couldn't keep Ming Dwan obscured in a room well filled with light. Battle would not be wise under present circumstances, when the first crack of guns would bring back the entire Dragon Clan.

Only The Shadow could have nullified that dilemma, by a surprising course that his foresight could connect with quick results.

SWEEPING Ming Dwan toward the deep end of the meeting room The Shadow halted with a sudden spin. Launching the girl in a similar twirl, he sent her into the lap of the golden throne, where Ming Dwan landed, very surprised, her head jouncing backward and her feet flying in the air.

Less than a second later, The Shadow was in the darkness of a pillar, beating the arrival of the incoming guards. As he looked toward the throne, The Shadow tightened his hidden lips, repressing the laugh of satisfaction that he should have uttered.

The Shadow had called the trick to perfection.

Ming Dwan was no longer in the glided throne. She had vanished as instantly as the Black Dragon!

The guards turned out the lights and closed the meeting room. As soon as they were gone The Shadow approached the throne and examined it with a tiny flashlight that cast a concentrated beam. Focused to silver-dollar proportions, the disk of light revealed a narrow slit in the back of the throne. Pressing one arm, then the other, finally joggng both, The Shadow gained results.

An edge slid downward from the slit. It was a sheet of glass that formed a long angle to the throne's front. The glass reflected the flashlight, giving the throne an empty appearance. Since nothing further happened, The Shadow pushed the glass up into its slit and seated himself in the throne.

When The Shadow joggled the throne arms with his elbows, the glass came down again. Boxed in the angled compartment, The Shadow delivered a low, reflective laugh. He should have fired immediately after the Black Dragon vanished, for one shot would have shattered the glass, and the next could have drilled the Black Dragon. Crime's vanished ringleader had still been close at hand after his disappearance!

Obviously, the Black Dragon hadn't remained there very long. So to test the next stage of the journey, The Shadow leaned back in the throne. There was a sharp click, well muffled by the glass. The back of the throne revolved, carrying The Shadow through the wall, where he dropped off to let the thing ride back again.

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As the panel completed its circuit, The Shadow gained a rear view of the glass sheet sliding up through his side of the wall. Neat, this delayed vanish, where the glass worked as a mirror to make the first stage quick, then remained in position until the mechanics of an actual departure could be completed.

Ming Dwan was awaiting The Shadow in the little room where they had both arrived. A door marked the exit that the Black Dragon had taken earlier. Removing his hat, dropping his cloak collar, The Shadow revealed the features of Lamont Cranston and gave Ming Dwan a slight smile which the girl returned.

"That was close, Myra," observed The Shadow, in Cranston's leisurely tone. (Ed – Myra Reldon (Ming Dwan) is an American girl who was born in China. She has acted as one of The Shadow's agents at various times.) "But it wasn't the closest I've seen tonight. I had to pull our favorite chestnut from the fire again."

Ming Dwan raised her thin eyebrows.

"Steve Trask?"

"None other," replied The Shadow. "What's more, he may be heading for further trouble, once he's on his own. I see the Black Dragon has provided a convenient telephone. I'll handle Steve's situation while you're getting back to Li Huang's."

The Shadow was picking up the telephone when Ming Dwan reached the door. The girl paused as The Shadow added a detail that belonged to her department.

"Watch for a dragon token," The Shadow stated. "Li Huang is to receive one and deliver it as bidden. Find out where it is to go."

With a confident nod, Ming Dwan left.

THUS far, Steve Trask hadn't encountered trouble, because he was still riding in The Shadow's cab. Its driver evidently knew Manhattan well, for he was covering a multitude of streets that Steve had never seen before.

All this was necessary to avoid questioning by patrol cars that seemed to be everywhere tonight. It wouldn't do for Steve to meet up with unobliging officers who would insist upon looking at his wrists. But he felt safe while in the cab, The Shadow's driver at the wheel.

Who the driver was, Steve didn't know, because the cab lacked the usual identification card that bore the cabby's name and photograph.

The ride continued for another fifteen minutes, until the cab halted in a very quiet neighborhood where the only visible lights showed from an old pawnshop.

The cabby thrust his face through the connecting window. Steve noted that the fellow had a pointed face, with quick eyes, but the cab was too dark to reveal his features clearly.

"Slide into the hockshop," said the cabby. "Tell old uncle to unclamp the jewelry. Say that Shrevvy sent you. I'll be waiting."

Alighting, Steve entered the shop and found the pawnbroker. Mention of "Shrevvy" produced immediate service, but Steve expected the process to be prolonged. Instead, it took less than five minutes. It seemed that handcuffs weren't like ordinary locks. Each brand of cuff had its own interchangeable key. As soon as the old pawnbroker had satisfied himself as to the make and model, he unlocked the handcuffs and handed them to

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Steve.

"Keep them for your trouble," remarked Steve with a grin. Then looking about, he added: "Is there a back door out of this place? I don't want Shrevvy to put himself in a jam on my account."

The pawnbroker showed Steve, through the back door which led into a darkened alley. Going out Steve decided that he'd done the right thing. After all, he was making it easier for the cabby, and therefore for The Shadow. Maybe The Shadow wouldn't want it that way but Steve did. He was an independent sort, Steve was, and though he owed much to The Shadow; he preferred to operate on his own.

Hand in his pocket, Steve clutched the jet dragon, glad that it was still there. Pausing at the outlet of the alley, Steve took a long look, just to make sure. In gazing along the street, he didn't bother to probe the darkness around him. The alley was its own security, helpful with its thick darkness.

More helpful to others than to Steve.

One step toward the street, and Steve was clamped from both flanks by a pair of brawny men who knew their business. His arms were pinned behind him so firmly that the handcuff treatment reminded Steve of putty. So expert were these captors that they bent Steve right back to his heels, which enabled them to clamp their free hands over his mouth.

Then Steve's captors were carrying him, still doubled, into a sedan, where they planted him without relieving pressure.

What added to Steve's bitter defeat was the course that the sedan took. It swung around the block and rolled right past Shrevvy's cab, which was still waiting in front of the pawnshop!

As the sedan rolled along, Steve kept staring upward through the window, unable to fight against the pressure that held him muscle-bound. There was no comfort in what Steve saw. He recognized buildings that the car was passing and knew that they were on the fringe of Chinatown. Steve was going right back to the ominous quarter of Manhattan where his strange adventures had begun, but this time he wasn't traveling in quest of a miniature dragon carved from jet.

Steve Trask already owned such a curio. He was carrying it in his pocket and he could feel its bulge – like the pressure of a gun, applied muzzle-first. For that black talisman meant death to its carrier!

Twice The Shadow had frustrated doom intended for Steve Trask. If the cloaked stranger from nowhere could miraculously appear to stay the present threat, Steve would be willing to believe anything. For Steve had deliberately put himself beyond The Shadow's protection, only to meet up with this.

Stolid faces, peering down at Steve's, seemed by their very lack of expression to taunt him concerning the death he knew must come!

CHAPTER IX. DEEP IN CHINATOWN

EFFICIENCY was the watchword of Steve's new captors. When their car pulled into Chinatown they didn't park it on one of the narrow streets. Instead, Steve felt the sedan swerve, take a slight jolt over a low curb and roll in through a narrow opening, where a well-oiled door slithered shut behind the car.

Immediately, the stopping place became an elevator, its open platform descending to a stone-walled cellar. The car rolled forward, curved between two pillars and stopped beside a narrow door that showed a gloomy

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passage leading underneath a street. Brought from the car by his two captors, Steve began to learn what underground Chinatown could really be like.

Steve was marched through what seemed an array of catacombs, some of the passages looking more like pipes than tunnels. Always there were turns and devious angles, until Steve hadn't a glimmer of the direction that they followed. The trip ended in a steel door that slid aside to show a small elevator into which Steve was pressed.

Unable to determine the speed of the elevator's rise, Steve couldn't tell how many floors they covered. However, the ride marked journey's end, for when Steve was shoved from the elevator he promptly arrived in a small room furnished like an office, where an Oriental was seated at a desk. The seated man gave a dismissing gesture and Steve's captors retired.

For the moment, Steve thought that he was back in Li Huang's presence, but in a different setting. There was nothing Oriental about these surroundings. The man at the desk was wearing American attire, instead of a robe. This might be a trick of Li Huang's, though curiously, Steve didn't entirely mistrust Li Huang. Steve's deductions were still persistently blaming the girl, Ming Dwan, for most of his trouble.

Then Steve saw that the seated man was not Li Huang. Though Oriental, this man had an American manner; his face was rounded, with an owlish expression so utterly devoid of challenge that Steve felt he could handle this situation with ease. Instead of waiting for the man to speak, Steve lunged forward, intending to clear the desk and overwhelm the trivial man into submission.

Blackness met Steve halfway. A flood of it, that seemed like the engulfing depths of Li Huang's pit. Then he was whirling, faster than his brain could twirl, under the manipulation of something that could be described as a human tornado. When Steve did finish his spin, he was deep in a chair that seemed to be prolonging the merry-go-round ride.

THE blackness that had done it all assumed a human shape – that of a cloaked figure, which Steve didn't see, because it stood behind his chair. Having come from nowhere, first as a living whirl, then a cloaked form, The Shadow carried the transformation still further. He removed his cloak and hat to become the complacent Mr. Cranston.

As Cranston, The Shadow was placing his black garments in a closet while Steve, slowly recuperating from his bewilderment, began to stare at the innocent Chinaman beyond the desk, wondering what kind of buttons had been pressed to produce the miniature earthquake. Then, in between stepped Cranston, idly tendering Steve an open cigarette case.

"A smoke, Trask?" queried Cranston in an even tone. "You could use one, considering the strain your nerves have been under."

Steve started to accept a cigarette, then shook his head. Reaching in his pocket, he brought out his pipe and pouch. Lighting a cigarette himself, Cranston finished by extending the lighter to Steve's pipe bowl. Taking a few draws of Fenmore's special smoking mixture, Steve looked squarely at Cranston and said:

"Your name is Cranston. I saw you up at Fenmore's house."

"Quite right," Cranston acknowledged. He gestured toward the desk. "And this is Doctor Roy Tam, a Chinese friend of mine who is very desirous of curbing the activities of the Black Dragon."

Dr. Tam leaned forward on his folded arms.

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"We regret the measures necessary to bring you here," spoke Tam in precise English. "The Shadow would have preferred that you remain in the cab which he provided. Fortunately, the driver foresaw that you might not –"

"So he notified Dr. Tam to intercept you," put in Cranston. "It would be dangerous for you to remain at large, Trask."

Steve didn't see it that way, and said so, adding that he could have dodged the police indefinitely, if necessary.

"We were not speaking of the police," put in Tam, politely. "Your danger lay from the Dragon Clan. My men kept you from falling into the hands of your former friend, Li Huang."

Steve turned a startled glance to Cranston, who nodded calmly and gestured back to Dr. Tam, who said:

"The Shadow informs us that Li Huang attended a meeting of the Dragon Clan this evening and was deputed to deliver the next death token, by order of the Black Dragon. Fortunately, Ming Dwan will inform us of Li Huang's moves."

Steve's thoughts whirled anew, only to arrive on an absolute balance. It was as though his spinning recollections focused upon a single tangible fact that proved the truth of Tam's words. Indeed, the thing was so tangible that Steve could actually grip it – the tiny jet dragon, in the pocket where he had just shoved his tobacco pouch!

The Shadow had returned that token, and The Shadow was certainly Steve's friend. But, so far, Steve had overlooked the mechanics of the operation, taking it that The Shadow had simply plucked the dragon from thin air. It was hearing Ming Dwan classed as an ally that made the truth strike home.

Assuming Ming Dwan to be a friend, facts fell into a new line. It was the girl who had dropped Steve to a rough but ready safety. The click he'd heard while waking in the pit must have been caused by Ming Dwan leaving after a preliminary visit, carrying the black dragon found in Steve's pocket so that Li Huang would not find it!

Those warning glances from Ming Dwan had stopped Steve from giving himself away. Later, her shots at The Shadow and Steve had been purposely wide. She was merely preserving her status with Li Huang in pretending to stop the fugitives. The proof of all this, the one point that Steve had so blindly overlooked, was the incident in the opium den.

There, Ming Dwan had stopped at the booth from which The Shadow later emerged to Steve's rescue. Then, only then, could the missing dragon token have reached The Shadow, delivered by Ming Dwan!

"You spoke of the police," remarked Cranston, his calm tone chiming with Steve's sudden vindication of Ming Dwan. "Suppose we let the police speak for themselves."

Tuning in a radio that stood on Tam's desk, Cranston picked up a garble of police reports to which Steve listened, horrified. The man hunt was on in full, its object Steve Trask! Not only was Steve wanted for the murders of Miljohn and Pendleton; the law had added another charge.

Boldly, Steve had summoned unknown killers to an attempt upon the life of Carlton Sauber, on the threshold of the importer's own home, with the police actually on the scene. Failing in the murder thrust, Steve had escaped with the aid of the assassin crew that served him. When last seen, he'd been wearing handcuffs that

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might still mark him as the wanted killer.

Sagging back in his chair, Steve rubbed the wrists that still ached from the manacles he'd worn. He looked helplessly from Tam to Cranston, and received calm glances in return. As he turned off the radio, Cranston casually remarked:

"I think that Trask would like to be your guest a while, Dr. Tam. Meanwhile, I can use my influence with the police commissioner to straighten matters as they should be. I am sure The Shadow would approve."

Dr. Tam bowed profoundly as he pressed a button, summoning servants to show Steve to his quarters in this safe refuge deep in Chinatown.

THE swiftness with which the Dragon Clan could move was proven when The Shadow left Tam's stronghold. Moving through dark alleys, The Shadow was quite unseen, for he had once more obliterated the identity of Cranston under the cloak and hat that blended with the shrouding night. But The Shadow could see skulking creatures in the darkness which he navigated so invisibly.

Bold skulkers, servers of the Black Dragon!

Police cars were about, their searchlights appearing suddenly to cut unexpected swaths along the narrow streets. Always the skulkers tumbled like phantom tenpins into alleys, doorways, or basements, to avoid those revealing beams.

The Shadow, too, was shifting away from each sudden glow. In avoiding one sweeping searchlight, The Shadow suddenly thrust himself into an unprepared snare.

Side-stepping into an alley as a police car wheeled past, The Shadow came right into the midst of some dragon lurkers who were about to issue forth. This time, half a dozen hands were upon him, all sensing the texture of the black cloak that they could not see. Not for an instant did they hesitate.

Like goblin claws, half of those hands clung to The Shadow as he tried to wheel away. Even as he whipped guns from beneath his cloak, free hands were swinging knives at the blackened mass that represented The Shadow.

Only the circling stroke of The Shadow's gun hand prevented the blades from driving home. But in the whirl, The Shadow lost his footing. Knives went clattering as The Shadow sprawled, but other attackers were pouncing on their prey, slugging hard with revolvers. The Shadow's only respite was the lack of gunfire. The Dragon Clan were fearful of clipping one another; likewise they knew that shots would bring police.

Few fighters other than The Shadow could have risen amid such a slugging hail. He managed it, but could only partially ward off the gun swings. Reeling out into the street, The Shadow was blindly seeking a wall against which he could brace his back. Hard after him came the murderous pack.

Grabbing at a corner, The Shadow missed. He stumbled across a curb, but turned his stagger into a lurch across the street to a big car parked there. The pack overtook him as he wrenched the door open. Twisting about, The Shadow did a backward drop to avoid the pounding weapons; at the same time, he used his other hand to stab shots with an automatic.

Spurting upward, those shots found no human targets, but they made assailants dodge. Moreover, they were the summons that the Dragon Clan had restrained themselves from giving, the thing that would bring the patrol cars. His senses slipping, The Shadow had scored a last moment stroke. Weakly, his lips throbbed a

laugh.

FEEBLE was that laugh compared to the glee of the Dragon Clan. Half a dozen hands slammed the door shut to hide the flopped form of The Shadow. Like a thing released, the big car roared away through the narrow streets, unstopped by the converging police.

For the officers in the squad cars identified that long-built vehicle as the commissioner's own official car! They did not know, as did the Dragon Clan, that two such machines were roaming Manhattan this night. No wonder scattering assailants were gleeful. This murderous tribe had dispatched The Shadow, half stunned and helpless, straight to their master, the Black Dragon!

It seemed an inglorious finish to the saga of The Shadow, this choosing of a way out that enemies took as a play into their own hands. But the sequel produced a different story.

The real climax was when Commissioner Ralph Weston arrived at his unofficial headquarters, the exclusive Cobalt Club. Alighting from a cab, Weston saw his official car parked by the curb. Purple-faced, the commissioner approached the chauffeur.

"So!" stormed Weston. "This is where you came! I don't blame you for leaving Chinatown when the gunfire started, but why didn't you wait when I shouted after you?"

The chauffeur blinked, bewildered. At that moment the rear door opened and Lamont Cranston, pale but composed, stepped to the curb.

"My fault, commissioner," said Cranston. "I was looking for you in Chinatown when the trouble started, so I commandeered your official car and had the chauffeur bring me here."

Mollified, Weston went into the club with Cranston, whose wan lips showed the traces of a smile. Well did The Shadow know why a certain car hadn't stopped at the commissioner's shout. The commissioner had seen the wrong vehicle, the imitation of his own official car.

As for the Dragon Clan, they'd made the opposite mistake. They'd packed off The Shadow as a gift to the Black Dragon, not in the replica official car, but in the original that belonged to Commissioner Weston.

Even in sagging state, The Shadow had seen the difference and made the most of it. Like his rival, the Black Dragon, The Shadow was skilled at taking a quick way out when occasion demanded. Now they were due to meet again on equal terms:

The Shadow versus the Black Dragon!

CHAPTER X. DEATH'S REAL TOKEN

SAVAGELY, Steve Trask flung the newspaper upon Tam's desk and glared at the placid Chinese doctor. Tam's quiet eyes invited comment, so Steve gave it.

"Still they're hounding me!" Steve yelled. "Can't they get it through their heads that I didn't murder Miljohn or Pendleton – that one was my best friend, the other a man I never saw?"

"Time will bring your vindication," replied Tam. "The Black Dragon has composed a noose of his own coils. The Shadow is waiting for it to tighten."

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Steve's glower lessened; his eyes showed interest.

"You have forgotten that Li Huang is to deliver a death token," reminded Tam. "When that happens, The Shadow will know the identity of the Black Dragon's next victim, and will move to prevent crime."

"I haven't forgotten Li Huang," retorted Steve, with a new surge of impatience. "He's only an intermediary anyway. He won't take a hand in murder."

"Others will," assured Tam complacently. "At least, they will attempt it. Whoever their victim, The Shadow will protect him and deliver them to the law. From the lips of such culprits, the police will gain clues to the Black Dragon himself."

"And if they won't talk?"

"The Shadow will personally provide the needed clue. Such is the way of Ying Ko, The Shadow."

Tam's solid confidence took effect on Steve. After all, Tam had as much at stake as Steve himself, and Tam had been fighting the Black Dragon a long while. Though passive, rather than active like The Shadow, Tam had been equally successful.

Every time that the Black Dragon had tried to gain a foothold in Chinatown, Tam had stopped him. Tam's system was to warn important Chinese whenever the Dragon sought to dupe them. As a loyal, solid race, none could match the Chinese. The Black Dragon hadn't been able to influence a single important citizen of Chinatown.

That was why the Black Dragon had planted Li Huang to pose as a retired Chinese merchant. But Li Huang hadn't fooled Tam nor anyone else. They knew he was an import from Manchukuo, long a sphere of Japanese influence.

Dr. Tam had let Li Huang stay in Chinatown, so that he could be watched as an index to the coming moves of the Black Dragon; and so far Li Huang had been deceived by that policy. By fooling Li Huang, Dr. Tam had likewise kept the Black Dragon unaware of the true situation.

Steve was rising and turning toward the door, when another thought struck him. Turning, he questioned:

"How is Cranston making out with the commissioner?"

"Very well, I understand," replied Tam. "He just phoned me from Fenmore's. They expect Sauber there to discuss the Black Dragon question. Cranston may learn much of value to our other friend, The Shadow."

That sounded good to Steve as he returned to his room in a corner of Tam's commodious house. Steve would have liked to attend that conference. He wanted to press the claim that Sauber had called the Dragon Clan to the attack, with Steve as the intended victim, instead of matters being the other way about. Steve felt that Fenmore would believe him.

With that thought, Steve started to fill his pipe, only to find that he'd used up all of Fenmore's tobacco. So Steve opened the tin of his own, which he still carried in his other pocket.

THE conference at Fenmore's was producing some results. Behind his big desk, Fenmore was receiving papers that his secretaries handed him and was passing them alternately to Commissioner Weston and Inspector Cardona, for comparison with their own reports.

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Beside the desk, Sauber was watching, chin in hand, his quick eyes darting glances from beneath their bushy brows. At times, Sauber beckoned to a dapper man seated near him. In an undertone, Sauber asked for the papers which the dapper man supplied from a brief case.

"I have inquired among friends who know the Orient," declared Fenmore. "These letters constitute their confidential replies. They all agree that the Black Dragon is the title given the leader of a clan that bears the same name. It is an organization of many heads; each chapter of the insidious clan has its own Black Dragon."

"That tallies with our reports," put in Cardona. "There's a Black Dragon right here in New York, running the local outfit. What puzzles me is why the outfit is only picking on people who have come back from the Orient?"

"These letters explain that point, inspector," declared Weston, referring to some of Fenmore's correspondence. "When a marked man leaves the jurisdiction of one Black Dragon, he becomes the property, so to speak, of the next."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" enthused Cardona. "Fellows like Miljohn and Pendleton landed back here with a lot of dough from the Orient. Miljohn admitted it, but Pendleton pretended to be broke. It made no difference; the Black Dragon was ahead of them. The boss of the New York bunch told them to deliver – or else!"

"It was 'or else' with Miljohn and Pendleton," agreed Weston. "But there must be a lot of cases where frightened men delivered, perhaps to the extent of millions. How about it, Sauber?"

Jerkily, Sauber thrust his own batch of letters into Weston's hands. They were old letters from Sauber's former correspondents in the Far East.

"Read those," suggested Sauber. "You'll find complaints about a lot of things, but no mention of a Black Dragon."

"But surely, Sauber, you must have heard –"

"I've never been in the Orient, I tell you!" Sauber's tone became an excited pitch. "Why should I know anything about the Black Dragon, if there is such a thing – or person?"

Sauber's half-scream awoke Cranston, who was deep in one of Fenmore's comfortable chairs. Opening his eyes lazily, Cranston saw Weston impatiently thrust the letters back at Sauber, who took the gesture as an insult and flung the papers in a fluttering stream across the floor. Cardona came to his feet and thrust himself between the two men, whereupon Sauber's frenzy ceased.

Turning to his dapper secretary, Sauber gestured at the scattered papers.

"Gather those, Pelly," Sauber ordered. "Bring them home with you. I am leaving now." Swinging to Weston, Sauber added: "After tonight, I won't need any of your protection, commissioner. Why should I be afraid of things that don't exist – like Black Dragons?"

The conference ended with Sauber's sudden walkout. Leaving with Weston and Cardona, Cranston declined the commissioner's offer to ride in the official car, saying he preferred a stroll in the fresh air, to awaken from his recent doze. Cranston's stroll ended in the shadows just around the corner. As the commissioner's car rolled away, the corner gloom stirred to life.

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Keenly, The Shadow had foreseen that Sauber's erratic behavior might be the forerunner of something deeper and more purposeful. At least, it allowed for certain opportunities that were not apparent on the surface. It had certainly paved the way for one man to go his way unsuspected; namely, Sauber's secretary, Pelly.

Soon, the dapper man appeared from Fenmore's front door. Still poking gathered papers in the brief case, Pelly glanced up and down the street. Seeing no one watching, he threw a suspicious look back at Fenmore's front windows, then moved along at a quick but shifty pace past the spot where The Shadow watched unseen.

Pelly's first stop was at a small cigar store a few blocks away. Still having trouble with his brief case, he unpacked some papers and laid them on the counter. Buying some cigarettes, he pocketed them, put away the papers and left. From the blackness that fringed the store window, The Shadow still watched the counter.

There, Pelly had left a square package, placed under cover of the papers. The cigar clerk scooped up the package and went through a rear door of the shop. Circling to the next street, The Shadow saw the man from the shop step out, to be promptly accosted by a slouchy panhandler.

What the clerk gave the panhandler wasn't a dime for coffee. It was Pelly's package, obviously for delivery to someone else. Instead of following along the trail, The Shadow faded into thick darkness with a whispered laugh.

It was Ming Dwan who answered the tinkly ring at Li Huang's front door. No longer was Li Huang keeping that portal guarded. He no longer had his brawny servants, and Ming Dwan knew why, though she hadn't been informed – at least, not by Li Huang. Those vanished servants were members of the Dragon Clan, who had actually kept Li Huang under a form of surveillance after he had sold out to the Black Dragon – for a price.

As an employer of traitors, the Black Dragon probably knew how untrustworthy they could prove. However, Li Huang's stint was through, or would be, after he went through with the delivery of a death token to some victim as yet unnamed. The Black Dragon had probably sized Li Huang as willing to do that final task in return for freedom. Hence the removal of the servants in advance was a form of encouragement.

But Li Huang was restless. Ming Dwan could hear his quick footsteps approaching as she opened the front door. Outside was a laundry man with a sizable bundle. Ming Dwan knew him for an honest Chinese. But she knew him to be careless, too, for she'd visited his little one-man shop. Someone could easily have stowed something in this bundle along with Li Huang's laundry.

The proof was the way in which Li Huang snatched the bundle the moment that Ming Dwan closed the door. The girl was almost tempted to press the switch controlling the floor, when Li Huang turned to hurry back to his den. A tumble into the pit, and Li Huang would still be dazed while Ming Dwan joined him and searched the laundry package.

Still, Li Huang would guess things afterward, and that would injure The Shadow's plans. So, instead of using the floor trap, Ming Dwan let Li Huang go his way, while she made a detour past the side door and drew the bolt. Then stealthily the girl went to Li Huang's own door and listened.

Prolonged silence caused Ming Dwan to worry. She'd always been suspicious of Li Huang's paneled room, where he liked to drowse over a pipe containing a dash of opium, until a small alarm gong awakened him. Li Huang's frequent naps might be faked. If he had a secret route from the room, he could use it and return before the time at which he had set the gong. Tonight would certainly be an occasion for secrecy on Li Huang's part.

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Slowly, carefully, Ming Dwan turned the handle of the door, ready to give a sudden knock and act surprised when the door went inward, as it sometimes did. Pausing as she gained a view of the room, Ming Dwan was relieved to see Li Huang, in his chair, leaning forward, head on arm, as he always napped. Beside him was the alarm gong; near it the inevitable pipe.

More important, the laundry package lay open on a chair, its contents rumpled. Li Huang had found what he wanted. It was on the desk in front of him – a little jewel box, its deep lid hinged wide, revealing a curved, jet dragon with tiny eyes of jade!

Step by step, Ming Dwan moved inward, breathing the air cautiously to detect the degree of opium that Li Huang had used, and therefore gauge the depth of his sleep. Reaching the desk, she saw a slip of paper projecting from beneath the carved dragon. Ming Dwan's confidence became complete.

Li Huang must have read the instructions on the folded paper, telling him to whom the dragon was to be delivered, and stating the hour at which he was to go. So Li Huang, to soothe his nerves, had set the little gong and taken some long drags at his pipe.

Still, this drowse might be feigned. The thought worried Ming Dwan until her gaze moved from Li Huang's fingers to his wrist. There she saw the telltale marks of a needle's jab. Evidently, Li Huang had been finding the pipe too slow of late, and had resorted to a quicker way of absorbing dope. So his sleep was deep enough.

Ming Dwan crept a slender, cream–yellow hand toward the jet–hued dragon. She intended to remove the token from the jewel case and read the folded note that lay beneath it. Li Huang could then fare forth upon his evil mission, only to have The Shadow reach the goal ahead of him. Just as those delicate fingers of Ming Dwan had saved the life of Steve Trask, so could they provide rescue for another threatened man.

A life was hanging in the balance! Such was Ming Dwan's thought, without the realization that the life was her own.

The truth came with a hiss, delivered by the death token that the girl thought was a carved dragon.

With a writhe, the creature came to life. No dragon, this, but a poison lizard that had already left its mark of death upon Li Huang! Again disturbed, the venomous reptilian darted its green–eyed head at the wrist of Ming Dwan!

Stabbing ahead, faster than any human hand could move, was a long, forked fang, thrusting its fatal stroke upon the girl who served The Shadow!

CHAPTER XI. THE DRAGON'S MESSENGER

THE anguished shriek that started from Ming Dwan's lips was interrupted on the instant. So suddenly did death jab home that it was done and over before the echoes of the broken cry had faded. The stroke itself was merciless, but the swift result was merciful.

Crumpling forward, Ming Dwan's frail form sagged across the desktop. Her hand gave a lifeless slither away from the spot where death had struck. There, where a carved, jet dragon had reared itself into a living instrument of murder, lay a plasmic mass of blackness dyed with crimson. From the gel, the redness began to ooze into a slanted furrow that had plowed the teak of Li Huang's desk.

Strange how the echoes of Ming Dwan's cry followed the roar that suppressed the scream itself!

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Perhaps it was because the shriek was piercing, voiced in a moment of mortal agony; whereas the roar, though louder, had come with the burst of a thunderclap, an appropriate accompaniment for the flash of flame that produced it.

Yes, death had been swift and merciful, to a creature that deserved death yet could not appreciate mercy – the poison lizard!

His gun still smoking in his fist, The Shadow sprang in from the doorway and caught Ming Dwan as her sliding arm carried her body across the far corner of the desk. Brushing the tumbled laundry from the handy chair, he rested the girl there and tilted her chin upward. Ming Dwan's breath came back with a gasp, as her eyes opened wide.

The opium-tainted air, the lizard's hissing death jab, the sudden explosion of The Shadow's gun – any of those could have been enough to throw a person into a faint. Not such a person as Ming Dwan. It had taken all three – and more – to overwhelm this stout-hearted girl.

The more was represented by the bullet from The Shadow's gun. The lizard's darting fang, too fast for a hand to escape, could not outmatch the instantaneous action of a single finger pulling a hair-trigger. The Shadow had proven this with a timely shot that blasted the living trip-hammer midway in its errand of doom.

It was The Shadow's bullet that gave the death jab, reducing the lizard to the gelatin now on the desk. Ming Dwan had felt the quiver of the woodwork as the continuing slug grooved its downward path beneath her frozen hand, forming the channel through which the lizard's life blood now trickled.

Her eyes meeting The Shadow's, Ming Dwan stared, unbelieving. Following his gesture toward the desk, the girl looked in that direction. Her lips formed for another startled cry that her throat failed to voice. Knowing that the lizard's pulp wasn't enough to so startle Ming Dwan, The Shadow turned.

The thing to which Ming Dwan pointed was Li Huang. His body was showing grotesque signs of life, as its arm slithered sideways, under the pressure of a tilting head that turned a bloated, sightless face toward the persons by the desk.

Having witnessed Ming Dwan's slide across the polished surface, The Shadow defined Li Huang's motion properly. The bullet's impact against the desk had joggled the dead man from his balance point. His arm, brushing pipe and gong ahead of it, was definitely lifeless, as Li Huang's hideous face proclaimed.

WITH The Shadow's hands bracing her shoulders, Ming Dwan steadied as she saw the corpse of Li Huang complete its slide and disappear with its frozen leer in a toppling slump beyond the desk. Her eyes again meeting The Shadow's, Ming Dwan found her voice and began to detail all that had occurred, prior to The Shadow's timely appearance.

What interested The Shadow most was the paper that Ming Dwan mentioned. It was intact, for The Shadow's shot had literally plucked the lizard from the jewel case. Yet there was something strangely grim in The Shadow's mirth as he reached for the folded note. He knew the paper couldn't contain the Black Dragon's instructions to Li Huang.

As good as dead when he received the package with the living death token, Li Huang, a traitor no longer useful, would need no further orders. Already, The Shadow could sense evil omen in that folded slip of paper.

Opening the sheet, The Shadow read its contents and passed the paper to Ming Dwan. The girl's expression changed from horror to anger, as she read:

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To The Shadow:

Greetings, Ying Ko, when you find this message. Alive, Li Huang could have told you much. Dead, he is as useless to you as he already was to me. If you suspected that Li Huang was to deliver a death token to my next victim, you were wrong. I have already provided another messenger.

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The Shadow was clicking a telephone on Li Huang's desk. The action proved useless, for the line was disconnected – more forethought to the Black Dragon's credit. Clutching Ming Dwan's arm, The Shadow spoke in a tone much like Cranston's, except that it was quicker:

"Come, Myra. There's not a moment to lose!"

"You mean the messenger?" queried the girl as they were hurrying toward the side door. "You know who he is?"

"Too well," returned The Shadow grimly. "The Black Dragon slipped in writing that message. The word 'provided' is our clue. It seems impossible, yet stranger things have happened –"

NOTHING could have seemed stranger to Steve Trask as he sat in the quiet security of his room at Dr. Tam's. During his sojourn here, Steve had learned that Tam's house was an absolute stronghold into which neither friend nor foe could find a way without Tam's due permission.

Yet The Shadow had come and gone invisibly within the last five minutes!

The proof lay in Steve's hand, a brief note written on a small slip of torn paper that somehow fluttered to the table beside his tobacco pouch. It was addressed to Steve, and it stated:

Our mission is immediate. My car is waiting near Gotham Court.

Take it and deliver the jet dragon. Let no one know.

The Shadow.

Grimly, Steve wadded the paper, its tiny writing on the inside. Thrusting the wad in his pocket, he felt the carved dragon that he still carried. A death token to which he was immune, being under the protection of The Shadow. That, Steve knew, was the reason why The Shadow wanted him to carry it.

A challenge to the Black Dragon, and now to carry it further, The Shadow wanted Steve to deliver the token somewhere. To whom and why, Steve neither knew nor cared. It was The Shadow's order; that was enough. It could only be The Shadow's order, otherwise it could not have arrived here. That was where The Shadow held the advantage over the Black Dragon. The Shadow knew where Steve was: the Black Dragon didn't. So this was The Shadow's order and Steve would follow it.

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Picking up his tobacco pouch, Steve found he'd already filled it. The empty can was lying on the table, fragments of its paper lining beside it, where Steve had crumpled them. Funny. Steve didn't remember filling his pouch, though he must have, because he'd been smoking his pipe steadily.

Maybe The Shadow had thrown some hypnotism Steve's way in order to pay the unseen visit. That was it, for Steve was sensing The Shadow's presence as he had that night in the opium den. He was moving steadily, almost rapidly, out through the door and toward a stairway. Below, Tam's men would be on guard, but they were watching for intruders and therefore not concerned with Steve.

Free run of the place – that was what Tam had given Steve in return for a promise not to leave. So there would be no questions from Tam's men and no regrets on Steve's part. He wasn't breaking his word to Tam while following orders from The Shadow!

The night air ended Steve's exit. He was outside, somewhere in Chinatown, though how he'd managed it so swiftly he couldn't understand. Right now Steve's worry was his legs: they were getting draggy. Seeing a cab, Steve stumbled into it. The driver's face showed through a cloud like something from a nightmare. Its features, though, were plain. This wasn't Shrevvy, so naturally this wasn't The Shadow's cab. Steve laughed.

How could it be?

The Shadow's cab was waiting outside Gotham Court, which meant that The Shadow was probably checking on Carlton Sauber. That suited Steve perfectly, so he muttered:

"Gotham Court."

The cab began to revolve. Next it started forward, so its locomotion took a corkscrew effect that made Steve very dizzy. At last the spiral ended and the cab became an arrow that shot right to its mark, stopping like something hitting smack against a target.

Steve handed the driver something that looked like an eleven-dollar bill, judging from the two ones that he saw side by side. No good, eleven-dollar bills, but they couldn't be counterfeit because there weren't any genuines to begin with. Maybe the one and one made two, but that didn't matter, either. Two-dollar bills were bad luck. The cab driver could have it.

The tail-lights chuckled and the cab was gone. It could go; Steve didn't want it. He wanted The Shadow's cab and here it was, flapping its door and saying: "Get in!" The Shadow's cab, all rigged up nice and new. They'd put a leaf in it, making it longer, like a dining-room table, and painted it so it would look like Commissioner Weston's official car.

Smart fellow, The Shadow, fixing the cab like this for Steve. No cops would think of bothering the commissioner's car. More power to The Shadow.

STEVE'S wish was The Shadow's own. At that moment, The Shadow was wishing for more power as he stood with Dr. Tam, viewing Steve's empty room. Ming Dwan, peering over their shoulders, arched her eyebrows as she sniffed the atmosphere. The opium scent was heavier here than at Li Huang's.

"My men did not know," apologized Tam. "They thought that Trask was looking somewhere for me. He seemed in no hurry, yet suddenly, he was gone!"

The Shadow did something very suddenly. Striding to Tam's office, he skimmed his hat across the desk, let his cloak drop from his shoulders. About to play the part of Cranston, he wanted to look like Cranston, even

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though he was only making a telephone call. After all, he would have an audience: Dr. Tam and Ming Dwan. He could judge from their reactions whether or not his act was convincing.

It was convincing. Tam and the girl stared open-eyed as they viewed Cranston in a state of fervor, something that he so rarely displayed. His call had gone through to police headquarters and he was talking directly to Inspector Joe Cardona.

"Yes, this is Cranston..." The Shadow was putting strain into his tone. "The commissioner just left the Cobalt Club. That's why I'm calling you, inspector... A message from the commissioner? No! One from the Black Dragon!"

"Yes, the Black Dragon called me... His voice? I couldn't describe it! But what he said was even worse. He intends to murder the commissioner... Absolutely! He says that Commissioner Weston will never leave his car alive, not even if the whole force tries to save him!"

"Excellent, inspector! The short wave will help... They may have taken over the commissioner's car, as you say... Yes, in that case, it will try to get away... But wherever it is, it will be reported. Good!"

Real sweat was streaking Cranston's forehead as he finished his intensive hoax. Mopping it with a black handkerchief that he took from his cloak, this man who was The Shadow leaned back and smiled at Dr. Tam and Ming Dwan.

"If Steve is where I think he is," declared Cranston, "the police will find him for us."

"Unless they find the commissioner's car first," observed Tam with a worried expression. "In that case, the search will be ended."

Cranston picked up the slouch hat and turned toward the door.

"They won't find the commissioner's car first," he assured quite calmly. "In fact, they won't find it at all."

Tam stared, puzzled, as did Ming Dwan. They saw Cranston raise his cloak collar and place the slouch hat on its head, its brim still upward, so that they could see his face. Sensing an immediate departure, Tam queried:

"Why not?"

"Because Commissioner Weston is at the Cobalt Club," declared Cranston. "His official car is parked right out front, the one place in all New York where the police will never look for it."

Cranston pulled down the hat brim. As darkness obscured his features, his hidden lips delivered the famed laugh of The Shadow. With it, he was gone.

CHAPTER XII. THE MAN WHO MOCKED DEATH

POLICE sirens were on the shriek when Steve Trask alighted from the car that he had met at Gotham Court. By this time, Steve had straightened a few facts to his own satisfaction. For one thing, he'd decided that this wasn't The Shadow's cab converted into something else.

It probably was the commissioner's own car, though Steve wasn't sure about the chauffeur. However, everything fitted plausibly. Probably Cranston had managed to borrow the car for the evening. Being Tam's friend, Cranston might know The Shadow, too. It all fitted.

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As for the sirens, they didn't matter. Nobody would bother the commissioner's car. Steve watched it pull away, then turned to look at the place where the car had dropped him. As he did, a sense of unreality seized him.

The place looked like an oversized mausoleum, a granite structure two stories high that didn't belong in New York at all. It occupied the corner of a short, dead-end street where Steve saw a blocking wall of stone that ran across to an old brick building that looked deserted.

For that matter, the gray pile looked empty, too, and when Steve looked at the inscription carved above its door he could almost read the word "Mausoleum," which was already in his mind. Then, while his bewilderment was actually increasing, his eyes made out the inscription more plainly.

Steve's imagination had added a few letters that weren't there. Instead of "Mausoleum," the inscription said: "Museum."

There was another word above, a name which Steve finally identified as "Norland." He had never heard of the Norland Museum.

Seeing a big bell beside the barred front door, Steve rang it. The door opened promptly and Steve was ushered into a foyer from which he could see the interior of an exhibit room, which was lined with stuffed heads of queer animals, along with elephant tusks, turtle shells, snake skins and other sizable knickknacks.

Footsteps sounded from a corridor. Steve turned and saw another attendant joining the one who had admitted him. Odd characters, these, men who were furtive, yet ugly. Maybe it was the poor light that gave their faces a clay color above the frayed collars of their drab uniforms.

Home to Steve came the sudden, startling thought that these attendants were too like some of the Oriental dregs who served the Black Dragon. Polynesians of a mixed caste was the best way to define them – or the worst. Yet the men were polite as they bowed Steve into the large trophy room, which seemed the principal portion of the Norland Museum.

As Steve's footsteps echoed hollow on the tiled floor, he heard others coming toward him. Stopping abruptly, Steve faced a man who stepped from a doorway at the rear. The man was an American whose face was long and oval in shape. Steve was taking in details of thin eyebrows, thin hair above an elongated forehead, when the man's eyes fixed upon him.

Droopy eyes, with lids like shields, above straight nose and lips. With the merest flicker, the man raised his eyelids just far enough to survey Steve thoroughly. Then the man spoke in a drawly tone.

"I am Craig Norland. I suppose you came to look at the collection of weapons? Most people do."

Norland gestured Steve into the rear room, which was smaller but well-stocked. It contained many odd weapons, but Steve was unable to identify any except boomerangs and blow-guns, so Norland politely classified others for him. The droopy man pointed out a weapon which was hanging on a small door at the rear of the room. Norland stated:

"A Filipino barong."

The barong was a two-foot sword that widened between hilt and point, but the really curious feature was its scabbard. The blade was sheathed between two fitted slabs of wood, held crudely together by thongs. Through the primitive lacings, Steve could see a very sharp edge. So tight were the thongs that Steve began to

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wonder how anyone could unsheathe a barong, if in a hurry.

"My grandfather went in for big game," remarked Norland. "So I made weapons my hobby. I thought the combination would be appropriate, particularly as we both traveled extensively in the Orient."

Steve was about to ask what part of the Orient interested Norland most, when he stopped himself. Glancing warily back across his shoulder, Steve heard Norland chuckle. A moment later, the back door of the museum was opening outward and Norland's hand was clamped firmly on Steve's shoulder, guiding the visitor through.

They were stepping into a high-walled garden in back of the museum, but for the moment Steve wasn't interested in such nearby surroundings. He was looking off above the wall toward the top of a great, sweeping superstructure that curved from one huge pillar off to another that seemed distant in the night.

The structure was one of the great suspension bridges that crossed the East River. This garden in back of the Norland Museum was located on the river bank itself. Oddly, the wall seemed specially designed to prevent anyone from looking into the garden.

For example, Steve could see the superstructure of the bridge, but not the roadway. Beyond the rear wall, he spied the passing smokestack of a steamer, but couldn't quite see the topmost deck.

The museum itself cut off any view from the Manhattan side, and putting those facts together, Steve lowered his gaze to the garden to learn why it was too unique to be submitted to public gaze. In one glance, Steve understood.

This was a Japanese garden!

LITERALLY, this product of Nippon might have been uprooted from the yard of Hirohito's own palace and transplanted to New York. It was a chunk of Japan in miniature, with an undersized pagoda no higher than the wall, a squatty Shinto shrine, humped bridges crossing a canal that ran between two pools that teemed with golden carp.

There were beds of exotic flowers, a crude water wheel that turned under the constant pressure of a small, flowing stream. As Norland gestured Steve around the premises, more features came into view; one, for instance, being a pool so thick with lily pads and flowers that it looked like a solid, earthen bed.

They reached the squatty Shinto structure which stood shoulder-high. Norland opened its door and disclosed a peculiar curved sword in a scabbard of the same shape.

"A Japanese samurai sword," explained Norland. "It must never be drawn from its scabbard except for shedding blood. I am a stickler for such traditions, Trask."

Steve stared. He couldn't understand how Norland had guessed his name. Whereat Norland laughed quite heartily.

"I have no love for the Japanese," sneered Norland. "None except so far as their arts and crafts are concerned. I shipped these mementos back here, piece by piece. Why should I sacrifice them because Japan has become unpopular?"

With a smile at his own mild way of putting it, Norland gestured toward the wall around the garden.

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"Instead, I have seen that these souvenirs should remain hidden," resumed Norland. "I consider myself a man without a country, hence free to collect the trophies of every land. You have an oddity which I should like to add to those I already own."

REMOVING his strong hand from Steve's shoulder, Norland extended his palm upward and ordered:

"Give me the jet dragon." Mechanically, Steve placed the death token in Norland's palm, where it looked quite puny. Norland grated a laugh.

"I suppose the Black Dragon thought he could scare me by having a notorious murderer bring this token. Is that it, Trask?"

Things flashed home to Steve. Norland was using guesswork. First, he'd guessed who Steve was; that part was correct. But now he was guessing wide, in classing Steve as a server of the Black Dragon.

"You have it wrong, Norland," argued Steve. "That little knickknack is one the Black Dragon handed me through a Jap stooge named Sujun. The curse was supposed to get me, but it didn't."

"Crawling out of it!" scoffed Norland. "Well, I should have expected it. The Black Dragon knows enough about me."

WITH a swoop, Norland produced a sizable tin box from a shelf above the samurai sword.

"Here's what the Black Dragon wants!" he stormed. "The money I brought back from Shanghai. His crowd tried to get it from me there, and there were two less when I finished. You think you're a killer, Trask." Norland's sneer was back. "The Black Dragon must think it, too, or he wouldn't have sent you. He knows I'm a killer, because I've never tried to hide the history of my souvenirs. I've used every weapon to dispose of a victim, and in most cases it was outright murder!"

Norland gestured toward the open door of the museum where the barong was hanging in sight, as a sample of other deadly weapons. Replacing the tin box on its shelf, Norland folded his rangy arms, as though inviting Steve to attempt the first thrust. The long, strained silence was broken by the howl of police sirens, wailing weirdly through the neighborhood.

"Killer meets killer," snorted Norland. "The difference between us is only this, Trask. I do my murders outside the realm of jurisprudence. You can't call it crime, where there isn't any law. That's how I acquired the wealth that the Black Dragon wants."

Norland's tone rang too true to be doubted. He was a man who mocked death, particularly that of his own making, a calloused murderer, self-admitted, contemptuous of those belonging to his ilk, in which he included Steve.

"I could kill you with pleasure, Trask," continued Norland in a grating tone. "I have a weapon that is itching for someone's blood!"

Thinking of the barong, Steve swung hastily about. Across one of the humped bridges he saw the open door, with its hanging, slab-sheathed sword. Steve was nearer to that vantage point than Norland, but it didn't help.

In the doorway stood the two clay-faced attendants, both with drawn revolvers; behind them, another pair, evidently here at Norland's order!

THE BLACK DRAGON

"There is no escape," sneered Norland, his voice coming from Steve's shoulder. "You were recognized the moment you arrived. One of my men phoned the police commissioner at his club to tell him that you were here, bringing a death token."

Steve could still hear sirens wailing outside the garden walls. He wondered how the police had arrived so soon. But the sooner they appeared, the sooner Steve's death would be. For it was quite obvious that Norland intended to kill Steve. He was a man with blood-lust, Norland, and he would receive no penalty for disposing of a victim already wanted for murder!

Wondering why the servants didn't shoot, Steve turned suddenly and saw Norland. Gunfire wasn't necessary in Steve's case. From the Shinto shrine, Norland was taking the samurai sword, which once drawn from its scabbard, would have to be dyed with blood!

In order to use both hands, Norland was pocketing the tiny jet dragon. As he did, Norland announced:

"There is only one reason why the Black Dragon sent you here, Trask. He knew that when you delivered this, I would dispose of you for him. The messenger who brings such a token is never the killer. Murder is always left to others."

Murder left to others!

Even as Norland was drawing the samurai sword, a wave of hope swept Steve. Eager to take Steve's life, Norland had forgotten that he, himself, was marked for death by the fact that he had received a jet dragon!

Springing suddenly away from Norland's blade, Steve sped a glance to the museum door and saw that the guns of the foremost attendants had not budged. They weren't trained on Steve, those weapons; they were pointed straight at Norland! The attendants were traitors brought out by the Black Dragon!

They were giving Norland his chance to kill Steve. After that, they would blast Norland by order of the Black Dragon. As Steve dashed for a humped bridge, with Norland close behind him, the two servants charged from their doorway.

SOMETHING whirred the air behind Steve's neck. It was the samurai sword, missing by a mere three inches. Steve tried to take a shortcut across a flower bed.

By mistake, Steve picked one of the shallow lily ponds. Tripping knee-deep among the pads, he was hardly out the other side before Norland was full upon him, poisoning the samurai blade for a terrific, murderous downswing.

From another angle, the two attendants were arriving with their guns, to cut Steve off from the museum. Under the shelter of the eight-foot pagoda, Steve was trapped in the most distant corner of the garden. His lurch ending in a sprawl against the stone wall itself, he could no more than turn and fling his arms upward in an effort too futile to ward off the coming swing of Norland's sword.

At that moment, when the death stroke seemed as good as home, Steve heard the only token that could bring a respite.

The laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIII. TRIUMPH'S FAILURE

THE SHADOW'S laugh ended in a shivering crash. Not the sort of crash that its echoes would normally produce, but a splintering sound that came with an increasing smash. Looking up, Steve saw blackness enveloping everything, blotting out Norland and his waving sword, eradicating the two gunners who were also lunging into the scene.

A block of blackness, much larger than The Shadow – such was the thing that ripped a path among the murderers. The squat pagoda, pride of Norland's Japanese garden, was hurling downward like a mammoth bludgeon upon the inhuman killers just beneath it!

From the low roof of the toppled tower, Steve saw a cloaked figure spring to the ground beyond. Landing on his feet, The Shadow was full about with a drawn automatic, ready to add new feats of rescue.

Only The Shadow could have staged this sudden surprise. With all the police in town hot on the trail of the commissioner's car, it hadn't taken them long to spot the vehicle that passed for it. They'd reported the chase by short wave, from the very start, and The Shadow, listening in, had promptly headed for the neighborhood where it began.

The most conspicuous building thereabouts was the Norland Museum. Knowing something of its history. The Shadow had picked it as the place where Steve must have gone. Rather than batter at the huge front portals, he'd tried the wall along the water front.

He was just in time, The Shadow, to see the chase reach the pagoda corner. He'd needed more than gunfire to take out three fighters at a clip, particularly when they were coming below his angle of range. Full force, he'd hurled himself upon the flimsy, ornamental pagoda and thrown it from its moorings and in among his foemen!

As yet, The Shadow hadn't learned that the attendants were traitors to their employer, Norland. What The Shadow had glimpsed looked like a mass attack, directed at Steve. Though jarred by the cracking pagoda, Norland and the other two weren't out of battle permanently. Moreover, The Shadow could see another pair of armed men coming from the rear door of the museum.

Hauling Steve to his feet, The Shadow started him on a quick circuit of the garden toward the museum door.

Half obscured by The Shadow's cloaked figure, Steve wasn't seen as he stumbled along. The Shadow didn't use the bridges, the way the second pair of attendants did. He cut through the flower beds, without picking lily ponds by mistake, made a detour past the water wheel, and finally gave Steve a quick shunt in through the open doorway.

By that time, snarls could be heard from the far corner of the garden, where the second pair of attendants were helping the others from the debris of the pagoda. Steve was hoping that they would find Norland in the wreckage and treat him as the Black Dragon had ordered.

That thought made Steve turn to tell The Shadow what it was all about. A bad mistake on Steve's part. He was forgetting that those traitors intended to let Norland kill him first!

Dumbly blocking The Shadow off from the doorway, Steve didn't have time to explain things. Already The Shadow had drawn a second gun, planning to stave off any attack. Half turned, he shouldered into Steve and lost his stride toward the doorway. Then, before Steve could gulp a single word, Norland was upon them!

THE BLACK DRAGON

THE man who reveled in murder had evidently dodged the pagoda's crash sufficiently to be at large again, with comparatively short delay. He'd made a short cut across the garden while The Shadow was taking the longer way about.

Still anxious to murder Steve, Norland was intent upon chopping through any obstacles. Among such, he included The Shadow, at present the only thing that blocked his path. Again the curved samurai blade was sweeping under the impulse of a murderer's hand, this time for The Shadow's head!

What The Shadow did was most amazing.

Coming up and around in cross-armed style, he threw a hand straight for the whipping sword. In that hand, The Shadow gripped a heavy gun that caught the stroke in midair. But the force of the terrific blow drove the .45 from The Shadow's fist, hooking it through the doorway that Steve had unwisely abandoned.

Moreover, The Shadow was carried with the swing, landing against the open door itself. He hadn't time to get his other automatic into play; in fact, he needed a free hand to stop his fall. Again, The Shadow performed in uncanny style, letting the second gun go riding over his shoulder, straight to a man who could use it without delay: Steve Trask!

A perfect toss, The Shadow's. Victory would be in the bag the moment Steve caught the lobbed automatic. Instead, Steve muffed it!

Bounding from Steve's frozen fingers, the gun landed in a flower bed. Madly Steve dived after it, to the tune of a whiplash from the samurai sword, another stroke meant for The Shadow. Norland's slash sliced half a sleeve from The Shadow's cloak, but missed the target underneath, for The Shadow was adding a roll to his fall. Then Steve, groping for a gun he couldn't find, looked up to see murder in its final process.

Coming up beside the door, The Shadow was grabbing the only weapon he could find, a Filipino barong. But the short sword was still in its thong-bound wooden scabbard as The Shadow tugged it from the door, whereas Norland's samurai blade was bare.

Down came the curved sword with a fury that could not be warded. Only the bite of a rival sword edge could divert such a slash. Blade for blade, The Shadow would have had a chance, but his weapon was still encased in its primitive scabbard.

Norland's face, alight with the joy of murder, seemed to outvie The Shadow's defiant laugh. Steel against wood, with Norland the man who held the metal! Steve thought it was all over with The Shadow as the two strokes passed.

FIRST to land was The Shadow's barong, and with the stroke its scabbard flew apart. What met Norland's shoulder was not a mere sheath composed of two wooden slabs, but a biting blade that hewed its course through the leather thongs, cutting them apart in the process!

Norland reeled, his own stroke going wide. The Shadow couldn't have deflected the samurai sword, so he diverted Norland's arm instead. In its blow, the unleashed barong cleaved half through Norland's shoulder, literally unhinging the arm below it. And Steve, a witness to that short-lived fray, was realizing that the correct way to unsheathe a barong was to use it!

Unique among weapons, a barong did not have to be drawn from its scabbard, as The Shadow had demonstrated!

THE BLACK DRAGON

Rolling after his own wide stroke, Norland sprawled. Blood was pouring from his shoulder down to the samurai sword, staining the long, curved weapon. Norland, at least, was maintaining the tradition; the Japanese weapon was tasting blood – Norland's own!

It didn't satisfy Norland. Savagely, he tried to come to his feet, swinging the curved sword with his other hand. Instead of fending with the barong, The Shadow made a long dive through the doorway, a thing which made Steve wonder until he heard the blast of guns.

The men in the far corner of the garden were opening fire. They were aiming at The Shadow, until he made his quick feint away from their first shots. Then, seeing Norland reeling to his feet, the charging crew of half-breed Japs gave him a point-blank volley.

As Norland sprawled, Steve found the missing gun. He aimed for a skulker in a flower bed, only to hear another shot from atop a bridge. Steve pulled the trigger and a roar deafened him. It wasn't the blast from the gun he had regained, but from another, fired out through the doorway.

The Shadow, too, had reclaimed an automatic, the one that Norland had slashed through the doorway. He was taking over in his usual style, his first shot being a crippling delivery that toppled the gunner who had aimed straight at Steve. There was a howl, followed by a splash, as the foiled marksman went over the rail of the bridge and landed in the canal.

Plucking the second gun from Steve's hand, The Shadow sent the rescued man off through a flower bed. Again guns barked, and when Steve reached the corner wall he turned to witness the results. The Shadow was contending with three marksmen in a bizarre setting where they were quite at home.

Shots seemed to come from everywhere – stabs of flame from beneath the bridges, out of the lily pads, through the revolving spokes of the ancient water wheel. Like Norland, these killers were trying to get rid of The Shadow in order to have a chance at Steve.

But from his safe corner, Steve could hear The Shadow's laugh, accompanying the return shots. In attempting to outshoot The Shadow, those assassins were committing another form of hara-kiri. The Shadow's laugh was everywhere, his gun stabs anywhere – except those places where the skulkers aimed.

STEVE saw a patch of blackness flit across the lighted block that represented the museum doorway, but none of the snipers noticed it, for they were on the other side. A gun stabbed suddenly from beside the water wheel, to test The Shadow's response.

It came promptly, that response, straight through the spokes of the wheel. An assassin sprawled, and another fired, too late. The Shadow had already spotted him and was one snipe ahead. As a figure rolled into a lily pond, Steve heard a gurgly cry:

"Hayai! Hashi!"

Steve was to learn later that those words meant: "Quick – the bridge:" Apparently one of the sagging Japs was telling the last of the tribe where to find The Shadow. Up sprang a crouched killer, his gun chattering a stream of bullets into the hump of the nearest bridge as he charged for the span itself.

Tuned to a weird laugh, came a single shot from near the Shinto structure in the garden's center. The Shadow's final jab sent the last Jap spinning from the bridge. Only then did Steve realize that The Shadow, himself, had gargled those words in Japanese.

THE BLACK DRAGON

While the last assassin was taking his sprawl across the bridge rail, shots came from within the museum. Flashlights were glaring from the doorway, directed by men in blue uniforms. Attracted by the gunfire, the police had crashed their way through the front door of the old museum!

While the amazed cops were staring at the scene before them, a hand gripped Steve and started him upward to the wide base of the overturned pagoda. Another boost from The Shadow, and Steve was going over the wall itself. Police saw him and shouted, but by then he was across, with blackness following after him.

At least they'd recognized Steve, for guns were barking, but the bullets were merely bashing the wall or whizzing above. Not only was Steve in the clear, but The Shadow was with him, thrusting him into a small rowboat that was moored beside the wall.

Using an oar as a paddle, The Shadow was propelling the boat silently beneath the great bridge. Past the bridge, they came ashore beside a dead-end street just as a police boat came scooting down the river, to play its part in the coming man hunt.

Moe's cab was waiting on the dead-end street. Soon it was snaking a course past converging police cars that were all bound toward the East River, while The Shadow and Steve were riding westward. From the darkness beside him, Steve heard a whispered laugh.

It was The Shadow's token of triumph, another victory over insidious crime, amplified by the details which Steve related concerning Craig Norland, the murderer who had defied the Black Dragon.

In that tone, Steve detected a prophetic note, as though The Shadow had already begun some new mission. For The Shadow had a way of packing one triumph upon another in rapid succession.

This time the rule was working in reverse. From triumph, The Shadow was traveling to failure!

CHAPTER XIV. THE UNSEEN HAND

THE cab came to an abrupt stop. It was somewhere in Greenwich Village, a district well distant from the Norland Museum. Steve noticed a slight stir beside him; the swish of a cloak as the cab door opened. Then The Shadow's whispered tone:

"You will wait here. Certain of my agents will soon join you and introduce themselves. Should they be needed, they will be summoned, you among them."

With that, The Shadow was gone. Gripped with the urge for action, Steve would have followed, but for the fact that Moe shoved his hand through from the front seat and prevented Steve from opening the door that The Shadow had just closed.

"He'll be back," assured Moe. "He's just gone up to make sure that everything is all right with Myra."

"Who is Myra?" inquired Steve.

"Ming Dwan," explained Moe. "Her real name is Myra Reldon. She should have stayed at Doc Tam's. Instead, she went home."

"To Li Huang's?"

"No. To her own apartment."

THE BLACK DRAGON

Steve could now understand how the girl had flashed warnings that night at Li Huang's. It hadn't been East meeting West. Myra had simply dropped her Chinese pose for Steve's benefit.

Steve's thoughts jumped from the past to the present. The Shadow had told him of events at Li Huang's tonight. In disposing of Li Huang, the Black Dragon had nearly taken Myra's life as well. Spies of the Dragon Clan might have been watching for the pretended Ming Dwan after she left Tam's. In that case, her present peril could be greater than before!

Such was the reason why The Shadow was entering the apartment house where Myra Reldon lived as her real self!

Already a swirl of blackness was filtering through the dim entry of the apartment building. Reaching the automatic elevator, The Shadow entered it imperceptibly. The car started upward when he pressed the button and immediately afterward the cloaked fighter drew a brace of guns. Should foemen be listening for the elevator's buzz, he would be ready to meet them the moment the car stopped at Myra's floor.

The Shadow was ready for all eventualities, except the thing that happened!

As it stopped, the elevator gave a sudden jar. A cable gave a clack above the car. Then the car simply lost all holds and dropped!

Down plummeted the elevator with The Shadow boxed inside it. The twang of a broken cable sounded like a giant's harp string, tuned to a note of death!

There was a crash as the car hit the bottom of the shaft. New sounds clanged up from the basement level, where the car had struck. Clashing discords, like a hideous chorus of brazen-throated ghouls!

Then silence from the shaft. Low, babbling voices took up the tale from lurking spots within the apartment house. Creatures who served the Black Dragon were posted here, awaiting the crash that would mark The Shadow's doom. As if in vengeance for the members of their clan who had died at the Norland Museum, these lurkers had heard the clatter that turned The Shadow's triumph into failure!

QUITE oblivious to her present menace, Myra Reldon was emerging from a bathtub where she had soaked for nearly half an hour to dispose of the special dye that formed her Ming Dwan complexion. Myra was smiling as she slid her arms into a dressing gown and stepped into a pair of slippers. A weight in the pocket of her gown caused her smile to fade.

The weight was a gun. It reminded her that she might still be hearing from the Black Dragon, whose efforts to gain a hold in Chinatown had been thwarted largely through Myra's own endeavors. Myra tried to shrug away the illusion of danger as she stepped into the living room and turned toward the bedroom door.

A hiss jogged Myra's memory anew. Coming about, she saw a man she recognized. He was one of Li Huang's former servants, a traitor who had worked for a traitor!

The man with the Mongolian look was toying with a knife. He watched for Myra's reaction to see if she would betray herself as Ming Dwan. But the resemblance between Myra and her Chinese counterpart was nil. In American style, Myra displayed her bewilderment, whereupon the man with the knife hesitated.

There was another hiss. Myra turned to see the second of Li Huang's former servitors. This fellow was angry at the other's hesitation. Still, Myra continued to bluff, hoping that these invaders wouldn't find her Ming Dwan costume which she had stowed deep in the bedroom closet.

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For Myra was confident that The Shadow would soon rescue her from this predicament. Her cloaked friend was one who never failed. Hopefully, Myra looked toward the door from the outside hall, expecting The Shadow to materialize.

Instead, a snaky figure crept forward. It was the third of Li Huang's servants, the most insidious of the trio. Reaching Myra, the creeper whipped a hand into sight and extended it palm-upward. In the bowl of his hand rested a jet dragon with eyes of jade!

The death token!

This was the real test. If Myra quailed, she would admit herself to be Ming Dwan. The recollection of a jet dragon that had become a living lizard charged with deadly venom, was something that could not be quickly eradicated.

Despite herself, Myra recoiled with a shriek.

The scream gave her away. The knife-men lunged with their deadly blades. Still staggering backward, Myra gave a frenzied glance toward the door.

No sign of The Shadow; no sound of his laugh. Too late for the mighty rescuer to deliver the aid that Myra needed. Tripping, Myra sprawled. As she toppled, she saw the glitter of the knife blades flashing toward her.

Then blackness obliterated all.

With the toss of those knives, every light in the apartment house was extinguished. Flat on the floor, Myra heard the passing whispers of the knives above her. Darkness had arrived just in time to spoil the aim of the assassins. Only The Shadow could have supplied so sudden an interruption. He had not failed!

COMING to her feet, Myra encountered a footstool, the thing that had so luckily tripped her. But she still wasn't safe. The killers whose knives had missed were lunging toward her in the dark! The lights came on again and Myra kicked the footstool at the nearest assassin, sending a slipper with it. The lights went off.

On and off – on and off –

Such was the behavior of the lights as Myra dashed about the living room, flinging everything she could find: chairs, tables, even books. The whole thing was a mad dream in this kaleidoscopic setting where blinking lights produced a deceptive blur.

Better than darkness, those blinks. Knowing the apartment, Myra, could gain her bearing, whereas her pursuers couldn't. All the while, the lights kept up their eccentric behavior, sometimes short, then long in their flashes.

They were spelling a word in Morse code:

"Come!"

Help was on its way. The Shadow was bringing it, even though his own plight might be serious! As a blink showed the bedroom door, Myra dodged through, escaping the grasp of grabbing hands that managed only to catch the corner of her gown. Wrenching from that lone hold, Myra slammed the door home and turned the key. Amid the blinking light, she reached an open window which had a ledge leading to an adjoining roof.

THE BLACK DRAGON

Blinks ended and the lights stayed off. Men were pounding up the stairs in order to reach Myra's apartment. Assassins quit hammering at the inner door and dashed out to the corridor where they were met by guns and flashlights brandished by The Shadow's agents.

Steve was a witness to what followed. Before Li Huang's former servants could use their regained knives, gunfire stopped them. One assassin was clipped at the stair top; he plunged across the rail and went down the narrow well to the ground floor, his howl trailing behind him.

The second flung himself through a window at the end of the hall and grabbed for something outside. A gun stab jounced him and he sprawled in space. Another screech drifted back from the depths.

The third, caught between a pair of guns, forgot about the elevator's fate. Yanking the door open, he dived for the car as though he expected to find it. His wail was hollow, like the crash that followed it.

There were four in the rescue party, not counting Steve. One, Clyde Burke, dashed into the apartment to call for Myra. The others threw flashlight beams into the elevator shaft. Seeing the broken cable, they started down the stairs. Steve followed them.

Spotting fresh members of the Dragon Clan, The Shadow's men began to use their guns along the ground floor. There was a scurry that reminded Steve of rats in flight, then the harried Dragon men reached a door to the basement, unbolted it and fled below.

Beyond the open door of an elevator that was bent but not broken, stood The Shadow. He was holding himself against the wall, clinging weakly to the master switch that controlled the lights in the apartment house. As enemies reached him, The Shadow tried weakly to draw a gun. The Dragon crew seized him. Hoisted on their shoulders, The Shadow disappeared around a corner of the cellar.

Unable to fire, The Shadow's agents followed, only to be blocked by a door that was slammed in their faces. By the time they pulled the door open and reached the rear street, the agents were nonplused. Police were arriving, some on foot, others in patrol cars. Even an ambulance was scouting about to pick up the victims of a fray that had roused the entire neighborhood.

The Shadow was gone and his captors with him, as though some power of the Black Dragon had spirited them all into thin air!

CHAPTER XV. THE DRAGON'S DECREE

THE sound clashed through The Shadow's groping thoughts. Clang!

It didn't belong with the falling elevator or the light switch in the cellar. Not even with the shouts that The Shadow had heard his agents give!

Clang!

The sound meant motion, for it went with the vehicle in which The Shadow rode. He heard voices babbling beside him, but when he tried to rise, he couldn't. His hands and feet were tightly bound.

Clang!

This time the signal meant "Stop." The Shadow was lifted on a stretcher and carried out through a door that opened in the middle. In the light of a dim street, he looked back and saw the vehicle which had brought him:

THE BLACK DRAGON

an ambulance!

The Dragon Clan had managed the impossible. They had captured The Shadow. They'd needed the ambulance for a getaway only, a purpose which it filled to perfection. Neither the police nor The Shadow's own agents had thought of trailing an ambulance, working on an errand of mercy.

Small mercy for The Shadow!

In the solid-walled room where his captors flung him, The Shadow looked up into the glaring light to see the Black Dragon attired in his writhing costume.

The forced voice hissed:

"This is your finish, Shadow! You have found me, and the deed itself means death! You are helpless, so helpless that you can not even preserve the secret of your identity!"

With that, the Black Dragon whipped away the slouch hat and looked at the face of Cranston in the light. There was just a trace of surprise in the sharp hiss that the Dragon gave. Then, planting the hat at an angle on The Shadow's head, the hooded man sneered:

"Perhaps I should also unmask. It would give you satisfaction to know who I am. That happens to be the reason why I shall not disclose my identity."

Wearily, The Shadow laughed. His tone carried a trace of Cranston's bored style.

"Quite unnecessary," he said. "You have made the whole thing very obvious. I know who you are."

The Dragon snarled in sudden derision. Turning about, he ordered his followers to shift the light. When they did, The Shadow saw a square-walled room with a door at the other side. At the Dragon's gesture, a pair of pock-faced men lifted The Shadow and carried him to the door. The Dragon opened it, kicked a doorstep and let The Shadow watch the closet floor slide open.

Below was a pit, approximately twelve feet wide. From each of its four walls projected knifelike spikes, a few inches in length. The Dragon reached for a wire that ended in a switch. Pressing the switch, he produced an electric buzz; with it, the spikes issued slowly from the walls. When they had emerged a few inches, the Dragon turned off the current.

"A comfortable nest," sneered the Dragon. "In it, a person could survive about five minutes. By then the spikes will be fully extended, intermingling to cover the entire pit. It will not be a pleasant death. Or should I say – it would not?"

The Shadow studied the pit. Its interior measurements were about six feet by six. The Dragon's five-minute estimate was approximately correct.

With a sweeping motion, The Dragon ordered his men to cut The Shadow's bonds. They did so, then the Dragon personally supplied the quick shove that sent the cloaked prisoner down into the pit. Grazing the spikes in one wall that he passed, The Shadow knew that they were sharp.

"Five minutes," the Dragon repeated. "During that time, anything you care to say will be heard through a loud-speaker in this room above. Simply call me by name – my real name – and I shall stop the spikes. But remember" – the tone came harsh – "no guesses are allowed. One false statement ends my offer!"

THE BLACK DRAGON

Unlimbering, The Shadow stood upright in the pit, his head six feet below the edge. He touched the spikes with his fingertips and gave an indifferent shrug. Reaching for his guns, The Shadow found that he no longer had them. The gesture pleased the Dragon. He beckoned to a man beside him and received one of The Shadow's automatics.

"I appreciate the suggestion," scoffed the Dragon. "After all, Shadow, if your guess fails you will have to accept the spikes. I shall then have no way of knowing how far you quailed at death. So I shall be generous, and give you this gun! Should I hear it fire, I shall know that your bravery is a myth."

The Black Dragon kicked the doorstep in order to bring the floor shut. As the space narrowed, he dropped the gun. Before The Shadow could catch the weapon, the floor was shut. There was a sharp clicking as hidden catches took hold within the wooden floor.

Swinging the closet door shut, The Black Dragon turned on the current that started the interlocking spikes. The first sound that came over the loud-speaker was the defiant laugh of The Shadow. Arms folded, the Dragon waited, his breath coming with a hiss.

THERE were less minutes than the five that he had promised. That period marked the time when the spikes would be fully home. The Shadow would have to speak before then or take the punishment of the stabbing points. So the Black Dragon waited only briefly, before he snarled through a microphone:

"All right, Shadow. Who am I?"

A laugh sounded in amplified tone. Then came The Shadow's reply:

"Commissioner Weston!"

With a fling, the Black Dragon threw aside the switch that alone could stop the spikes. Turning on his heel, he paused by the microphone for a final statement.

"A fatal jest, Shadow," he said. "Not knowing who I really am, you thought that you could taunt me or arouse my sense of humor. Your life will be very short from now on. You know it better than I, for you can see the closing spikes. Of course, you still have the gun I gave you!"

Striding across the room, the Black Dragon paused by the door and waited. His head had a tilt that added greater realism to the open-mouthed hood. He was a dragon indeed, this creature, as he listened for the token that would brand The Shadow as a coward. So well timed was the estimate that the Dragon was uncoiling himself toward the door, his hands dropping like flapping scales, when the sound came.

A gun blast from the spiked pit!

One of the Dragon's followers moved toward the cord that terminated in the switch. With a snarl, the Dragon ordered the fellow back. That switch wasn't to be touched until the spikes were home. Beckoning for other men to follow, the Black Dragon strode out through the door.

There was a clang from the ambulance as it took the Black Dragon to his next destination. More clangs, that faded in the distance. The last was echoing back when the buzzing ceased, telling that The Shadow, dead or living, was impaled upon four bristling batches of spikes. If The Shadow still lived, he wouldn't survive that hideous ordeal long.

Convinced of that, the Black Dragon had been free to leave. His departure, however, was spurred by a more positive belief. The Black Dragon was sure that he had heard The Shadow deliver a suicide blast, a thing which pleased the Dragon more. In any event, the decree of the Dragon was fulfilled.

Death to The Shadow!

CHAPTER XVI. TWO KEYS TO CRIME

EXCITEMENT still reigned outside the Greenwich Village apartment house. Indoors, heavy footsteps were pounding up the stairs, denoting police who were coming to search the premises. Steve Trask was only half a floor ahead when he reached the door of Myra Reldon's apartment.

Outside the door stood Clyde Burke. Head tilted, the reporter was listening to the sounds from below. When Steve arrived, Clyde reached out a hand, took the breathless man's arm and steered him right into the apartment.

A moment later, Clyde was inside, too, closing the door behind him. The reporter said, "Sit down. The police won't bother us. That broken elevator cable will worry them for a while."

Steve couldn't have accepted Clyde's invitation unless he'd chosen a seat on the floor. Every chair in the room was overturned; some of them were broken. The room looked like a hurricane exhibit.

Anxiety swept Steve's face.

"What about Myra Reldon?" he panted. "Did... did they –"

"They didn't," interposed Clyde.

He picked up a chair and planted it for Steve. "Myra dodged them while the lights were blinking. She got into the other room and bolted the door just before we arrived to break up the party. Myra will be out in a few minutes."

Clyde picked up two knives that were lying in a corner of the room, where they'd rebounded when they struck the fireproof wall. He handed Steve the souvenirs, then strolled to the window. Clyde beckoned and Steve came over.

Looking across rooftops and down between, Steve saw the cab that Clyde indicated. It was nosing from an alley a few blocks distant, timing its departure between the passing of patrol cars. It was The Shadow's cab, leaving with the other agents.

Stout fellows, those. One, Harry Vincent, had impressed Steve by his clean-cut style, which seemed an equal measure of his fighting ability. Another, Cliff Marsland, was more rugged in appearance, and as hard-fisted as he looked. But the third, a diminutive man with wizened face, who answered to the name of Hawkeye, was by no means a supernumerary. To say that Hawkeye was a pint of human dynamite wouldn't be doing him justice. He packed a wallop more like TNT.

Each of the trio had accounted for one of the Dragon's followers, and now the three were departing while the police were gathering the remains. The police would certainly be stymied for a while when they found the assassin who had dived down the elevator shaft. They'd wonder why he wasn't inside the wrecked car, instead of lying on top of it!

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"They're off to hunt for the chief," observed Clyde grimly. "There's no better hackie in town than Moe Shrevnitz. If there's a trail within a mile, he'll smell it. But the way The Shadow vanished taking that whole crowd with him – well, I just don't get it."

The bedroom door opened and Myra Reldon stepped into the living room. Her dark–blue dress was smartly fashioned, American style, well–suited to a striking brunette like Myra. It did justice to her trim build, quite as well as the Chinese costume which she had worn as Ming Dwan. The girl's real change was in her face.

FOR the moment, Steve was startled. He thought that Myra was deathly pale, on the point of wilting from her recent experience. Then Steve realized that the effect was his own imagination. Remembering Myra as Ming Dwan, he'd classed her complexion as that of yellow–ivory. The illusion of pallor faded from Steve's mind when he studied Myra's face in terms of normal white.

Methodically, Myra began to straighten the room. Steve and Clyde helped. She smiled when she set the footstool where it belonged, but her lips went a trifle grim when she saw the knives that Steve had laid aside.

Then, picking up a dressing gown from the floor, Myra rolled the knives inside it with a pair of slippers and took the whole bundle into the bedroom, where she stowed it deep on a closet shelf with the Ming Dwan costume. Returning, Myra looked from Steve to Clyde, her eyes asking an anxious question.

"No word yet," said Clyde a bit solemnly. "Moe just took the boys to the hunt. We'll hear from Burbank if they find the chief."

Who Burbank was, Steve didn't inquire. Glancing from the window, Steve saw a big official car nose into the front street, pause as though poking into matters, and then continue on its way.

"Look, Burke!"

"No soap, Trask," said Clyde, when he saw the car that Steve pointed out. "That's the commish in person. The phony job is out of circulation. Half the force grabbed it."

"They questioned the driver?"

"Yes. I was covering the story when you and the chief went by in Shrevvy's cab. The chauffeur was an A–1 dope who thought he was really working for Weston. He'd stopped at Gotham Court to pick up a passenger for Norland's. He was going back to some old garage when the law clamped down on him."

Steve felt an inward groan. There wasn't any way to beat the Black Dragon's game, the way all the trails evaporated the further they were followed. Nobody had even begun to beat it, except The Shadow, but his technique lay in putting things in reverse. For instance, tonight, The Shadow had let the police swarm after the fake, official car, just so he could locate where it had come from – namely, Norland's house.

A thought hit Steve like a sunburst. He wanted a key to crime and he had one. Why not carry The Shadow's system further, by tracing back to an earlier starting point? The fake, official car had been at Gotham Court before it went to Norland's. There was the place to use crime's key!

Steve didn't express the thought to the others. Myra was becoming really worried, so Clyde was using the phone to call Burbank just in case there was some word of The Shadow. A glance from the window showed that the street was deserted, so Steve strolled from the apartment unobserved and quickened his pace as he started down the stairs.

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THERE wasn't any copyright on the idea of checking backward trails. Clyde, Myra, the rest of The Shadow's agents all had the thing in mind. They'd rejected it because the trail they wanted led ahead to some hidden location where The Shadow had been carried as a prisoner.

So far, the agents hadn't an inkling as to where that place might be. Even if they'd found it, the atmosphere would have harrowed them. For the pall of doom was heavy in the square-walled room where the Black Dragon had decreed death to The Shadow.

Death delivered!

Two of the Dragon's followers were still present in that room, toying with revolvers they wouldn't have to use. Their ugly faces were exchanging evil leers. They had been ordered to wait, this pair, before withdrawing the spikes that impaled The Shadow's body. Now the time was up. One watcher gripped the door handle; the other turned to kick the stop that controlled the sliding floor. The door stuck as the first man tugged it. He yanked harder.

Flying wide, the door brought a mass of living blackness that reeled half across the room, came about with a sideward stagger, and disgorged a hand that swung a heavy gun. Blackness materialized into a cloaked figure, whose hidden lips trailed a strangely echoed laugh.

The Shadow, free from the spiked pit of death!

Frozen were the men who viewed this fabulous return. To the eyes that bulged from mud-hued faces, this was not The Shadow in bodily form. The babbled words they uttered were synonyms for the one term: "Ghost!"

The sweep of The Shadow's cloak displayed the proof. The garment was marred with rips from the spikes that must have pierced the human form within. In any language, The Shadow was a ghost, for only such a creature could have emerged as he had.

Reeling toward the man who had yanked the door, The Shadow was an open target for the watcher's gun. Too open, for The Shadow's own drive wavered. He couldn't seem to bring his automatic to aim. A few shots, point-blank, would have drilled The Shadow, but the man with the revolver didn't fire.

Of what use were bullets against a ghost?

Missing in aim, The Shadow swung his gun. His foeman went prostrate ahead of the weapon's sweep. Stopped when his stroke thwacked the door, The Shadow stumbled half across the figure that was bowing, pleading at his feet. He turned, steadying himself against the door, to aim at the other man.

NO aim was needed. That watcher was prostrate, too, hoping that he'd share The Shadow's grace. Both babbling men were tossing their guns along the floor, to prove that they wouldn't think of using such weapons, even in a case where bullets couldn't count.

Again The Shadow uttered his chilling mirth.

His tone, like his actions, proved that he hadn't fully recuperated from the plunge in the elevator, but his laugh was all the more ghostly. It was preferable to keep it so, to preserve the illusions held by these dragon men.

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Superstitious creatures, these, who had often witnessed the Black Dragon's vanish from his gilded throne and believed it to be real sorcery. They were of the right breed to accept The Shadow's reappearance as superior wizardry. Even their brief sight of The Shadow's face had not shattered their ghost theory. Lacking his slouch hat, The Shadow was displaying the features of Lamont Cranston. That detail was easily rectified.

The Shadow stepped to the closet. Its sliding floor was already open; the shot which the Black Dragon had mistaken for The Shadow's suicide had served another purpose. With it, the cloaked prisoner had blasted the woodwork above the pit, releasing the simple catch that held the sliding floor.

And now The Shadow demonstrated how he had escaped the sharp-pronged spikes.

He pressed the switch that controlled them. As the spikes receded, The Shadow waited until sufficient space showed in their boxed center. Down into that spiked vortex he descended, using the slowly moving spikes as the rungs of an improvised ladder!

At the bottom, The Shadow paused until the spikes had withdrawn a few more inches; stopping, he reclaimed his slouch hat. Deliberately, he duplicated his original escape, deftly climbing the pointed rods, shifting conveniently from one wall to another, but always avoiding the sharpened spike-tips.

In the first climb, the final spikes had caught his trailing cloak while he was gaining a grip inside the closet door. In wrenching the black garment free, The Shadow had caused those rips that had so impressed the guarding dragon men.

The cowed guards were still prostrate, their noses flat to the floor. The Shadow spoke in a commanding tone. Shaky, but willing, they arose and lunged toward the outer door.

Out into the waiting night, The Shadow marched the cowering pair, confident they would direct him to their former master, the Black Dragon!

CHAPTER XVII. PATHS TO THE DRAGON

DR. TAM looked up from his desk and studied the two nondescript Orientals who faced him. Though they were of mixed lineage, Tam could see that they were of Japanese strain, this pair that had been captured by The Shadow.

Being familiar with the Japanese language, Tam put questions in that tongue. They replied volubly under the nudge of guns that bulged from blackness behind them. The fact that The Shadow was still present caused them to magnify his prowess.

In the opinion of the prisoners, The Shadow was a Kitsumi-tsuki, a being who controlled the foxes and made them do his bidding. So powerful was The Shadow, that he might even be Inari, the fox god, in person.

When that outburst ended, Tam pretended to class the prisoners as Li Huang's former servants. Sternly he asked if they had delivered the kogo to Li Huang. Since kogo was the Japanese term for a small box with a lid, Tam's question was an implication that these men had personally seen to Li Huang's death by giving him the jewel case that contained the poison lizard.

When both protested innocence, Tam said he would believe them if they told him where to find the Black Dragon's kura, or hidden treasure room. They said they couldn't, but they did know where the Dragon Clan would meet – later tonight.

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When the pair had given the necessary details, Tam summoned his own men and had them remove the prisoners. Whereupon, blackness laughed, and materialized itself into the form of The Shadow. Bowing to his cloaked friend, Tam declared that he would send men to raid the meeting place, but The Shadow had a better plan.

"I shall go alone," he declared. "The whole spirit of the clan hinges upon the Black Dragon. Once his boasts are nullified, his followers will desert him. I proved that with the pair I captured."

Tam frowned. In whispered tone, The Shadow assured him that this plan would work. Though he nodded, Tam retained his frown because of something else.

"You were missing for quite a while, Ying Ko," reminded Tam. "During that time, Steve Trask disappeared. Your contact man, Burbank, phoned me and said your agents were unable to find him."

"Tell Burbank to send them to Sauber's," ordered The Shadow. "That is where Trask would go to look for trouble. They should be able to keep him from finding it."

The Shadow's own destination was the meeting place that the prisoners had named and described to Dr. Tam. If ever there had seemed a false trail, this was it, for it seemed the last place in New York where the Dragon Clan would dare to assemble. That fact, in itself, convinced The Shadow that the trail was real.

THE spot in question was the old building directly across the dead-end street from the Norland Museum, a structure almost under the shelter of the great bridge that spanned the East River!

It happened that The Shadow could understand the Black Dragon's purpose in choosing such a rendezvous. Had things gone as the Dragon planned, this place would have been perfect. The police would have found Norland dead, presumably murdered by Steve, who in turn was to have died at the hands of the museum attendants. The Dragon had counted on the police releasing those killers on the ground of justified action.

Instead, the treacherous attendants had met their own doom from The Shadow. That fact, however, had closed the case more definitely. With Steve alive and at large, the police were spreading their search, which meant that the Dragon Clan could still meet at its chosen place.

Nearing the building in question, The Shadow approached it from the bridge side. Noting activity along the water front, he saw that the police were still trying to trace Steve's course. They had found the rowboat and were making inquiries from persons in the neighborhood.

Soon, the police would be gone, but The Shadow's plans called for immediate investigation of the premises where the meeting was to be held. Having brought along a black bag filled with varied equipment, The Shadow adopted a unique method of entering the three-story building.

Instead of approaching by the street, he took an obscure route leading up to the bridge itself. Gliding along a deserted footwalk by the rail, The Shadow reached a spot directly above the building that squatted below.

From his bag, The Shadow produced a cylindrical object like a huge measuring tape, a dozen inches across. He hooked the device to the outside rail of the bridge. Gripping a small stirrup that projected from the cylinder, The Shadow swung himself across the rail and dropped into space.

There was a weird whine as a thin but powerful wire uncoiled from the cylinder. Like a living spider, The Shadow dropped in dangling fashion to the rooftop more than fifty feet below. The process was very simple, except for the outward swing that was needed to clear the space between the bridge and building, which were

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not quite on a vertical line.

Nevertheless, The Shadow made it with a comfortable margin. Nor was his drop too rapid, for the coil was braked by a mechanism in the cylinder. Indeed, The Shadow spent less than half of the wire's length in reaching his destination. Settled on the roof, he released the stirrup and the wire drew it upward with a powerful spring action. The cylinder itself could be retrieved later, after this adventure was completed.

From the bag, The Shadow took a portable jimmy that fitted on the end of an automatic. He pried open a trapdoor and descended into the forgotten structure that had once been an office building. When he reached the second floor, he found that the prisoners hadn't lied to Dr. Tam.

The stage was set for the meeting. There was an outer office, square and of sizable proportions, with ornamental screens along its walls. Since there were several of these, the screen behind the Dragon's throne did not look suspicious.

Knowing the throne's trick, The Shadow sat down and pressed the arms. As he tilted back, the deceptive glass slid down to produce its mirror effect. The back of the throne revolved with the central panel of the screen, and The Shadow arrived in an inner office which was quite dark.

Through the rear window The Shadow saw a fire escape, the convenient route which the Black Dragon would use. So The Shadow descended silently and reached the window of another empty suite directly below the meeting place.

A whispered laugh was absorbed by darkness as The Shadow entered the lower window, carrying his bag. This first-floor office would serve as his own headquarters until the Dragon Clan arrived. There were certain preparations to be made, after which The Shadow could move about the neighborhood as he chose, since the police were giving up their hunt along the water front.

A final duel was impending between The Shadow and the Black Dragon – a duel wherein skill in mysterious ways would constitute the weapons!

MEANWHILE, Steve Trask was exactly where The Shadow expected him to be, outside Sauber's house in Gotham Court. Steve was just about to try the front door when a big car pulled up outside the archway. Steve dropped quickly from sight below the steps, because he recognized the car as Weston's.

At least it couldn't be the spurious vehicle belonging to the Black Dragon! That false car had been taken into custody, so it constituted a menace no longer.

With Commissioner Weston was Miles Fenmore. The pair were admitted to Sauber's house by Pelly, the secretary. As soon as the door closed, Steve ascended the steps and tried the doorknob. It proved unlatched, so Steve entered.

The ground floor was dimly lighted, and there wasn't a servant in sight. Steve moved stealthily toward a stairway, then rapidly sought the darkness behind it as he heard footsteps coming from the second floor. Looking up through the banister rails, Steve saw Weston and Fenmore coming down, with Sauber right behind them.

In his usual style, Sauber was protesting ignorance of anything and everything that concerned the Black Dragon. He even doubted that the fray in Greenwich Village could have anything to do with the Dragon problem. His argument on that score was still the same; the whole business of the Black Dragon was a myth.

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Neither Weston nor Fenmore offered comment, but their faces showed annoyance. At the front door, they met Cardona coming up the steps and the inspector went along with them. Steve heard Weston telling Fenmore that he'd drop him off at his house, then the three were on their way to the commissioner's car, without even saying good night to Sauber.

The curt departure didn't hurt Sauber's feelings. If anything, it pleased him. Bolting the door, the tawny-faced man turned toward the stairs, and Steve, well-huddled from sight, saw a gleam from narrowed eyes that suited the sly smile of Sauber's almost lipless mouth.

When Sauber started up the stairs, Steve followed. What worried him was the absence of Pelly. But when Sauber entered an office on the second floor, Steve saw that the secretary was awaiting him. Deep in the office was another door with a large, upright cabinet shoved halfway through it. Steve decided that he could spy best by sneaking around to that adjacent room.

Steve reached his goal easily enough, but found the room stacked with trunks and crates, like other rooms that he passed on the way. Evidently the containers held the excess imports that Sauber had ordered on a lavish, wholesale scale when he foresaw that sources would be cut off.

Working in among the crates, Steve saw some with Japanese letters and the word "Silk." Others were labeled "Tea" and "Quinine." Most curious of all was a huge box marked "Tapioca," which Steve decided to climb upon so he could look across the cabinet that blocked the connecting door to the office.

To Steve, this emphasis on imports could be the cover-up for Sauber's real game – the Black Dragon racket. Certainly Sauber must know much about the credits – and cash – of businessmen returned from the Far East. Knowing who had money and who hadn't, the Black Dragon could stretch his insidious claws into the affairs of anyone he chose.

Such were Steve's thoughts as he peered across the blocking cabinet in order to spy on Sauber and his secretary, Pelly. Like The Shadow, Steve Trask was seeking the Black Dragon. But through Steve's brain was surging the idea that he had already found the monster in question – in the person of Carlton Sauber!

CHAPTER XVIII. HIGH-LEVEL BATTLE

THOSE shrewd eyes of Sauber's still had their sly look as his gaze ran through some papers that Pelly handed him. Finished with the sheets, Sauber crumpled them, touched them with a match and threw the burning wad into a metal wastebasket.

"Good work, Pelly," complimented Sauber. "These reports tally. Therefore, we can assume that the men who supplied them are properly informed, since you say that they do not know one another."

What the reports were, Sauber did not specify. While they burned, he opened the drawer of an ornamental desk and brought out a bundle of letters.

"Take these to Fenmore," ordered Sauber. "Tell him I found them after he left. They prove that he is right and I am wrong – that there is a Black Dragon. It is just as well that I should find it out. A man's status is always improved when he admits that he can be wrong."

Pelly left with the letters, and Sauber, softly drumming the desk, listened until he heard the front door close. Giving a sly glance at the ashes of the burned report sheets, Sauber brought a Japanese puzzle box from the desk drawer. Finding the secret spring, Sauber pressed it. The box popped open and into Sauber's hand dropped a jet dragon with tiny, bead-green eyes!

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Pocketing the death token, Sauber arose and approached the cabinet in the doorway. Steve slid out of sight to the tapioca crate and listened to a sharp click, so close to his ear that it could only mean that Sauber was opening a secret compartment, deep in the cabinet.

When Steve raised his head for another look, he saw the thing he expected. Carlton Sauber was putting on a costume that he had taken from the hiding place – a costume that seemed alive because of the writhes it gave. A robe of silver and gold, literally enfolded in the coils of an embroidered dragon absolutely black in hue!

The costume was a perfect disguise when Sauber finished by drawing the hood over his head and face. To Steve's amazed gaze, the hood became a dragon's mouth, yawning wide, with an eye-slit between its fangs. More monster than man, Sauber writhed out of the room and down the stairs to the front door!

As fast as he could, Steve followed. From the front door, he saw the dragon shape snaking out through one of the archways. At the other, a cab was pulling to a stop and Steve decided there was no time to lose. Full speed he dashed for the cab, to be met by persons coming from it.

They were friends, The Shadow's agents!

Myra was with them, and when they motioned Steve inside the cab, he found himself beside the girl. Harry was on the other side, while Cliff and Hawkeye perched in the folding seats. The cab, of course, was Moe's, and the speedy driver was off like a whippet the moment Steve told what he'd learned about Sauber.

Around the corner, Moe spotted a car ahead. It could only be Sauber's so Moe took up the trail. But they hadn't gone many blocks before Hawkeye, peering back in his sharp-eyed style, spotted a pair of cars behind them.

The situation was self-evident. Those cars were on hand to eliminate any trailing vehicle such as Moe's cab!

THE triple chase kept on, threatening to break into something more serious. When the chase was swinging into an area which Steve identified with the old Norland Museum, things began to happen fast.

Sauber's car took a turn leading toward a dead-end street. As Moe's cab darted in pursuit, the trailers roared into the attack. They wanted to overtake the cab before its riders saw where Sauber went, and they would have – if sudden intervention had not come.

From beside a ramp that led up at a right angle to the great bridge across the river, came the sudden jab of guns. Behind those weapons was a black-clad marksman whose presence here was proving of the timeliest sort.

It was The Shadow literally knocking the triple chase apart!

Sauber's car took a quick dart through an alley. That detour took the dragon-garbed man from the fray, but it was to cost him considerable time in reaching the meeting place, because the alley was a long one, with its outlet well above the bridge.

Recognizing The Shadow as the marksman, Moe performed accordingly. The skillful cabby took the shortest way out, to give The Shadow a chance at the pursuing cars which obviously contained members of the Dragon Clan. Moe's choice was the ramp leading up to the high-level bridge.

The pursuing cars were almost side by side. One took The Shadow's first shots and did a roundabout skid, that swung it across the other's path. To avoid a crash, the driver of the second car veered away and through

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sheer luck found the ramp. To add to such undeserved fortune, the veering car was shielded by the crippled vehicle and thus escaped The Shadow's gunfire!

Foreseeing what could happen next, The Shadow did not remain upon the scene. He disappeared like a puff of smoke, off between two buildings to the stairs that he had used before, those long steps leading up to the footwalk of the great bridge.

The Shadow's route was far the shorter. But when he reached the top, Moe's cab was already past, with the pursuing car close behind it. Guns were blazing back and forth as The Shadow's agents opened fire to stave off these members of the Dragon Clan. Far ahead, The Shadow saw a car swerve as it came from the other end of the bridge.

With Dragon servers coming from many places to attend their meeting, luck had again turned their way. The car from the other end was blocking off Moe's cab to put The Shadow's agents between two fires!

THE SHADOW had stopped beside the cylinder that contained the coiled wire. One gun drawn, his other fist was clutching the hand stirrup. Seeing that the cab was being trapped near the center of the bridge, The Shadow dashed along the footwalk. As he reached the end of the cable length, he hooked the stirrup over a huge bolt-head projecting from the bridge rail.

Then, with both guns drawn, The Shadow opened a rapid fire at the place where two cars had stopped with a cab at an angle in between them. Timely, indeed, was that gunnery. It halted men of the Dragon Clan in their tracks just as they were leaping from their cars to riddle the occupants of the beleaguered cab!

The Dragon fighters scattered, giving The Shadow's agents a chance for a counterattack. Leaping from the cab, the agents showed their stuff in no uncertain fashion. They were taking over the scene and capturing the two cars in the bargain, but a new brunt was being thrown on The Shadow.

Anxious to reach their meeting place, the foiled Dragon men scurried for the footwalk. There, for the first time, they located The Shadow's gunfire. They ripped shots in response, an enfilading fire along the footwalk itself!

The Shadow had no chance to dart between big girders. Shots were coming from too many guns, and such a course would have boxed him in. Besides, The Shadow had no desire to prevent the meeting of the Dragon Clan. Having carried this fray away from the meeting place, he was anxious to get back there.

Hence The Shadow sped ahead of the gunfire. Wild shots ricocheted from the steel posts all about him. Shooting foemen saw him only as a vague shape. The Shadow suddenly swerved beside the bridge rail and threw himself across and over it. As he went, The Shadow seized the stirrup from its bolt. The wire twanged as it swept downward into the darkness.

Stretched to its full length, the wire was like a mammoth pendulum with The Shadow as its base. Seemingly, The Shadow was bound for a plunge into the river, but the steel wire stood the test. It was tugging, gathering into its cylinder, as The Shadow swooped toward water level.

Then, with the bridge high above him, The Shadow reached the limit of his dip. He was coming up again, shoreward, with the squat building waiting to receive him, but he was too low to reach its roof!

This time, The Shadow hadn't made an outward leap. He profited by the fact, for as the wall came looming at him, he twisted just enough to miss its corner and take to space between. His swing was losing its momentum as he passed the far corner of the building. There, The Shadow made a grab.

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Then he was literally crawling along the wall, supported by the cable that couldn't get away until he chose to release it! Reaching the fire escape, The Shadow grabbed hold and let the stirrup go. It thwacked the wall, flapped past the corner, and sailed up to the high bridge.

The Shadow had reached the meeting place ahead of Sauber, whose detour had delayed him. He was ahead of the Dragon men who were hurrying this way along the bridge. As for The Shadow's own agents, they were wondering where their chief had gone.

It would take the agents and Steve some time to find the meeting place. Which suited The Shadow's plans to perfection, since he would still have time to confront the Dragon Clan alone, as he originally intended.

Low, sibilant was The Shadow's whispered laugh as the darkness of a waiting window swallowed him – a prelude to his final duel with the Black Dragon!

CHAPTER XIX. THE VANISHED MASTER

CREAKS were sounding in the darkened hall outside the old office that formed the new meeting room of the Dragon Clan. Whispers passed among lurkers who were stationed there. Those lurkers belonged to the Dragon Clan, and their whispers proved that no genuine Chinese were mixed in this ugly business. Chinese couldn't whisper; their language depended on inflections, which made it impossible.

Obviously, the dragon men were expecting someone. It was quite in keeping with the methods of their chief, the Black Dragon, to turn his meeting room into a trap. Hence, the hallway was dark, to encourage the intruder who was moving toward quick doom.

The creaks kept on. They reached the door of the meeting room and continued through. A surprising thing, considering that the door was closed. Whispers ended instantly. Only The Shadow could have opened and closed a door so silently as he. The thing was uncanny, nevertheless the lurkers took it as a matter of course. Shiftily, they moved to new positions, producing other floor creaks.

It was like a calm before a storm, this coming of the meeting hour for the Dragon Clan. A storm which The Shadow had boldly determined to invoke. But there were outside elements concerned in it; how soon they would be due was a question.

For one thing, Carlton Sauber couldn't yet have reached this meeting place in the reptilian guise that branded him as the Black Dragon. As for The Shadow's agents, they would be at least ten minutes behind the double-dealer whose departure Steve had witnessed.

Meanwhile, the drama was centered in the meeting room, and it was drama indeed. First, the creaks. They weren't the sound of footfalls; rather they were only the groaning of loose floor boards, purposely arranged so that even the tread of The Shadow would disturb them. Reaching the center of the room, the creaks stopped amid the absolute darkness.

A long time seemed to pass, but only because moments lingered in this place that was like a tomb, a purpose for which it happened to be intended. The proof that an insidious climax was at hand came when lights appeared, creeping from mere flecks of redness into a gradually increasing glow that soon revealed the room and the stranger it contained.

Standing in the center of the room was The Shadow. As the lights disclosed him, the cloaked figure hunched lower and began to turn about. His posture showed that he was ready to whip guns from beneath his cloak, should enemies invade this room. But so far The Shadow was alone. At moments he gazed toward the gilded

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throne, but observing it to be empty, he continued to look elsewhere.

The Shadow's back was almost turned when a puff came from the throne. There, as if conjured from thin air, sat the Black Dragon. As if startled by the puff of smoke, The Shadow wheeled about, too late. One of the Dragon's hands had already flipped a signal that went with the sharp hiss from his fang-embroidered mouth.

The walls of this room had more than ears. They held fighters. With a rip, panels crashed from the ornamental screens. Guns stabbed the openings that ripped further to disgorge a dozen members of the Dragon Clan, all aiming for their cloaked enemy – The Shadow!

Knives, too, were flaying through the air, to find their mark in that hated figure of justice. In one instantaneous swoop, the murderous horde had overwhelmed The Shadow before he could fire a single shot in return!

Halted, the assassinating band expected to see the bullet-riddled victim collapse. Instead, The Shadow laughed!

SNARLS came from killers as they shrank back toward the broken panels. Those snarls were drowned by the sharper, louder hiss of the Black Dragon as he arose from his throne. He would end this illusion, nullify this strange chance whereby The Shadow, through some sheer trick, was standing dead on his feet, his lips forcing a laugh that they had begun before the hail of knives and bullets reached him.

Advancing with a drawn knife of his own, the Black Dragon stopped just short of The Shadow, intending to slash the blade into his rival's heart. The Dragon paused, his hiss triumphant. The figure of The Shadow was swaying; its collapse had begun.

Such was the introduction to another marvel.

The Shadow did not fall. His sway became a shrink. He was dwindling, before eyes that now included the Dragon's in their astonished circle, to something that was formless! A thing that couldn't be The Shadow, yet was, for from the shape that folded into itself came the same challenge that amazed men had heard before:

The laugh of The Shadow!

Down to the floor where it spread like an enormous ink blot that crept, with its hemmed cloak transformed into tentacles, toward the murderers who couldn't kill! Such was the action of this thing that had once been The Shadow, and still was!

From the blot, itself, issued The Shadow's laugh, louder, more strident than before!

To dispel the illusion that so outmatched his own arts, the Black Dragon stooped forward to clutch at the spread cloak and the slouch hat that tilted from the top of the cloth blot. Then, his hiss changed to an angry snarl, the Dragon waved his hand instead, as though such menial work belonged to others. None of the Dragon Clan sensed their master's fear. One was bold enough to obey the Black Dragon's order.

Springing forward, a rangy killer grabbed the hat and flung it, at the same time scooping up the cloak. Timed to the action came a louder mockery, with it a gun spurt from the midst of the blackened folds. The Dragon man who had dared defy The Shadow, paid his penalty before the cloak could leave his hand.

Face forward, the killer sprawled, gave a kick that turned him over and lay face upward, his eyes staring into the ruddy glow. There was horror in those dead eyes, as though they had seen the invisible hand that could

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deliver vengeance from nowhere!

The Shadow's laugh ended at the same instant. Madly, the Black Dragon seized the hat and cloak himself and shook them in order to learn their secret. They were empty, those garments, due proof that The Shadow was indeed a ghost. But this ghost had proven that it could deliver vengeance to any – or all – of the Dragon Clan!

INSTANTLY, the power of the Black Dragon was gone. The Shadow ruled triumphant in the minds of the superstitious clan. Anxious to appease The Shadow, they saw the Black Dragon as their real foe. He was the one who had defied The Shadow's challenge and pronounced the doom of the pit upon a fighter who could return from the world beyond!

"Death to the Black Dragon!"

With that shout, the assorted killers hurled themselves upon their former chief. With a frenzied writhe, the Black Dragon reached the throne, striking his hands against the arms and rolling around, to land deep in the seat. He didn't wait to throw a puff ball that would dramatize his disappearance. He used the mechanism as fast as it could send him, which was just ahead of the bullets that shattered the dropped glass, ending its utility as a mirror.

Bullets fired from the doorway, by an arrival whose hand was quicker than those of the Dragon's followers! The motley clan still didn't guess the trick, for by then the throne was empty. Nor did they stand gaping at the broken glass, for their attention was diverted the other way. The thing that brought them full about was more than mere gunfire.

It was the laugh of The Shadow!

Fierce, vengeful mirth that seemed to hold this tribe responsible for the escape of the Black Dragon. There in the doorway stood The Shadow, fully cloaked, smoke trailing from his drawn guns. The Shadow, no longer a ghost, but a superhuman fighter who had switched from the invisible to the indestructible!

Like the pair who had seen The Shadow return from the spiked pit, the whole brutal throng flattened on their faces and pleaded with The Shadow to spare their worthless lives. Leaving them thus, The Shadow turned and started for the stairs.

His laugh, trailing back, was like an omen, telling the cowed killers that their case would pend while The Shadow was settling scores with their banished leader, the Black Dragon.

CHAPTER XX. THE DRAGON'S RUSE

OUTSIDE, a cab was stopped beside the curb a short distance from the meeting building. On its steps stood a figure robed in gold and silver, adorned with a writhing dragon that ended in a hood.

Gun in hand, this monster who represented murder was about to point the weapon at a doubtful cab driver and order him to start away, when The Shadow wheeled from the doorway of the building and delivered a weird laugh.

Instantly, the creature in the dragon's costume changed his tactics. Instead of firing at The Shadow, he sprang away from the cab and rushed for shelter across the street. The lights of another cab disclosed him and he tried to dart from the glare. Out of the cab sprang other fighters, The Shadow's agents.

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Between The Shadow and his agents, the fugitive hadn't a chance. Lowering his gun, The Shadow watched the roundup. It looked as if four men were trying to capture a slippery snake, so wildly did this Dragon writhe. He was coming across the street again, forgetful that The Shadow awaited him, when another car bore down on him.

Only by a mad scramble did the Dragon reach the sidewalk. Even then, he tripped across the curb. But his pursuers were blocked off by the stopping car and for the moment, the Dragon was in the clear. Then, a new champion was leaping from the limousine, in the person of Miles Fenmore.

In his hand, Fenmore had a revolver, which he tried to center on the Dragon. It was the writhing effect of the costume that fooled him and gave the other man time to come about. By then, there was no question as to the Dragon's identity. The man in the costume was Carlton Sauber; he had thrown back the dragon's hood, because the eye-slits were out of their proper place.

Seeing Fenmore aim, Sauber returned the favor. The gesture was almost useless, considering the advantage that Fenmore held. But to Steve Trask, springing around the front of Fenmore's limousine, the situation looked serious. With more fervor than wisdom, Steve hurled himself toward Sauber, shoving a gun toward the man who wore the regalia of the Dragon.

Only the speed of The Shadow could outmatch Fenmore's steady aim, Sauber's hasty return, and Steve's frenzied interference. Like a whirl of smoke, The Shadow went across the path of aim, but he met Steve with the solid effect of a stone wall. Flinging one hand upward, The Shadow struck Steve's revolver with the hard clash of an automatic and knocked the gun away.

Out of the same whirl, The Shadow aimed his other gun in backward style and fired. The illusion of the dragon costume seemed to baffle him, for he missed Sauber by scant inches. The shot, continuing onward, reached Fenmore's shoulder. Jolted at the moment when he pulled the trigger, Fenmore shoved his gun high. His shot carried over Sauber's head.

Before The Shadow could change that situation, Sauber's gun was full in line. It spoke, like an echo of the others, and drove its leaden message straight to Fenmore's heart. With a long, slow pitch, Fenmore flattened to the sidewalk into the posture of the Dragon Clan that The Shadow had so recently left.

There was no longer any writhe to Sauber's costume. The man was standing like a thing of stone. The Shadow's agents reached him and he made no effort to flee. The Shadow gestured toward Steve and they pushed Sauber in that direction. Steve plucked the gun from Sauber's hand and gave it to The Shadow. All the while, Sauber kept staring at Fenmore's body.

MINUTES must have passed while Steve stood frozen, watching Sauber, who was equally rigid. Not a word from Sauber; the mere sight of his handiwork, in the form of Fenmore's body, held him speechless. A big car pulled into the street and from it stepped Commissioner Weston, with Inspector Cardona right behind him.

Weston took charge of Sauber, while Cardona was bringing out a fresh pair of handcuffs for Steve. Hoping that The Shadow would at last explain things, Steve looked for his cloaked friend and saw, quite to his dismay, that The Shadow had gone. Nevertheless, the process of the law was rudely interrupted.

Out from the entrance of an office building came a curious parade. It began with a dozen men, hands all lifted, who by their ugly looks and indiscriminate attire belonged to the Dragon Clan. Behind them, stimulating the forced march, were The Shadow's agents. They turned their prisoners over to arriving police.

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Puzzlement was showing on Cardona's swarthy face. He weighed the handcuffs, but didn't slap them on Steve. Joe Cardona was beginning to get one of his very famous hunches, but he didn't express it aloud. Commissioner Weston didn't like Joe's hunches.

"Well, inspector!" Weston was gesturing toward Sauber. "Here is our Black Dragon. Poor Fenmore was right. The fellow was a killer. Too bad we didn't bear down on Sauber this evening!"

Steve watched Cardona. An odd thought struck him. Inspector Cardona was as badly muddled as Steve. He was hoping, too, that The Shadow would reappear. But there wasn't any sign of The Shadow; not even a trailing laugh.

Lamont Cranston stepped up from somewhere. He arrived in his usual leisurely style, probably from a limousine parked around the corner. Despite himself, Commissioner Weston smiled. His friend Cranston was always arriving late.

"If you'd been at the club," snapped Weston, "you could have come with us. Cranston. Fenmore called and told us where we could find the Black Dragon."

Cranston looked from Fenmore's body to Sauber's equally rigid, though upright form. From the appearance of things, he might have suggested that the Black Dragon had found Fenmore. But Cranston didn't comment on Sauber's costume. Instead, he questioned casually:

"Who told Fenmore about the Black Dragon?"

"That fellow Pelly," began Weston. "You know – Sauber's secretary. He came to Fenmore's this evening and said he'd learned that Sauber was the Black Dragon. You see, Pelly found a note that came to Sauber's –"

"What is it, commissioner? I would like to hear the rest."

"I'm wondering where Pelly is!" said Weston, somewhat puzzled. "He was coming here with Fenmore."

Cranston finished lighting a cigarette, turned about and blew the smoke toward a limousine, where a silent chauffeur was seated.

"There's Fenmore's car," observed Cranston. "Why not have a look inside, commissioner?"

WESTON stepped over to the car. When he opened the door, a thing like a wild cat flew out. It was coming, with a gun, but it stopped with a whimper and dropped the weapon. The human wild cat was Pelly, and the thing that stopped him was another gun, gripped by the complacent Mr. Cranston, who had shoved the stubby revolver right into Pelly's ribs.

"Good work, Cranston," complimented Weston. "I'm glad I gave you that gun permit you wanted. It came in very handy."

"This isn't my gun." With a smile, Cranston handed the revolver to Weston. "It's yours, commissioner. It was falling from your pocket, so I caught it."

Before Weston could think that one over. Cranston reached into Fenmore's limousine and dug deep beside the seat. He came out with a thing that looked like a deflated sea serpent. Spreading the object out, Cranston looked surprised to find that it was another dragon costume. He gave a glance toward Sauber's dejected figure.

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"Offhand, commissioner" – Cranston took another look at the outfit he was holding – "I would say that this was the original." He took a look toward Pelly, who was receiving the handcuffs originally meant for Steve. "Is it yours, Pelly?"

"It's Fenmore's!" blurted Pelly. "Or it was! He was the Black Dragon. But I had to work for him, or he'd have sent me a dragon token, like he did with Sauber!"

With a nod, Sauber dug deep beneath his costume and brought out the little jet dragon.

"I received this long ago," he said. "It had me scared. That's why I hid it. I couldn't understand why the Black Dragon let me live until I realized that I was being framed. So I tried to get back at the Black Dragon. I knew what his costume was supposed to be, and I rigged this duplicate. I wanted to get to a Dragon meeting and bluff that crowd of his.

"They were laying for me at Li Huang's, the first place I tried. They tried to get me the night you brought Trask to my house. I had Pelly make inquiries among people who might know something about the Black Dragon. Pelly found out more than I had hoped, because he was actually working for the Black Dragon, though I didn't know it.

"The moment I saw Fenmore, I knew the truth. He couldn't have come here, unless Pelly had told him, and Pelly wasn't supposed to tell. Fenmore wanted to kill me so I'd be marked as the Black Dragon. But The Shadow must have gotten here first, to break things up."

Cardona was quizzing Pelly, who admitted that he'd been waiting behind the building in Fenmore's car. There, Fenmore had joined him and discarded the original dragon costume. Tonight's trap had been planned for Sauber, who was to be found dead in the meeting room in the dragon costume. It was to look as though Sauber had run into some trouble with his own followers.

"Fenmore was finished with the racket," declared Pelly. "He was running out of victims. He didn't have to do any checking on them here; all the data he needed was sent him from Japan. The vault in his house is the kura that contains his wealth. He threatened many persons like Miljohn and Pendleton. Most of them paid."

LIKE the situation, the scene cleared. Cardona was gone, along with Pelly and the other prisoners. Sauber had left with Commissioner Weston to probe matters up at Fenmore's. Cranston was supposed to come there in his own car, bringing Steve, whose case was completely understood. But Cranston wasn't in a hurry to start.

Looking about, Cranston appeared surprised by the fact that all The Shadow's agents had strolled from the picture after delivering the Dragon Clan. One stepped into sight: Myra Reldon. She gestured toward the building where the Dragon Clan had met.

"Dr. Tam received word from The Shadow," said Myra. "He wants us to bring along a few things that he left."

Cranston nodded and they went inside.

In an office on the ground floor, they found a long rod, formed in telescopic fashion. Cranston whipped the thing full-length and found it rigid. Seeing the outline of a stairway in a corner of the office, he began poking the rod up beneath. There were creaks from the stair boards that had continued as Cranston poked the rod along the line of the upstairs hall, then in the direction of the meeting room.

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"A clever chap, The Shadow," observed Cranston. "He must have used this rod to make the Dragon Clan think he was sneaking into the meeting room. I suppose, at first, they thought it was Sauber."

Myra was pointing to a tiny hole in the ceiling. Cranston couldn't seem to understand its purpose. Finally, he pushed the rod up through and told Myra to hold it that way. Taking Steve upstairs, The Shadow found a hat and cloak lying on the meeting-room floor. It was Steve who pointed to the rod that projected through the floor and exclaimed:

"Try them on that!"

Cranston tried them and found that the end of the rod opened umbrella fashion. Adorned with hat and cloak, the skeleton contrivance made a perfect replica of The Shadow that became wonderfully lifelike when Cranston called down to Myra to revolve the rod. Then, for a finish, Cranston added:

"Draw it right down through."

Myra did. The cloak and hat collapsed and fell away to a formless blot. When Cranston lifted them, the rod was gone.

Myra had drawn it through, the sprouting ends closing right through the hole. Further amazed by the ingenuity of The Shadow, Cranston picked up the hat and cloak and carried them on his arm, to return to the friend of his friend, Dr. Tam.

THEY rode to Fenmore's, to find that Weston and Sauber had uncovered the Black Dragon's stolen hoard, thanks to Fenmore's servants, honest men, who didn't know they'd been the front for their master's double life. By the time they left Fenmore's, Steve was all straight on the Sauber question.

Twice, he'd mistaken Sauber's gestures as a summons to men of crime; whereas Sauber, like Steve, had simply been trying to get away from murderers!

Cranston summed other details as they left Fenmore's house. He was dropping off at the club and sending Steve and Myra home in his limousine.

"Fenmore put you in a jam the first night you saw him," Cranston told Steve. "That should have aroused your suspicion. Then there was the time that I was there, when Pelly muffed around with Sauber's papers just for an excuse to stay at Fenmore's. That was when Fenmore gave Pelly the real death token that eventually reached Li Huang."

Cranston paused, as though he felt that he'd really missed the facts on that occasion.

"What really tipped off The Shadow," declared Cranston impersonally, "was that message you received at Dr. Tam's. The one which bore The Shadow's name, but came from The Black Dragon."

Immediately agog, Steve asked if Tam had learned the secret of that odd riddle. Whereupon, Cranston nodded.

"The Shadow solved it," said Cranston. "The note was written on the paper in your tobacco tin. You tore it loose while you were filling your pouch. Later, you mistook it for a note."

"That's right!" exclaimed Steve. "I left my tobacco tin on Fenmore's desk! That's when he fixed it. But why was I such a dope to mistake that piece of paper for a real note?"

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"You were really a dope," put in Myra laughingly. "Fenmore just didn't fix the wrapping. He planted a nice dose of opium in the tobacco, too. A few pipe loads and you were in a mood to mistake almost anything."

There was one thing on which Steve wasn't mistaken: The Shadow. All through the weave of fact and fancy, he could see the hand of the master genius who had ended the Black Dragon's reign of crime. But the identity of The Shadow was still a puzzle that remained unsolved.

So strange a puzzle to Steve Trask that when he and Myra Reldon were riding from the Cobalt Club, Steve actually thought that he heard a distant laugh, trailing like an echo from the past. Mirth that was more than memory, for it symbolized The Shadow's conquest over crime.

As those echoes faded, Steve Trask looked back. He saw only Lamont Cranston waving a good night from the doorway of the Cobalt Club.

THE END