

CRIME CARAVAN

Maxwell Grant

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CRIME CARAVAN

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I.

HAPPY JACK began peeling the bank-roll the moment the big blue job swerved into the buying lot.

Fifteen hundred dollars was a safe bet for a first glance appraisal, and to wave the cash with the offer was the set system of Happy Jack Smiley. "If you want jack, see Jack" was the slogan that went with Smiley's inch-square photograph in all the used car want-ads.

So there was Happy Jack with his famous gold-toothed grin right beneath the big banner that stretched across the double-lane entrance to the lot where cars rolled in and out as fast as he could buy and sell them. Just by way of identification Happy Jack had a portrait of himself painted on the banner that bore his name. Usually drivers stopped when they saw the man who tallied with the chromo.

This driver didn't.

He veered the de luxe coupe toward Happy Jack in a manner that meant mayhem. Those legs of Jack's were faster than their rotund bulk betrayed, otherwise Happy wouldn't have escaped the menace. As it was, he cleared the wooden curb of the lot with a few feet to spare and the car, encountering the barrier, jounced along inside it.

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A junk trailer blocked the path and Happy Jack expected the blue coupe to bowl in broadside upon the station wagon that stood next in line. Instead the crash proved mild, nothing more than a clatter that dented the trailer and stalled the coupe. Muttering something about woman drivers, Happy Jack hurried over expecting to tell one what he thought of her.

It wasn't a woman behind the wheel of the coupe. The limp figure was a man, and his face was tilted sideways against the glass of the front window with an open-mouthed expression of a fish coming up for air.

Fish-eyed too, those glazed things that stared sightlessly from a face that Happy Jack knew too well.

The man was Larry Saugus and he was very dead.

Shoving the bank-roll in his pocket, Happy Jack stepped around the stalled car and waved for Clip Rowley, who had come from the office across the lot in answer to the clatter. Seeing that no cars were coming through the entrance, Happy Jack took time to show Clip the exhibit.

"Remember him, Clip?"

Happy Jack put the query with his customary smile, but Clip didn't catch any humor from the gold-toothed gleam. In response, Clip's long face took on a mournful air that befitted his solemn nod.

"Saugus was one of those phone bidders," remarked Happy Jack. "They usually pick up a used buy for themselves when the racket begins to fold. Only they generally try to sell out first."

Another nod from Clip.

"Guess Saugus thought he could swap this blue job for something in the lot," continued Happy Jack, "and take along some cash difference in his favor. He was talking that way when I saw him last."

Clip's face underwent a contortion as he leaned forward for a closer look at the dead man. Momentarily his expression appeared one of sympathy but it proved to be the shifting of a tobacco cud so that he could speak. All Clip asked was:

"What done him in?"

"Monoxide," replied Happy Jack, blandly. "It always gets them that way." He reached for the door handle, jiggled it and finally gave it a powerful wrench. "Try the inside, Clip, and see if you can get the window down."

With those comments, Happy Jack caught the spilling body of Larry Saugus as the door came open. Holding the victim, he watched Clip tug Larry's dead fist from the inner handle on which it had a determined grip. That handle wouldn't yield when Clip tried it, nor would the window come down. Going around to the other side of the car, Clip wrenched open the far door and found the same problems of a locked inside handle and a frozen window.

Meanwhile Happy Jack wasn't idle. Still propping the dead man, he went through the latter's pockets in professional style, coming out with contents that he transferred to his own. His final move was doubly efficient; giving the body an upward twist, he balanced it long enough to search the final pockets, then let it flop to Clip's side of the car. With a swing of his hand, Happy Jack stabbed a button that was projecting from the dashboard to stop a whirr that was coming from underneath.

The whirr didn't stop.

"Bum heater," commented Happy Jack. "Saugus was just too dumb to think about it. No more mono coming through now that the motor is stopped. It got him quick though, before it was supposed to."

Clip nodded in matter-of-fact acceptance of Happy Jack's professional knowledge of the odd quirks of cars.

"Fix those handles," ordered Happy Jack. "Get the windows down and put the hush on the heater. I'll be over in the office."

In roundabout style Happy Jack sauntered through the gathering dusk, passing the entrance of the lot just to make sure that no customers were coming his way. Finishing his detour, he entered the office and began to examine the residue of Larry's pockets.

Outside of a few bills that Happy Jack added to his own healthy roll, the only thing of interest was a card that bore the title:

CROSS-COUNTRY DELIVERY ASSOCIATION

The card bore the statement that the bearer, name left blank, was an authorized driver of the association and entitled to all privileges upon duplication of the signature to be affixed on the card. There was a serial number stamped in the corner and it read "028."

About to drop the card into the desk drawer, Happy Jack paused as a car wheeled up in front of the office. Thinking that Clip had completed a rapid repair job, Happy Jack stepped out to meet him, still holding the card in hand.

An instant later, Happy Jack was thrusting the card away and bringing out the roll of bills. This wasn't the coupe that had brought Larry Saugus; that car was still across the lot, with Clip working at the windows. This was a convertible roadster that had rolled into the lot, bringing Happy Jack a customer who for once wasn't wanted.

"Seven-fifty," announced Happy Jack, mistaking the car for a year later than it actually was. "Cash on the line, step right in here and get it."

Happy Jack could tell that the man in the car was staring from the driver's side, wondering what was going on across the lot. Smiley wanted to bring the fellow's attention his own way to end any curiosity regarding Clip Rowley. The offer of seven-fifty produced an electric effect, for a young man came bounding out the right side of the car with the astonished query:

"You said what?"

"Seven hundred and fifty dollars," repeated Happy Jack, brandishing the money toward the office door. "Step inside and we'll close the deal. Got the owner's card and the title?"

"I sure have." The man laid them on the desk. "What's more, I'm glad to meet somebody who means it when he says he pays top prices. The best offer I'd gotten so far was five hundred and thirty-five."

Happy Jack was looking at the owner's card. It bore the name Rodney Ballard, which also appeared on the driver's license which the young man unnecessarily tendered. The driver's card gave specifications of age twenty-two, height six feet, eyes blue, hair brown, and complexion light. Happy Jack checked these as he

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looked up at his customer and handed back the driver's card.

"Of course none of those other fellows looked at the car," continued Ballard. "I did it all by phone. I called one dealer, than another--next I was getting calls from them, some from dealers I'd never heard of, upping the price five and ten dollars--"

"I know," interrupted Happy Jack. "That's the way those fly-by-nights work. They mooch into everybody else's business. But me, I'm established. I buy and sell on a big scale, more than all those small-fry put together."

Rod Ballard nodded. Then:

"You wouldn't have a job here on the lot would you?" he asked. "Like helping the repair man who sent me over here?"

Happy Jack's broad smile didn't change, but his eyes sharpened as their lids closed into slits. He wasn't pleased to learn that this stranger had stopped to talk to Clip Rowley, beside the car containing Larry Saugus. The fact that Rod Ballard looked honest was that much more against him. Happy Jack didn't like people who were too honest.

"You'd be wasting time here," said Happy Jack, smoothly. "There's lots of good jobs outside of New York, the further out the better; California, for instance."

"So I've heard," returned Rod, "but I might spend half my money finding one."

"Not with this you won't." Happy Jack brought out the card that had once belonged to Larry Saugus and with it twenty-five dollars. "Here's a free ticket clear to California covering expenses on the way. This cash is payment for taking a driver's job. The caravan starts from over in Jersey tonight."

"You mean I can drive a used car West?"

"That's right. Take the one you just sold me. I'll phone ahead and fix the details. Here"--Happy Jack beckoned to the desk--"sign this receipt while I mark the road map. You can deliver the papers when you join up."

Five minutes later, Happy Jack was waving Rod Ballard through a one-way lane marked "Exit." As soon as the roadster was out of sight, Happy Jack changed his gesture to a beckon. The blue coupe rolled up beside him with Clip Rowley behind the wheel. Slumped low against Clip's shoulder was the inert form of Larry Saugus.

"How much did that guy see?" snapped Happy Jack. "Enough to count?"

Clip shook his head.

"He must have talked to Saugus though," decided Happy Jack. "He said he'd been trying to sell his car by telephone which was a pretty heavy hint." The narrowed eyes gave an ugly glare at Larry's body. "One thing I didn't expect was to have Saugus drive in here when he was supposed to be on his way to Jersey."

"What should I do?" queried Clip. "Take him over there?"

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"Not a chance," returned Happy Jack. "This calls for something different. You go East, over by the Queensboro Bridge."

"To Long Island?"

"I said over by the bridge, not across it. Remember that dead end street where you picked me up last Thursday night?"

Clip nodded.

"Take it," ordered Happy Jack, "and keep right on going. Leave those windows down and make sure the door don't stick. Better have it open before you pull that throttle button."

The blue coupe slid out through the exit. Turning on his heel, Happy Jack Smiley strode back across the buying lot. By the time he reached the entrance, his big fist was holding the even larger roll of bills from which he was ready to peel the exact amount of any appraisal.

Under the illuminated banner that bore his own jolly portrait, Happy Jack was again the man who guaranteed results to everyone who drove a used car into his buying lot.

In a way, his rule applied to Larry Saugus!

II.

STANDING beside the broad French window, Lamont Cranston looked across the tiny garden toward the darkening waters of the tide-swept East River. This scene was always best at dusk, when the glittering lights of the Queensboro Bridge threw their twinkling reflection into a sunset-tinted sheen. It would have taken a dozen rapid-fire artists to capture the changing moods of this iridescent panorama viewed from Marldon's living room. Like many visitors before him, Cranston seemed enraptured with the sight, utterly intent upon watching it until night laid its blotting pall upon the vista.

Actually, Cranston was playing a polite bluff.

What interested him far more than the outdoor transformation was the conversation taking place in the luxurious living room behind him, where Cranston's friend, Police Commissioner Weston, was talking business with Thomas P. Marldon.

In his capacity as police commissioner, Ralph Weston held to one ironclad rule. That rule was to watch for symptoms of crime and be prepared to stop it. As Weston argued, very correctly, crime had trends. Crooks were opportunists who would align with any profitable game. It was the business of the law to be ahead of crime's next move.

These sentiments were merely echoes of suggestions that Cranston had given Weston. For it was Cranston's business to stop crime too. He did it by adopting another personality called The Shadow, and as such he frequently invoked the aid of the law. But The Shadow often moved so far ahead that the law had trouble keeping up with him. Hence, in private life, as Lamont Cranston, he was always prodding his friend Weston into new fields where crime might strike.

Arranging this interview between Weston and Marldon had not been at all difficult. The idea had originated with Marldon, so Cranston had merely kept reminding the commissioner about it. This meeting, therefore,

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passed as Marldon's own opportunity to inform the law of certain matters which demanded prompt attention.

In the darkening panes of the French window, Cranston could see Marldon's stout but rugged face, with the troubled look that was worried enough to have produced the gray streaks in the man's close-clipped hair. In the lavish surroundings of this riverside residence, Marldon should have been enjoying ease, but he wasn't.

"My business problems are my own, commissioner," Marldon was saying in a firm, decisive tone. "In the buying and selling of used cars I have followed a strict standard, as these other men can testify."

In the room's reflection Cranston could see the commissioner nod as Marldon gestured toward half a dozen other men who sat in the background. All were dealers of Marldon's ilk who were more than glad to attend this conference.

"Our method is to find the markets," emphasized Marldon. "Individually we learn that cars are needed in Texas, California or Oregon; we then proceed to offer prices for used cars that will offer us a reasonable profit allowing for the expense of delivery."

"A sensible procedure," commented Weston in his brick style, "providing the supply can fill the demand."

"It can't," declared Marldon, "but that proved only a preliminary problem. We found that the delivery of cars was difficult. Sometimes they never reached their destination; when they did, they were often in bad shape from rapid driving. So to maintain a standard and fulfill our promises we formed the Cross-Country Delivery Association."

"I have heard about it," nodded Weston. "You send the cars in caravans from an assembly yard in New Jersey, don't you?"

"Yes. They are handled by authorized drivers who work in shifts. The cars are never driven more than thirty miles an hour, they follow routes where traffic is light, and they are inspected at designated places along the way. We have men who check the cars and arrange the accommodations for the drivers who are free to join up and leave as they please, since their jobs are not steady."

"An excellent system," approved Weston, "but this business comes outside my jurisdiction."

"Not quite," returned Marldon. He rose from his leather arm-chair and stepped to a table where he paused to fill his pipe from a large glass humidor. "These caravans are composed chiefly of cars bought in New York. Since we support and maintain the cross-country driving service"—he made a sweeping gesture to include his fellow dealers—"we need cars to complete our caravans. Unfortunately we are not getting them."

"Because the supply is short—"

"No." Marldon interrupted Weston emphatically. "Because the fly-by-nights are moving in ahead of us, buying up cars by trick bidding through different names, or offers of prompt cash. They buy by telephone, appraise by guesswork, and even offer driving jobs in our caravans as part of the purchase price."

Cranston turned from the window. Darkness had settled so there was no reason to keep watching the outdoor view. Marldon was handing a sheaf of papers to Weston, hence no one noticed Cranston when he casually took a chair and joined the group.

"Our present caravans are going to California," explained Marldon. "To get them started we accept any cars that come along. It costs fifty dollars to cover a driver's pay and expenses and that cost is charged at the other

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end. Is that plain?" Weston nodded that it was.

"One of us makes an offer for a car"—again Marldon gestured to his companions—"through an appraiser who goes to examine the car. The fly-by-night gets the seller on the phone, hears of our fair offer, and raises it anywhere to fifty dollars at the same time talking up the wonderful opportunity of a trip to California. He hands the man an application blank to become an associated driver, saying it is worth twenty-five dollars in expense money. If he pays cash besides, he collects it back from us, because he has listed twenty-five dollars as a driver's fee, paid in advance."

Cranston watched Weston twist the tips of his pointed mustache. Obviously the commissioner was groping for some method to curb this gyp racket, but finding trouble in the process. At last Weston shook his head.

"Your caravans need cars," summed Weston, "and they need drivers. In your anxiety to obtain both, you have laid yourselves wide open. The only solution is to limit the caravans to cars that you personally purchase."

"We can't," said Marldon ruefully. "because we would then be operating a monopoly in interstate trade. We had hoped that you could clamp down on the buyer's racket, commissioner."

"That would be impossible, Mr. Marldon. There is nothing the law could do at present—"

"Except this"—Marldon thrust a newspaper into Weston's hand and pointed to a page of ads for used cars. Weston noted that certain advertisements were marked with a blue pencil, as Marldon added: "You can investigate these so-called dealers who are ruining a legitimate business; that is, if you can catch up with them at any of their various addresses."

"But it will do no good at present."

"I'm not speaking in terms of the present. I'm asking you to investigate their past. From what we have learned, some of these newcomers are not only ex-racketeers; certain of them have criminal records. In that case, they may be working toward some future design—"

It was enough. Weston snatched the newspaper as though he had acquired a rare prize. Cranston could almost hear the ticking of the commissioner's clockwork brain. Started on a trail like this, Weston would never stop until he raised a big alarm in the form of a general round-up. As for Marldon, he was quite amazed at the sudden result.

The commissioner was picturing those names in front page headlines instead of want ads, with the newspapers announcing new activities on the part of known criminals. What Weston wanted was to beat the news-hawks to such an exposure and add another exploit to his credit in the way of stopping crime before it began. But as he glanced down the columns, Weston couldn't find any leading names.

All the fly-by-night ads were listed under such titles as "Apex," "Quick Deal," "X Y Z," and similar names, usually with the word "Service" or "Company" as an addition. It wasn't until his eye reached the final column that Weston saw anything involving personality. There he was attracted by the picture of a fat, beaming face accompanied by the name Happy Jack. The ad was marked with a blue pencil.

"I never saw this fellow," commented Weston. "What do you know about him?"

"Happy Jack Smiley," identified Marldon. "He's only on the doubtful list. I would class him as a sharper rather than a criminal."

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"How does he operate?"

"On a quick cash basis, as his ad states. I can't say that he actually misrepresents."

"Then why is his name marked?"

"Because of his connections. Time and again our appraisers have made appointments only to find that the cars have gone to Happy Jack."

"You mean these others send prospects to Happy Jack when their telephone deals fall through?"

Marldon's nod was corroborated by his associates. All were emphatic and prompt in stating that Happy Jack rated as the lone appraiser in the wild-cat field. That satisfied Weston, since it marked Happy Jack as the logical lead to further information. Thrusting the newspaper in his pocket, Weston shook hands all around and suggested that he and Cranston get their hats and coats.

Weston's departure was a signal for a general exodus. Stopping in the hallway the group were getting their hats and coats, when Weston suddenly raised his hand for silence.

At the open front door, Marldon stood riveted at Weston's signal, for Marldon too could hear the distant sound.

It was the weird trill of a police siren, somewhere in this area, a foreboding omen to all residents of Beekman Hill, a neighborhood where murder had flourished much too often.

As they listened, the others heard the sign, for it was approaching the dead end street that led past Marldon's brownstone house!

Only the most practiced ear could have determined that fact at the outset. Cranston was thus gifted, for within a dozen seconds he had scrawled a note with a handy fountain pen. Folding the note and sealing it in an envelope, almost in a single move, Cranston thrust the message in the commissioner's overcoat pocket.

Turning about, Cranston reached for his own hat and coat. They were right at the door of the now vacant living room. Oddly, instead of taking the garments, Cranston seemed to peel them. That was, he drew a hat from within a hat while he seemingly whipped the lining from the overcoat.

A roar of motors came suddenly from the side street along with the double howl of converging sirens. Commissioner Weston sprang out through the door and others teemed after him, some forgetting their coats, carrying Marldon along with them. But Lamont Cranston wasn't part of that human outpour.

Lamont Cranston was simply gone and the only answer to his evanishment was something that no one saw: the silent closing of the large French window that offered a view of the river from the far end of Marldon's living room!

III.

THE car that spurted across First Avenue was literally a blue streak.

That was all that Weston, Marldon or anyone else could see of it. Unquestionably the car had a driver or it wouldn't have gone straight, but it was plain that he couldn't make his brakes serve him as well as the steering

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wheel.

Hitting close to sixty and with a sloping dead end just ahead, the wild driver had only two alternatives: a crash or the river.

He took the river.

True, he was using the brakes, for their shriek drowned the wail of the police car sirens that approached the corner. Perhaps the brakes cut the blue car's speed by half, but they didn't change the result. There was a splintering clatter as the fugitive car ripped a frail wooden barrier that temporarily blocked the dead end; then, after what seemed a long succession of moments, there came the sound of a tremendous splash.

Jabbing their own cars to a halt, the patrolmen stopped half way down the dead end street and jumped out to be joined immediately by Commissioner Weston, who arrived on the run, giving his arm an officious sweep to identify Marldon and other followers as friends.

It had all happened too fast for anyone to follow it. Only a man who arrived ahead could have witnessed all that occurred when the coupe took its long, wild plunge.

There was such a man, a figure cloaked in black. Only a minute before he had been Lamont Cranston, now he was The Shadow, strange creature of the night. He might better have been defined as a part of night itself, so singularly did his cloak and slouch hat, both jet black, blend with the darkness that had sullenly settled over the East River.

What The Shadow had seen, few eyes could have detected. Indeed, he could hardly claim that he had seen it; rather he had sensed what happened when the car splintered the temporary rail. Then and there The Shadow had caught the impression of a figure flying askew from the leaping car and landing on the very edge of the embankment.

This happened on the far side of the car, but the somersaulting vehicle didn't wait to obscure the whole occurrence. Moreover, The Shadow caught a flapping motion of the far door before the coupe hit the water. As a result, The Shadow, stooping low, was already making his way past the gap that the car had clouded in the wooden barrier.

Searchlights suddenly geared themselves to that open space. The glare from the police cars actually picked out The Shadow, but only for an instant. His form faded like a patch of river mist and the police were staring at an open stretch of water which roughly marked the spot where the blue car had disappeared.

It was Commissioner Weston who suggested some attempt at rescue.

Marldon had an old rowboat in his cellar, so three patrolmen hurried there to bring it out while the fourth recounted how the chase had begun.

"It was this way, commissioner," said the cop. "The coupe was coming across town when a sedan picks up after it. The one guy beats it and the other tails him. That's where we come in and the one car goes out."

"Which car?"

"The sedan. It ducks off and we signal for another patrol to follow it, only I guess he loses it, because he shows up again."

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"Who showed up again?"

"The other patrol car. Meanwhile, we're tailing the coupe and the fellow in it don't like the idea, because he tries to give us the shake and quick. He headed this way and you saw what happened to him, commissioner."

Weston nodded. Stalking about impatiently, he waited for the boat to be brought from Marldon's cellar. In the course of his stalk, Weston paused to eye a car that was nosing past the entrance to the dead end street. He thought for a moment that it was another patrol car; then voices from Marldon's garden captured the commissioner's attention.

The boat was out and the patrolmen were launching it. One man was going into Marldon's to call headquarters and summon a police boat. Glumly, Weston was cataloging the whole endeavor as useless. By this time the driver of the sunken coupe must certainly be drowned.

The Shadow didn't share that opinion.

All this while, The Shadow was doing some stalking on his own, not of Weston's circular variety that led nowhere, but a direct sort along an established trail. The Shadow had confirmed his impression of a flying figure that had flung itself from the whirling coupe.

North of Marldon's street, a man was picking his way along the embankment, choosing narrow stretches of paving that led beside the houses, working from street to street and looking for a convenient alley. The man happened to be Clip Rowley, though it was impossible to identify him in the dark.

The trail was due for an abrupt ending. The reason was the abutment of the big bridge that spanned the river not far above Marldon's. Either the man ahead would have to dodge back toward the avenue, or change his course from the horizontal to the vertical.

Clip decided to try it the hard way.

The reason for his choice was the sudden gleam of searchlights down the final dead end street. Apparently a search was starting through the neighborhood on the assumption that a lurker such as Clip would be found there. Fading back into darkness on his own side of the street, The Shadow saw Clip dive into an opposite alley just as a probing searchlight added its gleam to the head-lamps. Spotting nothing, the occupants of the car backed it out to the avenue.

Instantly The Shadow sped across to the alley, made a quick trip through and reached the abutment of the bridge. There he heard the clang of feet upon an iron ladder that served as a fire escape for an old building close against the bridge. Silently The Shadow followed to the roof, where, looking upward, he saw the dim outline of a stocky climber against the twinkle of the bridge lights.

The man The Shadow wanted, the human key to the riddle of the river-seeking car, was scaling the abutment itself, using the rough stones of its corner as an improvised ladder. It was up to The Shadow to follow.

It was a chase in slow motion, with the odds entirely favoring The Shadow. If Clip had looked down when he paused, he could not have seen the cloaked figure in the darkness below him. The Shadow was banking on that fact and could afford to continue the climb until he gained the complete advantage that he wanted. That time came when Clip reached the actual superstructure of the bridge.

Then, like a thing materialized from nowhere, a hand plucked Clip's foot. Along with that phantom clutch came a sinister voice which Clip took for a ghostly voice of doom. It seemed impossible that anyone could

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have trailed him here, other than the ghost of Larry Saugus, whose body Clip had consigned to the river. Teeth chattering, eyes showing white in the darkness, Clip strove madly to break loose, nearly losing his grip on the ironwork in the process.

Tired from his climb, terrified by its conclusion, Clip Rowley would have capitulated and confessed all, if something hadn't broken the strain.

Something did.

From a street below the bridge, a shaft of light raced up the abutment, probed along the bridge and spotted the two figures clinging beneath. At least it spotted something human, seemingly a half-cloaked shape, for The Shadow at that moment obscured Clip to some degree. Hardly had the light focussed itself before guns began to jab along its path.

The men in the car were using the searchlight's narrow circle as a bull's-eye!

Other shots joined from the river, where the cops in the row-boat had located the sunken car. A shrill blast from down water announced the arrival of a police boat and signified that the shots had been heard. Bullets were clanging the ironwork of the bridge, too close to comfort Clip's strained nerves.

Madly, the hunted man kicked at The Shadow, just as the cloaked avenger was lifting higher. A bullet whistled past The Shadow's face as he reeled backward. Clip, his terror raised to an uncontrollable frenzy, let drive with his other foot. That mad kick met The Shadow's shoulder and Clip, suddenly free, took a diving crawl among the bridge struts.

The Shadow's dive was different.

Plain in the light, the cloaked figure was the only target, and the marksmen below were finding the range. The twist that The Shadow gave became a jolt, the sort that the impact of leaden slugs would produce. Lifting upward, the cloaked target went rigid and seemed to hang in space until with a backward topple it fell away from the flay of bullets.

Gone before the light could follow, The Shadow was plunging a hundred feet to the same river that had already claimed a dead man!

The searchlight flicked off. Profiting from The Shadow's misfortune, Clip Rowley had safely crawled from sight. Down below, the police boat was heading for the spot where a plunging form had struck the river. Down by Marldon's garden, Commissioner Weston was shouting half a dozen orders at once, most of them at the officers in the row-boat who had joined in the gunfire that someone else had started.

Meanwhile a car was swinging out into the avenue, the same car that Weston had observed earlier but had given too little thought. The commissioner was right on one point; it wasn't a patrol car. It happened to be a rakish sedan answering the description of the car that had originally trailed the blue coupe that Clip had driven from Happy Jack's premises.

That car was bound to other parts along with its quota of mystery marksmen who had found The Shadow a better target than Clip Rowley!

IV.

COMMISSIONER WESTON was feeling anything but pleasant when he entered the Cobalt Club an hour later. He had left matters much as they were along the waterfront, with one police boat working to raise a sunken car and another hunting for a body that had been shot down from the bridge.

These matters had badly disturbed the commissioner's routine, which was to form plans for dealing with crooks engaged in the used car racket. When Weston planned such a campaign he did it thoroughly and left things like river deaths to his subordinates.

What particularly annoyed Weston was the forgetfulness of his friend Cranston. Not seeing Cranston around after the excitement near Marldon's, Weston took it for granted that his friend had come to the club ahead of him. They were to dine together, but evidently Cranston hadn't remembered it, for he wasn't in the foyer. Nor had anyone seen him, for a young man named Harry Vincent had been waiting for Cranston at least an hour.

Being acquainted with Vincent, Weston told him the circumstances in brief. Vincent's response was a query:

"Didn't Mr. Cranston give you a message for me?"

Shaking his head, Weston reached in his pockets and brought out an envelope addressed to Harry Vincent. Somewhat amazed at his own forgetfulness, Weston handed it over.

"Mr. Cranston said he might not get here," said Harry, casually. "He told me that if he didn't, you would have a message for me. Perhaps he mentioned that he wouldn't be able to have dinner with you, commissioner."

"Perhaps he did," admitted Weston. "Yes, he might have, while we were standing there at Marldon's door, listening to those sirens. A bit stupid of me, all this."

It wasn't so stupid, as Harry learned when he was riding in a cab from the Cobalt Club. The envelope was addressed in dark ink, but its message was a lighter blue from a special fluid that The Shadow used. Not only was it coded, but the writing obliterated itself as Harry read it. Picking up a newspaper from the seat beside him, Harry turned to the page of ads for used cars.

Tapping his finger from one ad to another, in accordance with notations in The Shadow's brief message, Harry caught the drift at once. Four ads, though differently worded, bore similarities that were fairly obvious. Evidently The Shadow had checked them before accompanying Weston to Marldon's. There, as Cranston, The Shadow had simply sought to corroborate certain facts regarding fly-by-night dealers.

This was the sort of business that could involve various trails. That was why The Shadow had posted Harry Vincent to be ready if needed. What Harry didn't know was that he was taking up the only trail; that his chief had accepted another and more immediate mission with unfortunate consequences that Weston hadn't mentioned. In his blunt style, the commissioner had merely told Harry about a car plunging into the river, without adding details of some foolish shooting at an imaginary person on the bridge.

Leaning to the front window, Harry gave the cabby a destination. Soon the cab pulled up at a drug store in a rather obscure neighborhood. There Harry made a phone call to Burbank, The Shadow's contact man, asking him for details concerning four telephone numbers that weren't listed in the directory. Getting them, Harry came out to the cab, where the driver, an eager-faced man, promptly queried:

"What's cooking?"

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"Plenty," replied Harry. "Listen, Shrevvy, I'm going to the Triton Building, four blocks from here. I want you to follow and keep cruising. Give the horn if anything happens."

Shrevvy nodded and Harry set out on foot. He found the Triton Building to be an old dilapidated affair with an elevator that wasn't running. That didn't matter, since Harry was only going to the second floor.

Walking up, he stopped at a door that bore no number. It was locked, but Harry soon opened it with one of the special keys that The Shadow had taught him how to use.

Inside, Harry found an office containing exactly what he expected. The Triton Building was perfectly located for a gyp who had mooched into the used car field, because its neighborhood was one where telephone exchanges overlapped.

On a long shelf, Harry counted four telephones. All had different numbers and they corresponded with listings in the newspaper ads. To keep them straight, the man who used them had tagged them with labels.

One represented the X Y Z Service; another was the Quick Deal Auto Exchange; a third was marked Buyer's Bureau; while the fourth was tagged Sure Sale Service.

The phone numbers varying as they did, prospective customers wouldn't class these outfits as in the same locality, let alone the single office. The set-up explained why and how a car seller could get immediate inquiries from another company after negotiating with one. Harry's next and more important problem was to learn who ran this four-way project.

There was a closed door to an inner office, but before opening it, Harry took care to turn out the light in the room where he was. With one hand he adjusted a special ear-plug that would enable him to hear Shrevvy's high-pitched horn, while with the other, he opened the inner door.

Light coming through the doorway stopped Harry before he had widened the gap three inches. There he held the door, confident that his arrival wasn't noticed by the man inside. That man was busy going through desk drawers, weeding out papers that he wanted. He was a man that Harry had never met, but knew from his picture. Harry had seen the picture very recently, while looking through the newspaper ads. The face behind the desk belonged to Happy Jack Smiley.

Away from his buying lot, Happy Jack didn't appear to be his jovial self. When his gold teeth glittered, the display was the result of a snarl. Apparently Happy Jack was finding his present task annoying, and the curious part of it was that he didn't keep the particular papers that he wanted. Instead, he was shoving them into a metal waste-basket that stood beside the desk.

On the desk lay a bunch of keys which indicated that Happy Jack had entered the office in legitimate fashion. This in turn could mean that he was the actual proprietor of the four concerns represented by the telephones in the outer office, and that he was handling them as an illegitimate sideline to the less doubtful business which bore his name. Whatever the merits or demerits of the case, Harry's own presence here was on a questionable basis, so he decided to remain strictly in the offing until Happy Jack completed his manoeuvres.

Harry eased the door shut.

There was a corner past the shelf that offered a good place to wait until Happy Jack came through the outer office, which he would logically do without turning on the light. Groping to that corner, Harry waited, counting off the minutes. Five of them went by; then it came, the peculiar high-pitch of Shrevvy's special horn. It meant that someone had entered the building, someone whose arrival might prove detrimental to

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Harry's welfare.

Waiting for Happy Jack was out. It was better to meet him with a surprise attack. Drawing an automatic, Harry yanked the door open and sprang into the inner office, only to find it empty. Happy Jack was gone, and in leaving he had altered the entire scene. No longer was the room illuminated by the desk lamp; it was aglow with flame.

The fire was coming from the waste basket that now rested on top of the desk. It formed a torch half way to the ceiling. Since the basket was metal, this wasn't intended as an incendiary job; it was simply Happy Jack's way of destroying papers that he didn't want; as for his departure, that too was explained by a side door that Harry hadn't noticed before. This pair of offices had two entrances, one around the corner from the other.

To overtake Happy Jack was Harry's immediate impulse. Reaching the door at the side of the room, he whipped it open without thought of consequences. Harry was just in time to admit two men who surged in from the hallway with guns as big as his, though fortunately they weren't expecting Harry any more than he expected them.

A quick reverse took Harry back across the room. His start was sufficient to carry him through the outer office and out the other way, so far as his two attackers were concerned. But Harry wasn't expecting the other pair who came shoving through the very door that he wanted as an exit. With the instinct of a trapped creature, Harry made another turnabout and boxed himself in a deep corner of the inner office with all four foe-men crowding him.

There wasn't time for Harry to aim his gun and it was fortunate he didn't, considering that he was so outnumbered. Since he didn't aim, the four men unanimously decided to slug him into submission rather than disturb the neighborhood with gunfire. They landed so hard and heavy that their own weapons blocked each other as they slugged at Harry's warding arms. Sagging under the blows that did get through, Harry felt his senses reel.

The room was whirling fancifully, the effect intensified by the wavering light from the waste-basket's flames when there came a crash that to Harry marked the end of his conscious struggle. Such a sound could be imaginary, the result of a hard smash on the head, but in this case it was very real.

The crash came from the window. Harry's attackers heard it and turned from their intended victim. Clustered around Harry's slumped form, they saw blackness pour through the shattered window like a cloud of living smoke. It was still traveling fast when it solidified beyond the desk, but by then every gun was swinging toward the cloaked figure which the blackness had become. Despite the mocking laugh that the wheeling form delivered, the four gunners had the edge.

The Shadow, amazingly returned from the river into which they had dispatched him, was again confronted by the crew from the mystery sedan, due to receive at close range the bullets that he had somehow escaped before. Despite his sensational arrival, he was up against the proposition of beating four guns faster than he could pull a trigger to stop them.

How The Shadow handled spots like this was something to remember. In one swift twist, he not only diverted the aiming guns but left his opponents without a visible target. The Shadow used a better weapon than an automatic. He simply hooked the blazing waste-basket with a sweeping hand and let it fly right into the coffin corner.

Dodging the flaming missile, the four men fired high and wide. Scattering as the blazing papers strewed among them, they took the hint of The Shadow's repeated laugh and drove tandem for the doorways. They

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fired madly as they went, but they couldn't see The Shadow, now that the glow was gone from the center of the room. Rather than reveal himself by responding stabs, The Shadow let them go.

The Shadow was thinking in terms of Harry, who was slumped in the corner among the burning papers. Clearing the desk, The Shadow reached Harry's corner and wheeled just long enough to make sure that the fleeing gunmen didn't change their minds and try a comeback. Such a notion was gone from their minds, as evidenced by the clattering footsteps that came from the stairway. Turning to the corner, The Shadow beat out the flames and lifted Harry across his shoulder.

Already a siren was shrilling outside. Police whistles trilled in answer, proving that Commissioner Weston must have sent a squad to make the rounds of the questionable advertisers checked on Marldon's list. If anything, this helped The Shadow, for he knew that the police would take up the trail of the four gunmen that he had just banished.

So The Shadow left by his own route, the window, carrying Harry to a low roof just outside. Leaning down from the edge, The Shadow blinked a flashlight into an alley below and Shrevvy's cab coasted up. Taking Harry by the arms, The Shadow eased him down through the cab's open top; then dropped in after him.

The cab waited while sirens trailed into the distance. By then, whistles were blowing in the offices on the second floor indicating that the remaining police were finding the place where trouble had begun. The Shadow spoke and the cab started smoothly from the alley and turned into the street. Its lack of hurry gave the cab the appearance of a vehicle that had simply pulled to the curb and waited until the excitement was over.

Two blocks away, Shrevvy increased the speed, since the course now lay clear.

V.

HARRY VINCENT had a headache but it wasn't so bad, now that he understood what caused it. Harry had been really blotto when The Shadow rescued him, and to connect ideas at noon the next day was more than he could individually accomplish.

However Lamont Cranston was sitting beside the bed in Harry's hotel room, piecing the final facts for him. That was enough to awaken Harry's earlier recollection. He told how Happy Jack had left him with a barren office which had immediately become the stamping ground for four gun-toting hoodlums with Harry on the receiving end of the stamping.

All this interested Cranston, particularly when Harry mentioned Happy Jack. Casually Cranston inquired:

"Do you know who operated that four-way office?"

"Happy Jack, I suppose," Harry replied. "Who else could have?"

"A man named Larry Saugus," returned Cranston, "whose body was fished out of the East River in a blue coupe."

"You mean the car the commissioner told me about? The one that took the dive off the dead end near Marldon's?"

"The same. Larry Saugus used to be in the numbers racket. He worked for a big-time operator named Leo

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Trennick, better known as Big Leo."

That name struck home to Harry.

"Big Leo Trennick," he repeated. "Why he's the fellow who took over that night club in Connecticut, the one that burned up with about half its customers and some of the management, including Big Leo himself!"

"Exactly. It would have been classed as an insurance fire if Big Leo hadn't gone up with it. As it was, the job was laid to some of Leo's henchmen who didn't like it because he gave up the numbers game."

Harry remembered those details along with the fact that Big Leo Trennick had been dodging a few indictments at the time his unruly mob had taken care of him.

"Saugus was one of Big Leo's collectors," continued Cranston. "His past was one reason why he covered his move into the car buying racket. The police didn't know he was in it until they identified his body last night and found enough evidence at the office to prove that it was his."

"How does it add up from there?"

"Very nicely, so far as the police have gone. Saugus must have had some money in order to start buying cars. That could have been cash that he held out from Big Leo. So the old mob that used to strong-arm in the numbers game decided to collect what Big Leo hadn't paid them. They went after Larry Saugus when they located him."

It sounded very logical to Harry, until Cranston dismissed the police theory with a slight but depreciating smile.

"A big sedan chased Larry's coupe into the river," declared Cranston, "and the same car—or one very much like it—raced away from the Triton Building later. That makes it look as though the mob got rid of Larry Saugus and then went to his office to see what they could find there. But the police don't know that Saugus happened to be dead—or at least helpless—when his car was being pursued."

"You mean someone else was driving it?"

"I saw the man who jumped out and I trailed him up the bridge. The crew in the sedan were looking for somebody and they spotted us both with a searchlight. When they started shooting without blowing any whistles, I knew they weren't police. So I didn't stay."

Cranston smiled indulgently as he recalled his experience. Noting Harry's interest, he added the essential details.

"I staged the dead pigeon," explained Cranston. "It's a good trick to remember for a spot like that. You stiffen and twist right into a dive. Don't worry about the bullets because there's a chance of falling right in front of one if you hurry it. That's a risk you can't avoid, and you make out better with the slow-motion because they think they've clipped you and they slacken fire without realizing it."

"Then you're gone and they think they finished you. What delayed me last night was the police boat. I had to keep under the embankment while it was looking for me, and it took longer than I thought it would."

Harry rubbed his bandaged head. The Shadow's enforced delay had contributed to the final clouts that had ended Harry's resistance; all of which made Harry the more anxious to learn how soon The Shadow hoped to

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locate the missing mob.

"Somebody got rid of Larry Saugus," analyzed Cranston. "That done, somebody had to get rid of the body. It means tracing back to learn where the car came from and who sent it where it went. And that means--"

"Happy Jack Smiley," put in Harry, savagely. "Every time my headache gets worse I see that big fat face of his. He used that crew to make sure that Larry's car was sunk and when they were covering for the man who sunk it, they spotted you. Maybe it was Happy Jack who climbed the bridge."

Cranston shook his head. The man he had followed was far too agile for Happy Jack, whose fatness wasn't confined to his face.

"Well anyway," insisted Harry, "that same crew covered for Happy Jack at the office. He was in and out, leaving me in the middle. Happy Jack is foxier than I guessed. He must have spotted the way the door moved when I took that peek into the inside office."

"We can leave Happy Jack to the police," decided Cranston. "I have already suggested an autopsy on the body of Larry Saugus and the commissioner liked the idea. The police are trying to trace the former owner of the blue coupe. Meanwhile Happy Jack can't make a move. If he quits his profitable business he will bring suspicion on himself."

With that, Cranston handed Harry a little batch of newspaper clippings. They weren't ads for used cars as Harry expected; they were news items culled from various newspapers, all out-of-town journals.

"Those may be a more important lead," remarked Cranston. "They may concern the four men who used to work for Big Leo. The police haven't traced them since they escaped last night. In fact, by a very interesting coincidence, the police haven't found anyone who ever did work for Big Leo--except Larry Saugus."

Harry remembered some of the clippings. They were all recent stories and they covered various robberies, small and large, that had taken place in different states. Reported briefly in the New York papers these crimes had not loomed large, when compared with world news, but the local accounts raised them to their proper stature.

Bank robberies, highjacking of trucks, sudden disappearances of payrolls, were among the numerous crimes in Cranston's catalog of clippings and through all ran one significant note, the remarkable way in which the criminals had disappeared after each quick and sudden job.

"It's the way that crew worked last night!" expressed Harry. "Here, there and gone again, with plenty of shooting when needed. This has the makings of a nationwide crime wave!"

"Or a return to the age of outlaws," added Cranston. "But your term 'nation-wide' is appropriate. Wide and at the same time narrow."

Harry didn't understand until Cranston spread a map on the bed. The towns where crime had struck were marked with a red pencil and Harry saw that they studded the country like the ornaments of a belt. They formed almost a straight line east and west.

Above and below were two highway routes, marked with a blue pencil. Pointing to them, Harry inquired what they were.

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"The routes followed by the used car caravans," explained Cranston. "I didn't know about them until last night. I dropped around at Marldon's this morning to get my hat and coat, which I had forgotten in my hurry. We talked about the cross-country delivery service and he told me how it operated. Marldon marked the map with the blue lines and I added the red dots afterward."

"So the crooks are using those caravans to go places," said Harry, grimly. "Do you think they all belong to the mob that used to strong-arm for Big Leo?"

"Very probably. There were enough of them."

"Then those four from last night have joined the rest. But how are they getting away with it?"

"Quite simply." Cranston unfolded a sheet of paper and handed it to Harry. "They use these application blanks to become drivers in the caravans. All you need for a reference is an operator's license, because drivers are badly needed."

"But it's risky letting anyone drive those cars—"

"Not while they travel in caravans. That is the basis of the whole plan. The cars stay in a line and are inspected at regular stops. Nobody worries about the drivers; they come and go as they please."

Harry saw the significance of Cranston's final sentence.

"Trust Happy Jack to see the loophole," declared Harry. "He's been playing Marldon for a sucker all along and this is the pay-off. Taking over the mob that belonged to Big Leo was bad enough, but to move them in as cross-country drivers with a string of crimes laid out for them—"

Harry couldn't find words to complete his tirade. He simply shook his head and handed the application blank to Cranston, who promptly returned it.

"Keep it," suggested Cranston, "and fill it out."

"Fill it out?" echoed Harry. "Why?"

"So you can get your card," replied Cranston. "Then you can overtake one of the caravans"—he checked a town in West Virginia—"and join it right here. Maybe you can spot some of the crowd you met last night—unless I find them first."

Often, during his long period of service with The Shadow, Harry Vincent had heard the knock of opportunity, but never so loud as this. Harry could think of no better cure for his present headache than a future meeting with those sluggers of the night before, on terms that would spoil their coming schemes.

The grin that Harry gave Cranston was broader than the famous smile of Happy Jack.

VI.

DRIVING one unit in a caravan of a hundred cars was the greatest monotony that Rod Ballard had ever known. Rod had hoped that the boredom of the New Jersey flats would be relieved by the slopes of the Pennsylvania mountains, but it wasn't.

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On level ground you could practically go to sleep behind the wheel and the honk of the next car's horn would awaken you when you began to veer from the road. But with hills it meant being always alert, watching for road hazards that wouldn't be experienced in regular driving.

Every curve meant watchfulness, in case a car was stalled around the bend. That in turn required thought regarding the car next in back, because a quick stop wouldn't give it time to do the same. Keeping under thirty meant shifting into second on a lot of hills that would have been easy in high gear. Cars varied a lot when they shifted into second speed. On those occasions, the caravan became scraggly. There were times when Rod could see it stretching a mile ahead, humping over hills, dipping down into valleys, always with cars nosing impatiently at those ahead, except when some were spurting to regain lost slack.

Just as the sun was about to set over a mountain to the right, the cars began to swing from the road into a broad flat stretch of ground that looked like the front of an abandoned quarry. Parking in a space that a man indicated with a flag, Rod clambered from the car and stretched his legs. The man with the flag was wearing a cap that bore the word "Inspector" so Rod asked him:

"What's this all about?"

"Dinner," replied the inspector. "You'll find it waiting in the old road house around the next bend."

"Early for dinner, isn't it?"

"Not the way we operate. We want you fellows off the road while the sun is setting. That's the hazard period."

Rod nodded as though he should have remembered it. Driving at dusk was always difficult, due to the obstinacy of persons who failed to turn on their headlights. Then:

"How long do we have off?" Rod asked.

"Two hours," the inspector told him. "Then you drive until midnight." He gave Rod an appraising eye.

"You're a new driver, aren't you?"

"Just joined up."

"Let's see your card."

Rod showed the card that Happy Jack had given him. He had inserted his own name in the blank space, but he wondered what the inspector would think about a new driver having a card with a number as low as 028. Apparently that made no difference, for the inspector simply handed back the card and inquired pleasantly:

"How do you like the job?"

"It gives you the heebies," returned Rod. "It's like driving through the Holland Tunnel in a steady line."

"You'll find it better tonight," said the inspector. "We're keeping you new fellows at the back of the line, if you get what I mean."

Rod grinned.

"I get it."

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Rod only thought he got it. He considered it logical to put the new drivers at the rear because in case of accident there would be less cars in the pile-up. But that wasn't it at all. Rod had given the right answer without realizing why.

With darkness, the drivers left the old road-house and went back to their cars. They were discussing the route that lay ahead and they agreed it would be easier after the next thirty miles. Some of the drivers were veterans who understood the choice of routes.

This caravan had to travel considerably further than the three thousand and twenty miles that represented the shortest distance between New York and San Francisco. By the longer route it avoided the heavy truck traffic and decreased the accident hazard, but that wasn't all to be considered.

Keeping under thirty could prove wasteful on gasoline when hills were encountered. So in choosing secondary routes, the management had considered grades. More mountains lay ahead, and bigger ones, hence the caravan was to avoid them by a veer below the Maryland border and thence into West Virginia. This would give the benefit of roads through river valleys.

As the cars pulled out, the inspector tallied them. Rod noticed that he assigned some to new positions in the line after looking at the cards the drivers showed him. The inspector remembered Rod so that detail wasn't necessary in his case. With only about a dozen cars remaining, the inspector turned Rod's way and gave the go-wave with his flag.

Night driving proved different and therefore pleasant. This wasn't Rod's old roadster that he was driving; his car had been put in the repair shop back in New Jersey. Rod was at the wheel of a very fine sedan, worth at least two thousand dollars in its slightly used condition. Its headlights were perfect and fairly ate up the highway ahead. Rod only wished that he could let the car eat up the hills at sixty plus instead of thirty minus.

One hour more of those hills, then the valley roads. Rod was thinking of that schedule as he reached the top of a hump. Flashing across a stretch of lower ground, the powerful headlights showed a higher rise that curved to the left to avoid a cliff at the right. Perched at the bend was a big signboard advertising a popular cigar. Rod couldn't read it at this distance, but he recognized it by its pattern.

Dipping down into the stretch between, Rod could see the tail-lights of two cars ahead. An odd thing happened with the first; as it climbed the slope, it took a swerve to the right instead of the left. Then, as his headlights lifted at a timely instant, Rod saw something even more amazing.

An oblong gap was yawning to receive the swerving car. Rod saw it just in time to learn the cause. The cigar sign was parting inward, like the halves of a garage door!

The veering car went through and the signboard came shut. The next car swerved and again the portal opened, apparently controlled by a photoelectric beam, that operated when the headlights cleaved it. Rod's turn was next and momentarily he hesitated, wondering what this was all about.

There was just one rule in caravan driving and that was to follow the car ahead. Of course that didn't apply if the lead car went off the road completely, but it did hold in case of detours. As the signboard closed for the second time, Rod observed that there actually was a road beyond, for the tail-lights of the car ahead stayed straight and steady. So Rod swung toward the signboard, applying the brakes nevertheless.

The big doors parted as they had before. The headlights of Rod's car disclosed the road in detail. Straight for fifty yards, it curved upward through an arch of trees, a single lane with a gravel surface. Rod saw tail-lights twinkle at the rising bend, then disappear, so he followed through. It wasn't his business to question this

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curious process so long as the road proved safe.

Other cars followed Rod's and there was a mile of gravel road. Then they struck a paved but narrow highway, and Rod was guided by the tail-lights of the car in front. From that moment however, the caravan was no longer operating according to strict rules. The car ahead opened up to fifty and the one behind Rod began to crowd him. So Rod let the big sedan show its stuff.

Reaching a broader highway, the pace was raised to sixty and there, as the cars raced across an intervening hill, Rod discovered that he was no longer part of a hundred car caravan. Instead, his was the third car in a bob-tailed aggregation totaling no more than fifteen. The rest were taking the whole thing for granted, otherwise Rod would have pulled out, to learn what it was all about.

The lead cars slackened as they reached a road that came in sharply from the right. There they made what amounted to a U-turn, to take the other half of the fork. As he followed suit, Rod noted that the straight road would have taken them into a town, for he could see the distant street lights. Apparently that town was to be avoided.

Heading out into the rugged countryside, the lead car was setting a slow pace while its driver watched for something. At last it made a sharp turn to the left and the next car copied it. Rod did the same and saw to his surprise that this tag-end of the caravan was going through a large barn and out the other side. The route became a wagon track that skirted down a slope to a wide but shallow creek, which the cars forded, the water coming only to their hubs.

On the far side was an old dirt road. A mile of it produced a covered bridge across a deeper creek. The old bridge rattled when Rod drove through it and he guessed that it was no longer used. That fact was proven when the road joined a good highway, because the cars were forced to swing around a blockade that was supposed to cut off traffic from the old bridge road.

From there it was high speed for half an hour in a direction which Rod knew must be northwest, because they were really climbing in among the Pennsylvania mountains. A swing across a summit produced a galaxy of lights below, the glitter of a small city. The cars took a zig-zag down a well-paved highway, getting closer and closer to those lights. How they could avoid this town was something that puzzled Rod until they reached the outskirts.

There, the first car pulled into a broad, low-built garage that was large enough to accommodate the whole fifteen. A man was inside, awaiting them, but he didn't wear an inspector's cap. Instead, he was dressed as a mechanic and there were three others who looked just like him. Every man in the lot was tough enough to settle a sizeable argument without calling in his friends.

There wasn't any argument. The drivers from the caravan were grinning when they stepped from their cars. Rod copied the universal expression, though he didn't like it, because it gave him the feeling that his face was just as rat-like as those he saw around him. For the first time, Rod realized that all the drivers in the rear section of the original caravan were the sort he wouldn't want for friends.

The head man of the garage crew was lining up the drivers so he could pay them off. Rather than betray himself, Rod fell in line to receive his share. As the line moved along he watched the other mechanics set to work on the cars. Two were lifting hoods and filing away at the numbers on the engine block; the third was wheeling up a large cylinder of paint with a sprayer attached, to begin a color treatment.

More men appeared, rolling tires mounted on wheels of different types and colors; one was even bringing a collection of door handles to go on certain cars. By the time they were finished, this batch of automobiles

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would be so altered that their makers wouldn't recognize them. Rod had heard of this sort of thing; it belonged back in the days of the "hot car" racket, when automobile thieves regularly rolled their loot into secret garages controlled by "fences" who camouflaged the cars and unloaded them on the market.

It was the same old racket, but on a new and startling scale. For this batch of cars, that was already undergoing a transformation, had been literally highjacked from a cross-country caravan by a group of crooked drivers!

The big garage man was counting fifty dollars into Rod's hand and adding a bus ticket for good measure.

"There's a bus goes out at midnight," he was saying, "and another at three. Take either you want only don't stick close to the other guys. We don't want nobody to notice anything."

Nodding, Rod noticed that the drivers who had collected ahead of him were leaving the garage separately. He followed and saw that some were turning into side streets as they sauntered into the town. It was every man for himself now that they had been paid off.

That notion intrigued Rod Ballard, as he walked along through the dark. They wanted him to play a lone hand for a while, so he would, in a way that would lead to crime's undoing!

VII.

THE name of the town was Irondale and it was a very busy place from the look of it. At the all-night lunch wagon near an old hotel, Rod saw workers returning from their shift in ancient cars that looked like fugitives from a museum.

Irondale needed cars and it was going to get them. Such at least was the talk that Rod heard at the lunch wagon. Across the street an empty used car lot seemed to belie the claims of the local prophets, but they insisted that some smart local buyers had promised to supply the demand and that cars would arrive tomorrow.

Rod could have gone that one better. He knew that the cars were already here, but not yet suitable for public sale. Once the garage mechanics were through with them, they would go at top prices, netting a huge profit to the man behind the highjack racket. Who that manipulator was, Rod could only guess, but he remembered that the fellow at the garage had peeled off money in a style that seemed a close imitation of Happy Jack Smiley.

It was Happy Jack who had started Rod along this very crooked road. Happy Jack had offered a cash opportunity and Rod already realized the result. Perhaps somewhere along the line someone should have tipped off Rod regarding the real duties of his job, but after all it hadn't been necessary. By simply keeping his place in line, Rod had found himself with the highjack section of the caravan and had wound up with a fistful of cash. As for the bus ticket, it was routed to Cold Spring, West Virginia, where the caravan proper was due tomorrow night, so it was a silent promise of another fifty dollars to anyone who would keep his mouth shut and his eyes open.

Rod intended to do both, right here in Irondale, Pennsylvania, until three o'clock.

Walking the back streets of the town, Rod could see the flares of big blast furnaces off against the hills. They represented the smelters that were working overtime, requiring workmen who needed cars to get to and from their jobs. This busy but well-secluded hive of industry was an ideal spot to unload twenty thousand dollars'

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worth of automobiles with no questions asked.

But Rod Ballard wasn't going to ask questions. He intended to give answers in advance. Questions of a different and unexpected sort could be put later to Happy Jack.

Three o'clock.

The solemn dongs of the big town clock announced the hour before Rod realized it had arrived. Pacing toward the center of the town, he heard the sputter of the through bus, pulling out on schedule. The rumbling had become a distant fade-out when Rod reached the lunch-wagon. Entering, he took a look around and convinced himself that the last of the highjackers had left to rejoin the caravan.

Perching himself at a corner of the counter, Rod ordered a cup of coffee. When the proprietor served it, Rod broached the confidential question:

"Where will I find the police chief here in Irondale?"

"Police chief?" The fat proprietor gave Rod a suspicious stare. "What do you want to see him about?"

"I'd rather tell the police chief personally."

"If it's got to do with any bank robberies"—the proprietor propped his elbows on the counter and tucked his chin between his pudgy hands—"like as not we'll all be interested. We're kind of keeping our eyes peeled for wrong guys, the way they've been knocking off the tills around the country."

Rod shook his head.

"It's something else," he said.

"More of a personal matter. What's more"—Rod added a happy afterthought—"it isn't exactly a local problem. It covers a lot of ground."

"Then you ought to see the county sheriff," decided the fat-faced man. "Don't you think so, Mr. Kerringer?"

He turned to a tall, gray-haired man who was taking a stool next to Rod's. In one glance, Rod decided that Kerringer was someone of local importance. His manner was affable, and his eyes became keen the moment he was brought into the discussion. When Rod repeated that he had some private business which concerned the law, Kerringer was prompt in decision.

"See the sheriff by all means," said Kerringer, in a precise tone. "But he isn't here in Irondale. You'll have to drive over to Bennville, fifteen miles from here."

"I can't very well," objected Rod. "I don't have a car."

Kerringer's eyes showed quizzical sympathy.

"You mean it was stolen?"

"Not exactly," replied Rod. "It's just sort of disappeared. That is, I let somebody take it—"

Kerringer interrupted with a gesture.

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"That's what happened in those towns where the robberies happened," he declared. "Cars people thought were borrowed turned out to be stolen and nobody was able to trace the criminals. Finish your cup of coffee, young fellow. I'll get my own car and drive you over to Bennville to see Sheriff Yates."

The fat proprietor gave an approving nod as though he had personally settled the whole problem. While Kerringer was out getting his car, the proprietor confided:

"You can talk to Mr. Kerringer. He's sort of a trouble-shooter up at the smeltery. Handles what they call personnel detail, like renting houses for new workmen, and things like that. Lately he's been trying to arrange a charter for a bus line between here and the plant, which would be a big help in the transportation problem, but something always seems to block him."

Rod was adding facts as he left the lunch wagon in answer to the honk from Kerringer's horn. Naturally somebody would be trying to block the bus charter until after Irondale could be saturated with stolen cars, secretly filched from cross-country caravans. Talking to Kerringer was the right idea.

So Rod talked, from the moment he was in the front seat of Kerringer's car. While he listened, Kerringer grimly swung the car in the direction of the garage where the highjackers had finished their excursion. As they neared the place, Kerringer calmed Rod's qualms with an easy tone:

"Don't worry about them seeing us pass. They'll be too busy to check on everybody that goes by. We're on the road to Bennville, anyway, and I want to be able to assure the sheriff that there is something in your story."

They were beside the garage when Kerringer finished, but instead of driving on, he brought the car to a sudden stop. Whatever Kerringer's surprise, Rod's far surpassed it. Instead of a glow from frosted windows and the throbbing hum of machinery at work, there was complete darkness and absolute silence. Incredulously, Kerringer stared through the darkness, then turned to Rod with the question:

"Is this the place?"

"It must be," began Rod, "and they ought to be hard at work behind those closed doors. That is, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless they've already finished. I know that may sound improbable, but those fellows looked like fast workers. What's more, there's a rumor around Irondale that a lot of cars will be on sale tomorrow, so it would have to be a rapid job."

Kerringer gave a doubtful grunt, as he fished in his pocket for a cigarette pack. Rod started to reach for a pack of his own, and the action put him totally off guard when the car door opened on his right. Before Rod could do more than turn, a revolver muzzle was planted in the back of his neck, only it didn't come from the door.

The man who produced the gun was Kerringer. He gruffed for Rod to "Sit tight," which Rod did, while somebody outside shoved a glaring flashlight in his face. Kerringer certainly knew who it was, for he included a name when he inquired:

"Know this fellow, Ernie?"

"Yeah," came a voice from behind the flashlight. "He came in with the highjack crew. I'll shove him over and keep him covered while you drive."

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Climbing into the rear, Ernie supplanted Kerringer's gun with his own, but Rod knew that the gray-haired driver would be ready in case an extra hand was needed. Deep though his heart sank, Rod still found his head throbbing with the hope that this was simply a test on Kerringer's part, which would be fair enough, considering that Rod was a total stranger. It was Kerringer's business to know what went on around Irondale and his friend from the dark might logically be a watcher who had already checked on illegal doings at the old garage on the outskirts.

Rod's hope evaporated in the moonlight that suddenly flooded the car. They were on the open road, away from sheltering trees that blocked the glow. All was clear, too clear, when Rod saw the face of the burly man upon his right.

Kerringer's friend Ernie was the head man of the garage crowd, the pay-off expert who handled the receiving end of the highjack racket!

VIII.

DURING the miles that followed, Rod Ballard found himself the center of a cross-conversation that occasionally included him as a participant, but treated him chiefly as a subject. When called upon for comments, Rod was notified by a nudge from Ernie's gun.

"The highjack crew should have been wise to this," expressed Kerringer. "How come there wasn't any tip-off, Ernie?"

"It wasn't their business," returned Ernie. "Our orders were pay for delivery and send the guys on their way."

"But somebody should have spotted a phony."

"How? They didn't know each other, except a few of them. The spotting was your job."

"And I handled it," stated Kerringer. "Only I'm wondering if there were any other phonies."

"Yeah," agreed Ernie. He gave his gun a nudge. "How about it?"

Rod found his voice.

"I didn't know anybody else," he said stoutly. "But when you speak of phonies, you mean your own crowd, not me."

"That's a matter of opinion," returned Kerringer. "But getting down to cases, who steered you into this?"

"Somebody who wanted to get rid of me," replied Rod. "Otherwise he wouldn't have talked me into coming along."

"That makes sense," put in Ernie. "Weeding out is part of our business."

It suddenly struck Rod that he had talked too much. He began to think in terms of correcting his mistake and decided that the best immediate policy was silence. The next mile provided Rod a brief diversion though it didn't help solve his problem. In the mirror, Kerringer was noting the headlights of another car.

"Who's tailing us?" he inquired. "The boys?"

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"Yeah," replied Ernie. "I told them you were picking me up, but I didn't say why. They'll swing off soon unless we stop to talk with them."

"That won't be necessary. We'll handle our job and they can go back and finish theirs."

"Suits me. They've still got a lot to do."

Silence continued well past a cross-road, when Rod could see the distant lights dwindle in hesitating fashion. His captors noted it too and Ernie promptly renewed the conversation, prefacing it with pressure from his gun.

"Who did you say sent you?"

"Happy Jack Smiley," answered Rod, "since you really want to know. He told me there'd be dough in it."

"I thought you said he wanted to get rid of you."

"That was your idea, not mine," misquoted Rod. "Happy Jack just made a slip-up, the way I see it now."

"How come?"

"He told me he'd phone ahead and arrange things," replied Rod. "All I had to do was show the card he gave me, which I did. I guess the checker was supposed to put me hep when he placed me in line."

That made Ernie think a bit, but Kerringer wasn't at all impressed.

"You found things out when you got to Irondale," reminded Kerringer. "You didn't have to be told. But you told us something right now."

"Yeah, plenty," chuckled Ernie. "Happy Jack's cars went through on an earlier caravan. They aren't the brand that's being highjacked."

"We like the kind that come from legitimate dealers," laughed Kerringer, in a style that wasn't pleasant. "Reconditioned and guaranteed. But Happy Jack wouldn't be putting drivers on those; not ordinarily."

"Unless they were guys he wanted to forget," added Ernie, catching Kerringer's drift. "Like you, for instance."

Kerringer was hitting the road at high speed, along a fairly good highway. He slowed to take a cross-cut along a road that was mostly rock and came to a precipitous descent that resembled the bed of an old stream. At the bottom, he followed a dirt road that brought him to another highway.

By then, Rod began to understand. They were taking him back to the superhighway, but they were aiming for a cross-road well in advance of the trick sign where the highjacked cars had ducked from sight. The reason the tail of the caravan hadn't used this short-cut was because nothing less sturdy than a jeep could have climbed the rocky precipice down which Kerringer had managed to work his car.

Rod knew this present road by its number and Ernie saw him noting the route signs. That brought another chuckle.

"No use checking where you are," said Ernie. "You're going to forget it soon."

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"I'm willing to forget a lot more," conceded Rod as a last resort. "That ought to make everybody happy."

"Not us," retorted Kerringer. "Some day you might get absentminded and ask for the wrong brand of cigar."

"You might remember where you saw it advertised," added Ernie, "and go along looking at signboards. Our road-men wouldn't like it after all the trouble they went to, planting a special job."

"That's right," agreed Kerringer. "Besides, we may be ordering some more cars soon. We wouldn't want to have the sheriff sitting on the wrong side of that trick sign."

"Only he won't be," predicted Ernie. "It looks too much like the rest of them. The lead-man who pulled you over to Irondale went by a mileage table so he could pick it out. That's how good the job is."

Kerringer was applying the brakes. It wasn't the car's rapid halt that renewed Rod's sinking feeling. He was recognizing his journey's end, the junction with the superhighway. As he stopped, Kerringer veered the car to the right, indicating that he and Ernie intended to return to Irondale by the highjack route. Since this was the most remote spot on their round trip, it must be where they intended to leave their victim.

Opening the door, Ernie stepped out and gestured his gun in the moonlight, an invitation for Rod to follow. When Rod balked, Kerringer provided a steel-muzzled nudge, so Rod stepped slowly to the ground, bracing himself as he arrived there.

"Go ahead," sneered Ernie. "Run for it. That will make it more of a mystery when they find you."

"Sort of a sporting chance," said Kerringer, coldly, as he opened the door on his side, "along with a little fun for our side."

Mechanically, Rod took a few faltering steps toward the front of the car; then, realizing that Kerringer was coming around to meet him, he yielded to a mad inspiration. Stiffening he wheeled and flung himself upon Ernie, who at that moment was weighing his revolver in preparation for cool aim.

With a savage snarl, Ernie whipped away, tugging his arm from Rod's clutch. His gun was upward, so instead of shooting, he slugged for Rod's head and landed a glancing stroke. Reeling half around, Rod charged again, so blindly that he ran squarely into Kerringer, though he thought he was back at Ernie. The down-beat of Kerringer's revolver hadn't the force of Ernie's swing, but it landed solidly.

Completely dazed, Rod staggered around in front of the car in a reeling fashion that promised an immediate collapse. Pouncing after him, Kerringer and Ernie apparently intended to slug Rod into oblivion, but the arriving roar of a motor intervened. An instant later the pair were forgetting Rod and his blind stagger, to blaze diverting shots at a car that was coming unexpectedly from the cross-road.

That car did miracles.

Its every swerve seemed to dodge the hasty shots. Taking a dry skid, it was full around, missing Rod's tottering figure. Kerringer and Ernie were shooting ahead of it, but missing it again, because its twist hadn't stopped. The car actually seemed to enfold Rod in its continuing spin, out in the middle of the broad junction and he was on the other side of it, stumbling against the door on the left, as the car shrieked to a stop.

Kerringer and Ernie were hopping around toward that side to take pot shots at the driver, when he beat them to the proposition. Though he couldn't possibly have left the wheel, his big gun tongued from the right, packing the thunder of an automatic. They'd picked the wrong side, these gentlemen of murder, because they

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hadn't identified the sleek mystery car for what it was, an imported make, with the steering wheel on the right.

A laugh accompanied the automatic's jabs. It didn't matter whether Kerringer and Ernie were steeped sufficiently in crime to recognize that taunt as the challenge of The Shadow. The bullets that grooved the concrete underfoot were sufficient to break their attack. They were favored by a lucky angle, from which The Shadow couldn't quite clip them, and their own car was even further out of range, so they scrambled for it.

Grabbing the wheel as he clambered in, Kerringer was getting the car in motion when Ernie arrived from the other side. The Shadow's car was delaying just long enough for him to haul Rod in, but it did a quick reverse that rendered Ernie's few shots wild. When one of The Shadow's bullets skimmed Kerringer's ear and starred the windshield right before his eyes, Kerringer didn't wait to rely on Ernie's skill.

The car from Irondale was hitting the superhighway with all it had, along the route that the caravan had traced before it reached the signboard detour that the hijackers had taken. After it, though well behind, came The Shadow's speedster, out to pick up distance after a necessarily poor start.

The wind that whipped Rod's face brought him from his coma. This chase was like a dream, hanging in a half-awakened stage ready to drop back again. A familiar dream, for Rod had been along this road before and knew where it would lead. Miles ahead—how many Rod neither knew nor cared—would be a familiar cigar sign, a replica of many that lined this highway; that sign would be the secret entrance to a hidden road that the fugitives would take.

Ahead, the car lights blurred against a rise. Suddenly Rod's vision cleared and he saw the car ahead, climbing toward a sign that was wedged beside a cliff at the right of a sharp leftward turn. It was vaguely familiar, but harder to distinguish at this speed; yet with all the tricks that Rod's eyes were playing him, he could read the big name on the sign.

Kerringer read it too and swerved, without slackening as the hijackers had. He couldn't waste time to let the flimsy signboard slide open in its smooth but leisurely style. He crashed it with a straight-head-on that punched a big black hole, through which he and Ernie were promptly gone, car and all.

A big black hole.

Rod was looking straight through the gap in the signboard, but the headlights of The Shadow's halted car weren't showing the road that should have been beyond. Instead they were gleaming on a rocky brink with a complete blank beyond it.

The lull of a few scant seconds seemed minutes long to Rod, before the echoes of a clattering crash came drifting upward, muffled by the depth of a mountain gorge. With the wind no longer reviving him, Rod's consciousness faded, but it lapsed with a perfect picture that blended with the knell of The Shadow's whispered laugh and could have been inspired by that tone.

There were a lot of cigar signs along this superhighway and where the road was mountainous, they perched above actual cliffs, with the sole exception of the signboard that fronted a forgotten road. Even with a mileage chart, it was smart to approach the signboard slowly to make sure it was the right one, but Kerringer and Ernie had been in too much hurry.

They had picked a wrong one.

IX.

HARRY VINCENT sat in the lobby of a small hotel, reading a Pittsburgh newspaper. This wasn't Pittsburgh, it simply happened that the journals from that city were particularly favored in Cold Spring, West Virginia, which had no newspapers of its own, not even a weekly sheet.

In fact Cold Spring didn't have much of anything except this hotel, a restaurant next door, and a big parking lot attached to a garage across the way. The parking lot was the stopping place for transcontinental caravans that proceeded under the auspices of the Cross-Country Delivery Association.

The newspaper mentioned the C.D.A. along about page eleven. There was a funny item about a dozen cars losing themselves like Bo-Peep's sheep somewhere in the wilds of Maryland. But nobody was arranging a search party to find them. If left alone they would probably discover themselves a few hundred miles from where they were supposed to be.

Less humorous was a story that rated page three and had a photograph with it, briefly relating that two citizens of Irondale had crashed through a signboard on a mountainside, meeting death at the bottom of a two-hundred-foot ravine. Lack of witnesses to the accident left its cause in doubt.

There wasn't any doubt in the mind of Harry Vincent. He had already received vital details from his chief, The Shadow. Hence Harry knew the connection between the stories on pages three and eleven and could consider it as confidential information. Even the members of the highjacking crew and the repaint experts in Irondale were in ignorance of the connecting elements. Of course the facts were reasonably clear in the mind of Rod Ballard; hence Harry was on the watch for him.

A bus was unloading some passengers who walked over to the parking lot, so Harry decided it was time to go there, too. He found the arrivals showing cards to a man who wore an inspector's cap. Seeing the inspector nod, Harry produced a nice new card that also identified him as an authorized driver in the employ of the Cross-Country Delivery Association, but all he received was a head-shake.

"Sorry, Vincent," said the inspector, "but I can't use you until the missing cars show up. When they do, they'll need fresh drivers."

"How soon will that be?"

"In another hour, I hope. That's all the longer we can hold the caravan. It will be after dusk by then."

Harry still wasn't satisfied.

"You just assigned those fellows who came in by bus," he argued. "How come I don't get a car?"

"They have low numbers," explained the inspector. "That gives them priority unless a man has already been assigned. I always keep places open for them, because it's rules. There's one car left among what's ready to go. I'll give it to you if another low number doesn't show."

Another low number did show.

Shortly before the hour ended, a rather pale young man arrived hurriedly from the direction of the railroad depot. He saw the cars that were ranked in the parking lot, some eighty-odd in all, and looked for a vacancy. The inspector stopped by, received the arrival's card and handed it back with a nod. Turning to Harry who

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was standing near, the inspector shook his head.

"Sorry fellow," he said. "The job is filled. A low number has it. You'll have to wait until the missing cars show up."

The first cars were pulling away from the lot, but Harry wasn't disturbed. While the inspector was busy sending them out, Harry walked into a little booth and took a look around. He'd noted something on a previous stop in the booth and he wanted to look at it again. It was a frame, containing specimen cards authorized by the C.D.A.

There were cards for drivers, inspectors, mechanics and officials, all heavily stamped with the word "Specimen," but there was another type that interested Harry more. It was a card that bore the printed statement that the bearer was an authorized passenger.

On a nearby bulletin board was a faded notice saying that passengers could no longer be transported in caravan cars because of an adverse ruling by the Interstate Commerce Commission, but that didn't phase Harry. Opening the top drawer of the inspector's desk, he looked for some spare cards and found a few. All were for passengers and they bore the signatures of the proper officials. So Harry wrote his name in the blank space and pocketed the rest of the cards.

The cars were pulling out rapidly when Harry sauntered from the booth, so rapidly that they tended toward a traffic jam at a corner just beyond the hotel. Since drivers had been assigned in rotation, the young man from the depot had been given the last in line. That gave Harry time to stop in the restaurant across the street, where he bought a few cigars.

As the last few cars trickled from the lot, Harry made the most of opportunity. He let the final headlights sweep past him, then took quick steps in the gathering darkness and reached the corner where the traffic slow-up was habitual. As the final car came almost to a stop, Harry opened the door and eased in beside the pale young man. He was showing his passenger's card as he came and the man gave it a puzzled glance, which meant that he was new.

Harry had guessed right; this rookie among the low-number men was Rod Ballard.

Evidently Rod knew nothing about the taboo on passengers, for he handed back the card with a nod; but as the car started again, Harry could tell that Rod was uneasy. Before they had gone more than a few blocks, he said warily:

"Maybe I ought to drive back and have your card certified by the inspector. He didn't say anything about a passenger to me."

"Why waste time?" inquired Harry, calmly. "I'm already certified."

"That card didn't show it."

"Here's one that does."

With that, Harry flashed his driver's card; then, before Rod could question it, Harry added:

"It's regular stuff, taking along extra drivers as passengers—or didn't you know?"

Rod grunted as if he knew.

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"You look new," continued Harry. "How high is your number—about eight hundred?"

There was a suspicious dart from the corner of Rod's eye. He didn't want to mention that his number was low, because it would lead to further questions. For one thing, his passenger might ask pointedly why Rod was at the rear of the caravan. So Rod compromised by muttering:

"It's pretty high."

"So is mine," admitted Harry. "That makes it all the better. I haven't been driving long enough to get over the monotony of the thing, so I imagine you feel the same way."

The frank admission reassured Rod along with the fact that he had seen the number on Harry's valid card and knew that it was high. Still, he wasn't taking chances on noosing his neck right into a trap. After his experience with Kerringer, Rod felt that anyone, friendly or otherwise, might be checking on him. Harry saw it and knew that a bolder stroke was needed to win Rod's confidence.

From his pocket, Harry drew two cigars that he had bought at the restaurant. He offered one to Rod with the comment:

"Have a smoke. These aren't bad at all. Look at the band and you'll see why."

In the glow from the dashlight, Rod saw what Harry meant. The cigar was of the brand so glowingly advertised on the signboards through Pennsylvania. This time Rod's darting glance was totally unguarded. Taking quick advantage, Harry pressed home his point.

"After we've finished two of them," said Harry, "we ought to be better friends. That seems to be the way it works. Just watch their smoke and let them burn themselves right out."

Puffing to get a light from the match that Harry extended, Rod finished by gulping nervously:

"You—you know—all about it?"

"Most all that counts," responded Harry. "You don't have to guess who told me. How did you make out after he put you on the train?"

"I didn't even know he did," confessed Rod. "I was groggy, and plenty. Right after those two fellows ditched themselves two hundred feet deep, everything went black. It was just as if darkness swallowed everything."

"Including the man who had helped you out?"

"I guess you know him all right," replied Rod, with a confident nod. "Only he didn't exactly fade-out. Truth is, I didn't get a good look at him at any time. Maybe that's the way he operates."

It was Harry's turn to evade a coming question, so he avoided it by putting one of his own. The more of a mystery The Shadow was to strangers, the better it suited his plans. Changing the subject was therefore a matter of policy on Harry's part.

"What did you do?" asked Harry. "Wake up on the train, wondering where you were?"

"And where I was going," added Rod, "until the porter told me that a tall gentleman had said I was to get off at Cold Springs, West Virginia. I took it that meant I was to go back on the job, so I did."

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The ice thus broken, Rod poured his story in detail, beginning from his meeting with Happy Jack. Harry made mental notes because these were things The Shadow wanted to know, not having been able to question Rod while the latter was in a semi-conscious state. In his turn, Harry added a few sparse details, but they satisfied Rod.

Referring to The Shadow simply as his chief, Harry said that he had gone to Irondale on the chance of stopping robbery that threatened there. That made Rod remember something; namely that the local folk had been on the lookout for bank robbers.

"That chief of yours is uncanny," complimented Rod. "He must have a hunch about everything. I guess Kerringer tipped off Happy Jack that a robbery would be a bad bet, so the crooks were ordered to stage a hijack instead."

"Very probably," agreed Harry. "From what you heard, Irondale wasn't ripe for a bank haul. Anyway, the chief was on the lookout for something crooked, when he saw one car pick up another's trail on the outskirts."

"Kerringer's follow-up!" exclaimed Rod. "But Ernie said the boys were dropping off somewhere along the line."

"They did," stated Harry. "But the chief picked up the trail instead."

"And kept it!" added Rod in admiration. "Until Kerringer and Ernie dropped off in a big way—on their own."

They drove along for another hour with only occasional comments. One thought was in both minds; that of another venture like the night before, only this time Rod was posted in advance and he had a staunch companion. Then, as the cars ahead began to slacken, they found that all were stopping briefly at a roadstand where sandwiches and cardboard coffee containers were being handed out free with the compliments of the Cross-Country Delivery Association.

The fellow who did the handing out looked dumb at first sight, so Harry openly played the part of passenger and took in supplies for himself and Rod both. What caught his eye were two cars that were pulling out from behind the roadstand, going back the way the caravan had come.

"Who's in those cars?" inquired Harry, casually. "Inspectors?"

"We don't have no inspectors here," replied the dim-wit. "Them's just some extra drivers."

"Where from?"

"Out of the caravan. Where else would they come from?"

"You mean some other men replaced them?"

"That's right. Relief drivers to take the place of the first eight. Guess they need the regulars back in Cold Spring. The missing cars must have showed up."

Harry turned quickly to Rod.

"If that's the case," said Harry, "I'll be needed back in Cold Spring, too. Better turn around."

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Rod hesitated, a bit befuddled, but he snapped out of it before the slow-minded attendant sensed anything irregular. As they were turning around, Harry gave Rod orders in a low but definite tone.

"Get going fast," instructed Harry. "If my guess is right those cars will be turning off at the first cross-road. I remember one a few miles back. We've got to see which way they go."

"But it can't mean anything," began Rod. "They're the front drivers—and those two cars are legitimate—"

"Maybe the cars are," interrupted Harry, as Rod was stepping on the gas, "but that doesn't prove the drivers are. Remember what didn't happen back in Irondale?"

It was a long moment before the answer dawned on Rod. Then, breathlessly he asked:

"You mean a bank robbery?"

"Exactly," returned Harry. "We've got to pick up that trail. Once we really have it, we'll stop at the first country store on the chance we'll find a telephone. I'll try to reach the chief, and if I can't, the local constabulary will have to do."

From Harry's tone, Rod felt convinced that The Shadow must be already in these parts, hoping to be ahead of crime among the West Virginia hills. Remembering his own experience of the night before, Rod agreed with Harry's preference regarding persons who should be informed.

In any kind of a toss-up, Rod Ballard would take The Shadow.

X.

PICKING a town in western West Virginia was anybody's toss-up. This section had its share of new and thriving communities, which had so recently come into industrial prominence, that some of the spellings varied on the freshly-installed road signs. What was worse, the routes were quite as uncertain.

One name would be absent at a cross-road only to reappear at the next. Sometimes signs pointed back the wrong direction, indicating that somebody had figured a way that was either shorter or better; if either definition applied. For none of these oiled road, with high-humped centers were short, considering the way they wangled over hills, nor could any be termed good.

Road maps weren't particularly a help since only half of these roads were marked on them, but the men in the two black sedans didn't need maps. They were going by mileage lists, with descriptions of landmarks large enough to show in the moonlight, such as abandoned farmhouses, lone oak trees, and old wooden bridges. If anything, they were making their route twistier than circumstances called for, but that was with design.

They wanted to be difficult to trail, leaving their destination well in doubt until they neared it. But in doubling back and forth among the hills, they were making one mistake. An alert pursuer with a quick-eyed companion could occasionally spot the lights of the two cars when they reappeared on some unexpected road on the far side of the valley.

Reaching a fork that topped a hill, the cars were confronted with a sign that pointed one way to Oroco and the other to Elcor. These were obviously industrial towns since the names were contractions of company titles that had probably supplanted the former names of tiny hamlets. What wasn't obvious was the fact that one road had been made into two.

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Forking to the left, the cars took the Oroco road. They swung from it almost immediately by going across what seemed an embankment on the right, but which proved to be the remains of a dirt road. It didn't jolt the cars too badly, as they veered into the Elcor road, a hundred yards away.

This was done so promptly that the tail-lights glimmered out of sight, like matches snuffed by the wind. Since the Oroco road continued its swerve among some trees, it would seem that the cars had followed it. Instead, they were bound for Elcor, five miles distant in a narrow valley.

Elcor looked like a one street town, but the impeachment wasn't quite justified. There were other streets that paralleled the main one, though they were merely dirt-surfaced and seldom used. However, the cars took one of these and pulled up behind an old brick building with windows that had iron bars fitted into the granite sills.

The place looked like a jail—and had been once—but recently it had been converted into a bank. That, rather curiously, was a token of Elcor's prosperity as represented by a towering industrial plant that stood on the other side of the tumbling river that supplied the needed power. Elcor had sprung up so rapidly in wealth and population that building construction couldn't keep up with it. Transforming the abandoned jail into a bank had been a happy thought toward harboring the money that was being saved for buying houses, when available.

Newspapers loved to print such bits of whimsy. The idea of a town putting its cash in a jail, as the last place where crooks would go to get it, came under a heading some editors termed human interest. Maybe they thought that crooks weren't human or couldn't read, but they were wrong.

It was being proven right now.

From the cars behind the former jail came a squad of experts who demonstrated with the aid of muffled crowbars, that getting into jail was a very simple process. When they pried the bars, the granite sills followed and took the bricks along. Equipped with other utensils, the crooks went inside to see what the vault was like.

The vault occupied a cell that had once been used for solitary confinement. Its front wall was tough enough to restrain a lone prisoner, particularly if bare-handed, but it didn't fulfill a vault's qualifications, even though a strong-door had been fitted into it. Rather than play with the big steel door, these technicians decided to blow the wall away from it.

They filled the stone crevices with a mushy substance formed from a dynamite base. Referring to the stuff as "soup" they retired to the far corners to watch how it would work.

It worked.

The whole building seemed to suck in its breath, in order to deliver the mighty "Pow!" that blew the vault. With the blast came what could best be termed a muffled glow, vivid yet suppressed, a glare that briefly showed the entire scene in full, even to the faces of the men who crouched in the distant corners.

Though scarcely more than instantaneous, that curious flash seemed to linger, as did the thunder of the power-packing blast. Both were things that had been accumulated, to be delivered in a single moment that didn't seem large enough to hold them. Perhaps the effect was only mental, but it could have been physical as well, judging from the other things that happened.

The crooks had overestimated the necessary charge, or possibly the real blame lay with the persons who had originally built the jail. In either case, the effects of modern explosives were out of proportion to the strength

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of ancient masonry. The huge hush that followed the blast was broken by crackles from the walls, where widening fissures spread into great gaps, bringing the clatter of tumbling bricks.

This was still going on, while men were coming from their corners to reach the ruined vault. The front was completely gone, for the door had simply flattened when its support was blown away. Reaching the shelves at the back of the vault, the crooks found themselves elbow deep in currency. All they had to do was shovel those bundles into bags that they had brought along.

During this rapid process, the walls were still crackling, adding to the deluge of bricks. Moonlight was streaming in through jagged holes, producing an eerie effect as the men of crime came hurrying from the wrecked vault, bringing their bags of loot. They were like dream-figures, moving in slow-motion, due to the patches of filtered glow, through which they came and went.

Only the windows were still dark, for they were away from the moonlight, yet it was toward those openings that crooks were headed, for they had planned it that way. But they were still short of their exits when a sound arose above the clattering brickfall.

The strident tone of a challenging laugh!

This bag-lugging tribe knew that tone. Some acted as though they remembered it from experience rather than hearsay. All, however, were convinced that they wanted no part of it. They shied away from their chosen exits, scattering toward other corners, just as they had done in anticipation of the recent explosion.

Such was the effect of The Shadow's sinister laugh, delivered from utter darkness, direct to men of crime!

It didn't occur to the retreating crew that their own actions explained something. Those who had started for one window should have realized that The Shadow couldn't be blocking them, because in that case, men starting for the other window wouldn't have shied away from it. Finding two windows, both jimmied open, The Shadow had foreseen the inadequacy of blockading one and leaving the other as a clear path. So he had come right through, while crooks were busy in the vault, and was now between the windows, ready for a quick shift either way. This wasn't necessary, because the elusive effect of his laugh gave the impression that he was both places at once.

There was a purpose in The Shadow's taunt. When he used it as an opening move, it was actually a weapon. The consternation it produced invariably made foemen seek to better their own positions, without realizing that The Shadow wouldn't be forcing such a move unless they were well off to start. As a result, these scattering thugs were simply laying themselves wide open to the coming gambit of The Shadow's guns.

In ducking for corners, they encountered moonlight. To avoid moonlight, they cut in other directions, but the glow overtook them, for it was increasing more rapidly than ever with the continuing fall of bricks. They were blundering into each other, this helter-skelter tribe, turning their show into a farce.

Guns in hand, they would have been mistaking each other for The Shadow, except for the bags they were swinging as they dodged about. Knowing that this would lead to a mad, disorganized rush in his direction, The Shadow came stalking forward, ready for a lunge into the disentangling throng. Slugging them down would be so simple that The Shadow doubted he would have to fire a single shot.

Then, suddenly, The Shadow was in moonlight, too!

That happened when the roof caved. The cracking walls simply couldn't stand the strain. From that instant, it was every man for himself, including The Shadow. Crooks didn't have a chance to fire when they saw him,

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for he was lost, a moment later, amid a downpour of debris that was pummeling them as well. Cut off from the window at the rear, frantic men turned the other way and found half a dozen paths to safety, for the front wall had broken all apart, right to the ground.

By the time the fleeing men had dashed around to the back, the building had really folded, half-burying the tilting windows in its mass. There were drivers in the cars, but they were lying stupefied, for The Shadow had slugged them as a preliminary. Other men took their places and some sprang into both cars, chucking the swag into the first, leaving the extra burglary equipment in the second.

Then, both cars were off, heading for the main street, where the going would be faster, leaving behind them a complete ruin of humped red brick, from which a pall of gray dust was rising like a wraith.

That cloud was spectral in the moonlight. Briefly it took the shape of a giant figure that could have been compared to a grotesque, cloaked shape, before the stir of a passing wind dispersed it.

A momentary monument in memory of The Shadow!

XI.

SPEEDING from the outskirts of Elcor, the two cars crossed a concrete bridge that took them to the other side of the roaring river, below the big industrial plant. Already an emergency siren was shrieking from the factory, signifying that the mystery explosion had been heard, but that didn't bother the bank robbers, since they intended to leave Elcor far behind them.

At least it didn't bother them yet.

A few hundred yards below the bridge, the river met an old dam, which formed a broad ledge straight across it. Supplanted by a modern dam a few miles further upstream, this older specimen was nothing more than a landmark. In fact, the water no longer trickled over it, but found openings through the dam itself; hence the river's rush was altered into a melee of jets and faucets that teemed into the gorge below the dam.

This was to the left of the highway. Checking by a mileage list, the man who sat beside the first car's driver gave the tally:

"Three and four tenths to go. That's where the road from the other valley hooks with this."

"The other valley?" queried the driver. "You mean the road that comes through Oroco?"

"That's right. Over a new bridge. They join like a fork."

"Which way do we go?"

"Straight ahead, of course, unless we have to double back through Oroco in the other valley. Only that wouldn't be smart."

The driver gave a grunt of agreement.

"One thing, though." The man with the chart made a careful reference by holding it to the dashlight. "If we have to double back, we can hit the dirt."

"What dirt?"

"An old road over there." The fellow thumbed to his left, to indicate the other side of the river. "It comes back up toward Elcor, then climbs a hill on the other side of the dam. It would get us across to the Oroco road without hitting the dam."

"How's the dirt road rated?"

"X plus, which means it's pretty bad."

"Good. We won't take it."

Keeping the car whizzing toward the fork, the driver seemed set in his decision until he reached the final grade. Then, with an oath, he began to slam the brakes. Before the other man could inquire the reason, the driver snarled it.

"Look at that heap, will you? Swinging right over from the bridge like it wanted to block us!"

It wasn't a case of wanting. The car from the bridge was doing it! Arriving with a sudden twist, the car had apparently tried to swing sharply toward Elcor, then had balked right where it was. At its present angle, it blocked the road completely.

"I'll back him out of there!"

The crook who handled the mileage chart shoved the paper in his pocket and produced a revolver instead. As the driver braked the car, the gunner opened fire. What he got was a prompt response, in kind.

The man at the wheel of the blockading car was Rod Ballard. Among other things, he had slanted the car so that Harry Vincent could take proper aim with an automatic. Harry's shots were more of a threat than the revolver fire that came his way. The range was long, so nobody was doing damage yet, but if the bank robbers insisted on an approach, something would be sure to happen.

Since the crooks wanted to go, and Harry wanted to stay, the odds were offset. If they shot holes in the tires of Rod's car, the crooks would only increase its blockade value, while if Harry punched one lucky bullet into the rubber of the crook-manned car, its getaway would be ended.

The crooks with the equipment were stopping in back of the car that held the money. A couple of them came running up bringing objects that looked like full-sized pineapples.

"How about heaving these?" asked one. "They ought to blow that jalopy right off the tarvia."

"Yeah?" retorted the spokesman in the front car, as he paused to reload his gun. "How are you going to get close enough?"

The driver gave a snarl.

"More cars coming!" He pointed off beyond the bridge from Oroco. "Say—they guys must have been tagging us until we pulled that smart turn that took us to Elcor. What they've done is come through Oroco and brought everybody after them!"

"We're going back," snapped the spokesman, "right through Elcor and up the road we used to get there!"

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The highway was wide enough for a quick turn. The first car swung around while the pineapple boys were getting back to theirs. By the time the second car was able to make the maneuver, Rod was ending the blockade stuff. His car whipped to the pursuit just before the vehicles from Oroco began to pour across the bridge.

It was a strange chase, this.

Two cars loaded with bank robbers were speeding straight back toward the scene of crime, the first carrying the actual fruits of robbery, the other some unused items of equipment which looked like fruit, but happened to be bombs. Behind them was a third car which, by strange behavior in a neighboring town, had excited enough suspicion to bring a squadron of local pursuers on their heels.

The two men in that car were very grim, as was logical, considering their undetermined status. They were actually chasing crooks, but the cars behind them contained men who might deem otherwise. It would have given Rod the jitters, if Harry hadn't reassured him.

"Keep after them," prompted Harry. "Too bad we couldn't contact the chief. Let's hope he's on his way here, anyway. He'd settle this mess for us."

"I know he would." returned Rod. "But what do we do if we stay on our own?"

"Catch that gang ahead," declared Harry. "Stop them any way we can, then dodge for it."

"And let the Oroco crowd slaughter us?"

"They won't if we give up. We'll have to take a chance on that part. Stopping the crooks comes first."

To emphasize the point, Harry leaned out and stabbed a few shots at the cars ahead. They were out of range, but Harry considered the gesture a wise one. It might help their story later if some of the local residents testified that they'd seen shots from Rod's car fired at those ahead.

What Rod hadn't learned through experience was that running fights like this often came to an unexpected crux. Harry was familiar with that point, but he didn't anticipate the sudden climax, nor its consequences.

The fleeing cars gave slackening jolts before they reached the old dam, which was now on their right. The reason disclosed itself in the moonlight. A squad of men had arrived from the Elcor plant on their way around to the town. They were carrying clubs and shot-guns and were suddenly deciding that they ought to use them to stop the two cars that were heading right at them.

The crooks might have bluffed it, but they didn't. Men from the front car jabbed revolver shots that sent the human barrier scattering. But before the cars could pick up speed again, their self-betrayal brought them trouble. Two guns began to talk from the darkness, up where the road turned to cross the bridge above the dam.

Somebody was backing up the scattering factory hands and doing it right well.

Even at long range, those shots took effect. One windshield shattered, a pair of fenders were cracked in one-two style by bullets that were seeking the rubber underneath them. Any attempt to run that bridge would mean a finish of the flight that crooks so badly wanted. With Rod's car closing in on them, the criminals seemed really fixed.

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It was the smart man in the front car who provided the answer. He remembered the old dirt road on the other side of the dam and gave a startling order.

Still moving, the first car swung, took a jounce from the road, and hit the broad artificial ledge. The dam itself was dry enough to provide a roadway, though the car's right wheels were close to the edge above the gorge.

The second car copied the first's action, to the tune of gunfire from several directions, for Harry was in it and the factory men were bringing their shot-guns into play. The crooks didn't like it, for a face appeared at the rear window of the second car, accompanied by a hand that held a pineapple. The man with the bomb hauled back to chuck it at the shotgun specialists who were crowding to the river bank.

The river wasn't very wide, it was scarcely more than an oversized creek. The first car was almost across, the other was nearing the middle. A heave of that bomb would have put it right into the throng. From his side, Harry couldn't see the pineapple tosser, but the sight was quite visible to the unknown marksman up by the bridge.

He laid a shot right into the center of the moonlit picture. It found the man who was leaning from the second car. There was a jerk from the upraised hand and the oval bomb slipped from its fingers. The thing scaled at an angle and landed close by the old dam, on the upper side.

The bomb blasted just after it struck the water. The pressure of that liquid packing gave it a tremendous power. Not only did the stream gush high, enveloping the car like a geyser; but the dam itself quivered. The driver should have known that hesitation might prove fatal, but the combination of a slippery and quaking roadbed forced him to stop the car.

Safe on the other side, the first carload of crooks could see the menace, but their shouts were in vain. Such sounds were drowned by a roar that the men in the marooned car didn't understand, because they couldn't see the cause. Big foundation stones were tumbling from the old dam down into the gorge, carrying lesser chunks with them. Not until a great slab heaved up in front of him did the driver realize that the dam was staging a faster collapse than the old bank building.

By then, the chance for escape was gone. As the car shot madly forward, it seemed to lift on end. Skidding on the drenched stone, the rear wheels nearly slipped across the brink; then, as the car was righted, it tilted the other way as a block of stone dived slantwise.

Out went the dam with a final, tremendous roar that dwarfed the gushing tumult of the water that poured through. The doomed car went from sight, carrying its passengers under a great layer of foam; when it reappeared, it was bouncing in the gorge, where the unleashed stream carried it like a wooden chip, battering the car's steel body like a tin sardine can.

Seeing that their comrades had gone with the flood, the men in the first car howled for the driver to get going. He hit it up the dirt road and the car was lost from sight. By getting clear of long range fire, the crooks who carried the stolen cash were safe, since the bursting of the dam had blocked off all immediate pursuit.

Before the men from the Elcor plant could recover from their stupor, Harry told Rod to shove his own car in gear. They whipped past the factory hands, reached the bridge a few hundred yards above and shot across, into the town itself. As Harry looked back, he saw that cars from Oroco were coming after them, so he ordered Rod to speed it up.

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Eyes glued on the road behind, Harry didn't see the flattened ruin that had recently been a bank building. As the car outdistanced its pursuers, Harry stared ahead again, to help Rod pick the right roads.

"We belong back with that caravan," reminded Harry. "Now that we're clear, we ought to be able to overtake it if we find some short cuts."

"We'll make it," promised Rod. "We're good for sixty most of the way and the caravan keeps under thirty. Say, though—wasn't that a break?"

"You mean the way the dam went, or the chance that we had to get clear?"

"Both, because they were one and the same. Whoever picked that bomber off did it mighty neat. They know how to shoot, here in this hill country."

Harry was quite inclined to agree. In their whirl across the bridge and through the town, he'd failed to glimpse a trace of a cloaked figure that he thought might be around. Knowing The Shadow's penchant for spotting crime in advance, Harry was a trifle disappointed.

Had he seen the flattened bank building and known how its caving walls had trapped The Shadow, Harry's disappointment would have changed to horror. The result would have forced Harry Vincent to the grim admission that The Shadow, by arriving early, had reached crime's scene too soon.

XII.

THE weather was balmy in the outdoor garden beside the East River, so Thomas P. Marldon was entertaining his guests there. The occasion, however, hardly came under the head of entertainment, since no one was particularly happy this afternoon. Most of the men with Marldon were the used car dealers who had attended that first meeting with Commissioner Weston.

His rugged face glum, Marldon was running his fingers through his close-clipped hair, as he discussed new problems that confronted the Cross-Country Delivery Association. Again, Commissioner Weston was a listener, but chiefly in an advisory capacity, since the troubles had occurred far from his bailiwick.

"First, fifteen cars vanished in Maryland," asserted Marldon. "Then twenty were lost somewhere in Illinois. It's something I can't begin to understand."

The situation did present a bad beginning. The first batch of cars had been hijacked in Pennsylvania, not in Maryland, though statistics didn't show it. As for the next batch, they had wandered away in Kentucky, before the caravan had crossed the border into Illinois.

Both Rod and Harry had missed that job because they hadn't caught up with the caravan in time. Their little detour in West Virginia would therefore force a retracing of the route to pick up evidence. Harry had left that to The Shadow or to other agents that his chief might designate. It hadn't yet occurred to him that The Shadow might have suffered heavily in the literal collapse of the Elcor Bank and Trust Company.

The town of Elcor was due for mention at the conference in Marldon's garden.

"It's worse than that West Virginia bank robbery," declared Marldon. "I mean the things that are happening to us. Our last caravan was made up of cars supplied by fly-by-nights, but it went through intact. This one contained cars belonging to legitimate dealers"—Marldon gave an arm sweep to indicate his

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companions—"but what became of them? Nobody knows!"

"About that bank robbery." Briskly, Weston produced some reports received, from Washington "It seems to be part of a national crime wave that includes almost everything."

"You mean it links with the stealing of cars from our caravan?"

"In a way, yes. Drivers cards issued by the C.D.A. were found on some of the crooks who were drowned in the river below Elcor."

Marldon's gaze showed total amazement and the expression was shared by those around him. Suddenly, the rugged man tightened his fist and drove it hard against his open palm.

"So that's the game!" exclaimed Marldon. "After other schemes fail, our cars are stolen! Do you have the names of those drivers, commissioner?"

"Yes," replied Weston, "along with the numbers on their cards. Here is the list."

While Marldon was looking at the list, Weston spread a big cross-country map and showed it to the others. Pointing out towns that he had marked, the commissioner commented:

"Observe how these crimes were confined to a belt which follows the route of your caravans. That fact escaped attention until the cards were found on the men who were drowned last night. Today, the F. B. I. began to check the caravan movements against the crimes."

Marldon looked up eagerly from his list.

"Did the dates tally, commissioner?"

"Quite closely. Apparently the criminals were going and coming from the caravans, between crimes."

"I thought so," nodded Marldon. "All the numbers on this list are high."

"What has that to do with it?" queried Weston.

"Just this," explained Marldon. "Only our regular drivers, or men recommended as such, are given low numbers. These criminals were obviously extra drivers. We shall check them very carefully in the future."

"What about the drivers of the cars that disappeared? Were their numbers high?"

"Frankly, I don't know, because the inspectors do not list which cars the drivers are given. But I think the elimination of high numbers should settle that situation too."

Marldon reached for the map to study the marked places where crime had occurred. Leaning back in his chair, Weston glanced idly at the ground and decided to disturb a troublesome ant hill near his foot. With a scruff of his shoe, the commissioner spread a splotch of obliterating dirt across the offending mound. He was staring out toward the river, when a calm voice spoke beside him:

"Ants are industrious creatures, commissioner."

Turning, Weston was surprised to see his friend Cranston, whom he supposed was out of town.

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"You buried them alive," rebuked Cranston, gesturing toward the ground, "but they are emerging without much trouble."

Looking at the scuffed dirt, Weston saw that Cranston was right. The sudden reappearance of the ants rather puzzled the commissioner, until Cranston flipped away some dirt with his cane.

"Even a grain of sand has individual shape," remarked Cranston. "Consider bits of dirt as fragments of debris, such as portions of a demolished building. You see what happens when they cluster? They pack against each other, leaving spaces between."

It would have taken a microscope to fully demonstrate Cranston's theory, but when he finally uncovered the ant hole, the proposition stood proven. The hole wasn't filled at all. Ants were squeezing out from among wedged bits of dirt.

"Suppose that were a doorway," suggested Cranston, "or better yet, a window. Its frame would not only block off fallen masonry, it would hold gaps between. Remember it in case of a building collapse, commissioner. You will be surprised how often trapped persons survive."

"We know that," argued Weston, "provided you can get to them."

"If they had foresight," returned Cranston, "they could usually extricate themselves. By foresight, I mean the business of getting placed right, during the final collapse."

"Suppose we have you try it, Cranston. Would you like to demonstrate the process, the next time a building is demolished?"

"Not particularly. I was rather fortunate during my last collapse, so there is no use tempting fate."

"Your last collapse?"

"Yes, referring to the building, not myself. It took me about seven minutes"—Cranston paused, then shook his head—"no, nearly nine, to crawl entirely clear."

"All of nine minutes?" bantered Weston. "You should take lessons from the ants."

"I did, a long while ago," responded Cranston, seriously. "That's why I came out as well as I did, the time I just mentioned."

Cranston didn't add that the time in question had been less than twenty-four hours ago. He didn't want to take credit for a noble deed claimed by half a dozen West Virginia marksmen; that of helping a covey of notorious criminals bomb themselves and their car from the top of an unsteady dam.

As The Shadow, Cranston had hoped to keep his hand completely hidden. From the time when crooks mistakenly thought that they had winged him on the big bridge, here near Marlton's, The Shadow had indeed been out of sight. Reappearing at Elcor, he had found another opportunity to disappear.

It might be days before the ruins would be searched sufficiently to prove that they contained no victim. No one had been around to see The Shadow emerge from that wreckage like an ant from a buried hill. Hence, during those days to come, The Shadow would be in an ideal situation to conclude his campaign against double-edged crime.

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As Cranston, The Shadow had returned to New York to gather needed facts. Listening to Weston's review of the reports from Washington was a good beginning, but Cranston hoped for more. What he needed were facts concerning crooks as well as crime and he felt that he could fill any gaps in the data already acquired by the law.

Here in Marldon's garden, The Shadow was preparing for the stride that would bring crime to its climax!

XIII.

WHEN Marldon finished looking at the map, he handed it back to Weston with a nod. The commissioner was right; crime was operating on a nation-wide scale. Where it would strike next was the coming problem. Marldon was about to comment on it when he saw Cranston.

Sight of the commissioner's friend pleased Marldon, for he had heard that Cranston had Washington contacts which might be helpful in analyzing these crimes. Being chiefly concerned with the question of the missing cars. Marldon switched promptly to that subject.

"Hello, Cranston," he greeted. "Look at that map the commissioner just showed me. Maybe you can find the places we want."

Cranston looked at the map and smiled.

"You seem to have found a lot of places," he remarked, "judging by all the red marks."

"We need another color," returned Marldon. "One that will tell us where the stolen cars went. A third of our caravan has disappeared, representing a loss of fifty thousand dollars. Where did those cars go?"

Cranston could have named one place. It was small on the map, but large in his experience. That town was Irondale and it bore no mark of any color. But as his eye roamed the map, Cranston picked another spot, a Kentucky town named Cliffwood. Already he had narrowed down the disappearance of the second group of cars.

It was logical enough, with Cranston's knowledge. Lightning might not strike one place twice, but its mode of striking was always the same. Cranston had learned one vital fact; that the stolen cars were being sold locally in towns like Irondale. From all reports, Cliffwood was a similar town, located in about the same relation to the caravan route.

It wasn't Cranston's plan to prevent more highjacking jobs. He was sending men in the wake of such crimes to pick up local evidence that would settle those cases later. He was looking ahead in an effort to link the highjacking with the more serious crimes that were running across the country. His eye moving westward on the map, Cranston paused momentarily in the state of Missouri. His glance was going further along when he heard Marldon speak to Weston.

"These crimes still have a local aspect, commissioner," said Marldon. "We are still waiting for your reports on Larry Saugus, the man who was hounded to his death right off this street."

"Saugus was murdered earlier," corrected Weston. "The autopsy showed effects of poisoning by carbon monoxide gas."

"You mean he was dead when he drove into the river?"

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"I mean that somebody else must have been driving the car. That's why those crooks began shooting up toward the bridge."

Cranston looked up from the map, carefully retaining a casual expression. It was quite encouraging to find Commissioner Weston indulging in such excellent deductions.

"Let me get this straight," insisted Marldon. "Those were the same crooks who later raided the office where Saugus operated those dummy companies."

"That's correct," nodded Weston. "We are quite sure they were part of the gang that once worked for a racketeer named Big Leo Trennick."

"Big Leo died in a night-club fire," recalled Marldon. "Saugus was obviously murdered. But the gang is still alive—"

"Not all of them" put in Cranston, suddenly. "This list of yours, commissioner"—he gestured to the sheet that Weston had received from Washington—"seems to bear some rather familiar names. Or am I wrong?"

Weston stared at the list, then began pawing among papers in his brief-case. Finding what he wanted, the commissioner exclaimed:

"You're right, Cranston! Why didn't I think of it myself! Here are names and aliases that we totally neglected because the men did not have criminal records. They tally with names on those drivers cards found on the bank robbers!"

"So somebody is really running Big Leo's mob," commented Cranston. "The same old outfit geared over to a new style of work, this time outright crime."

"I'll inform Washington right away," decided Weston. "This gives us the very lead we wanted."

This time it was Marldon who supplied a smile.

"You have already given me a better lead," declared Marldon. He snapped his fingers and brought a secretary over to his chair. "Foster, get me those association reports on used car sales."

Foster already had the lists. Thumbing through them, Marldon found the sheet he wanted.

"You say that Saugus was murdered," stated Marldon. "More specifically, you gave monoxide as the cause. We might therefore assume that he was gassed in the very car that was later driven into the river."

"I consider it very likely," agreed Weston. "The car had a defective heater that could have emitted monoxide fumes from the exhaust."

"Do you know where that car came from?"

Weston shook his head.

"I do," declared Marldon, replying to his own question. "It was purchased by the Quick Deal Auto Exchange, one of the so-called companies that Saugus operated."

"That's natural enough," returned Weston. "Saugus did all his buying through those names."

"Were all of his telephones connected?"

"Why, no. I believe that the service had been discontinued on one."

"And that one was Quick Deal. Saugus had sold out that particular company. That is another practice of the fly-by-nights. They peddle companies as well as cars. It keeps people from catching up with them."

Marldon handed the documents to Weston, who held them so that Cranston could read them too. Chief among them was a confidential report on the Quick Deal Auto Exchange, stating that cars it had purchased were still in garages as yet uncalled for.

"Saugus must have been going the rounds," decided Weston, "picking up the cars that he had bought through Quick Deal."

"Not necessarily," objected Cranston. "That death car may have been the last he was to collect. He could have sold the rights to the others when he disposed of the company."

"I incline to your opinion, Cranston," declared Marldon, "because we have learned where some of the Quick Deal cars were taken a few days before Saugus was murdered. Here are the reports."

One look at the reports was enough for Weston.

"To Happy Jack's!" exclaimed the commissioner. "You mean he took over Quick Deal?"

"Apparently he bought out Saugus," replied Marldon. "But I don't think he wanted any part of Quick Deal after what happened—or should I say, after what didn't happen?"

The question was puzzling to Weston, so Marldon stared significantly at Cranston, who responded with a nod.

"A nice analysis," certified Cranston. "Let me see how well I follow it. First, Saugus must have gone to Happy Jack and offered to sell him the Quick Deal Auto Exchange."

Marldon nodded.

"And from that," continued Cranston, "Happy Jack concluded that Saugus intended to leave town. Knowing that Saugus had once worked for Big Leo, it probably had something to do with the old mob."

Another nod from Marldon.

"So Happy Jack bought him out," analyzed Cranston, "but left Saugus the privilege of keeping one car, the blue coupe. There may have been some dickering on that matter."

"I am sure there was," affirmed Marldon. "It was the only way Happy Jack could find the time he wanted."

"Find what time?" sputtered Weston. "Stop talking in riddles!"

"If we're talking in riddles"—Marldon included a deep chuckle with his tone—"we are solving them for you, commissioner. At least Cranston is, so let him proceed."

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"Time to fix the death car," explained Cranston. "It's very plain, commissioner. In closing out his business, Saugus put himself right in a trap. There's only one question: why didn't he peddle the other fake companies too?"

"He probably couldn't," supplied Marldon. "The only company that would have interested Happy Jack was Quick Deal. The name fitted his own method of operation."

"A good point," approved Cranston. "Well, commissioner, there you have it. By all rights, Saugus should have started from New York and crashed somewhere on the open road. Instead, the monoxide fixed him while he was driving somewhere in town."

"Probably to Happy Jack's" added Marldon. "If he didn't like the blue car, he might have decided to deliver it and pick up one of the others. Somehow I can picture Saugus dying right in Happy Jack's buying lot."

The whole thing drove through Weston's head so hard that he came bouncing to his feet.

"Happy Jack Smiley!" shouted Weston. "There's our man, the big brain of the double-barreled racket! Car-thief, bank-robber all in one, using the mob that worked for Big Leo, the crowd that Harry Saugus knew too much about! We're going over and arrest Happy Jack right now!"

Fifteen minutes later, a row of cars came rolling into Happy Jack's lot, bringing customers who intended neither to buy or sell. First in the procession was Weston's big official car, with Cranston and Marldon riding as extra passengers. The remaining cars contained the various used car dealers who were members of the Cross-Country Delivery Association, all anxious to witness the downfall of Happy Jack.

They expected to find a smiling man with a fistful of cash, exactly as he was advertised. But Happy Jack's buying lot lacked its generous, beaming owner. The only man on the premises was Clip, and the stooge wilted the moment he learned who the commissioner was.

It took Clip just three minutes to blubber the part he had played in disposing of Larry's body. Until now, Clip hadn't suspected that his own boss, Happy Jack, could have put the murder squad on his trail, to help speed up the process. When that angle was suggested to him, Clip wanted to tell more than all.

Unfortunately, he couldn't.

All Clip could reveal was that Happy Jack had packed and left an hour before, after mulling deeply over some newspaper accounts of a bank robbery in West Virginia. Clip produced the newspaper that Happy Jack had been reading. It was in a waste-basket in the office.

There was something else in that same waste-basket.

Something else that only Lamont Cranston noticed. After the others left the office, he remained. The thing in the waste-basket was a large road map of the United States and on it were tiny dots in black pencil, that seemed to have much to do with Happy Jack's musings.

Those dots represented towns where certain things had happened, along with other towns where things could—or might have occurred. As if timed to Happy Jack's own calculations, Cranston ran his forefinger across the map, slackening it as it traveled further westward.

When his hand stopped, Cranston laughed in a tone that was whispered, yet ominous. It was the laugh of The Shadow, the sort he supplied when he knew that his trail was due to cross that of crime.

CRIME CARAVAN

Time, place and purpose would be factors in the case. The Shadow had put the finger on them all!

XIV.

THAT night another twenty cars were highjacked. It happened in Missouri under remarkable circumstances which were witnessed by both Rod Ballard and Harry Vincent. All the odds seemed against it and both young men were resigned to an uneventful evening when the snapper came.

The caravan was rolling along the fringe of the muckiest swampland on the whole transcontinental route, when suddenly a car veered off the road, into what seemed the middle of a quagmire. Instead of dropping instantly from sight, its lights sliced steadily on the level until they were swallowed by the dead, dejected trees that poked up from the swamp.

By then another car was off the road and as Rod drove onward, they kept doing a column right until his turn came. Rod was driving a sedan with Harry as a secret passenger in the rear seat, but both were watching this startling thing, because Harry was up and looking at Rod's first call.

A swing to the right and Rod's car was in the procession. He and Harry could hear the squidge of their tires, but instead of the car being sucked into the swamp, it seemed to be drawing the muck upward. Watching the progress of the cars ahead, Harry provided the answer in a breathless tone:

"Pontoons!"

"That's it," agreed Rod. "But I can't even see them, Harry. You'd think we were skating right across the swamp."

"Keep going straight," advised Harry, "or we'll be buried twenty feet deep, like some of those dead trees."

"Why not?" demanded Rod. "That would put an end to this expedition, wouldn't it?"

"To our part of it, yes. The deal would be short one car and two men. It wouldn't be healthy if they tried to rescue you and found you had a passenger. Nor for me."

"I guess you're right, Harry. Well, sit tight and watch old Hank Monk bring this stage-coach through."

After several hundred yards, the procession hit high ground and ran along an abandoned corduroy road. Soon it was off through the swamp again, using the pontoon service and from then on the course could be described as short hops, pontoon style, between sizeable islands where the ground emerged a few feet from the swamp bed.

Occasionally flashlights flickered alongside the passing cars as though giant fireflies were improving the sound effects provided by big croaking bull-frogs that were everywhere in the swamp. But by this time, Rod and Harry were no longer straining their imaginations.

They knew what the lights meant.

A special crew was on hand to attend to the pontoons. They had probably acquired some old material left over from army maneuvers and hauled the stuff to the Missouri swamp. Having rigged their hidden causeway through the muck, it was their job to hide the evidence, which they could do by simply sinking the pontoons.

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"They're either using weights or winches," was Harry's verdict. "That's the only way they could have had the pontoons ready on short notice."

"What will they do now?" queried Rod. "Sink them permanently?"

"Not yet," decided Harry. "It would be too much trouble. Besides, they might want to use this rig to swipe a chunk from another caravan."

"Then the pontoons will stay as evidence."

"Better than any we've picked up yet. We're piling up a real case against these crooks. Rounding them up will be easy after the chief decides to crack down."

"I hope you're right about the pontoons."

"We'll know for sure," promised Harry, "after we get where we're going. We'll watch and see if the pontoon crew shows up too. If they do, we'll know that the evidence still stands."

The evidence did stand.

Reaching a road on the far side of the great swamp, the caravan proceeded to a thriving community called Laverne. There the cars were herded into an old abandoned factory on the outskirts. The building had once represented Laverne's only industry, but it had failed. Reorganized under boom conditions, the plant had demanded a new building, so it was now located on the other side of the town.

Around it had grown other plants and the workers needed cars. So the highjackers were bringing them and using the abandoned factory as a clearing house. The usual crew was on hand to do its speedy disguise work. Tomorrow or the next day, the car famine would be lessened in Laverne, with the local buyers mistaking their purchases for part of a legitimate shipment.

Harry told all this to Rod after they met at a stated spot near the factory. Rod had dropped Harry outside before pulling in with his car. What puzzled Rod was how Harry had found out so much.

"I found out even more," laughed Harry, as they started their trek into the town. "The fellows who handled the pontoons showed up just after you left. That proves our theory about the evidence."

"You mean you went inside?" inquired Rod. "Weren't you taking too big a chance?"

"It was better than staying out," replied Harry. "There were some chaps with guns, patrolling around for snoopers."

"But didn't anybody spot you indoors?"

"Sure. Some fellow thought I was one of the caravan drivers. He wanted to see my card, so I showed it."

"Didn't he notice the high number?"

"I kept my thumb over it. Apparently they weren't counting the drivers or checking them against the number of cars. So I collected fifty dollars and put it here." Harry slapped his left trousers pocket; then used his other hand to thwack the right, as he added: "The hundred is over here."

CRIME CARAVAN

"What hundred?"

"Money I collected from another fellow," laughed Harry. "He thought I belonged to the pontoon crew. They were getting double pay for their work."

Rod stopped short in open-mouthed admiration. Then, laughing along with Harry, Rod asked:

"Which did they give you—a railroad ticket or one for a bus?"

"Both," replied Harry, "or rather one of each. So whichever you have, I can match it."

Rod had a railroad ticket and the train pulled out an hour later. It was a through limited with a club car so Harry and Rod spent some of their unearned cash to ride de luxe, thus avoiding any of the low-number caravan drivers who might be in the smoker. At a table in the corner of the club, Harry unfolded a map and pointed out its details to Rod.

"Where we went," declared Harry, "it was impossible to go. You'd have to travel a hundred miles to get around that swamp, what with rivers and other obstacles. Even the railroad veers completely away from it."

The map was self-explanatory, as Rod observed when he studied it. Another feature promptly occurred to him.

"Those cars might have gone anywhere," said Rod, "That is anywhere except where we took them. Into Iowa, for instance or into Kansas—"

"Or even Nebraska," completed Harry. "That's part of the racket, to keep hopping state boundaries and confusing the various authorities."

"Why hasn't the F.B.I. taken over the case?"

"They probably have, where the bank robberies are concerned. But this business of cars vanishing from caravans hasn't been fully established as crime. Technically, I suppose, some of the cars just lost the road and haven't found it."

"And they won't be finding it."

"We know it," agreed Harry, "but the question is how soon this case can clear through the proper channels. The Feds don't worry over every wild-goose chase. I have a hunch though that this issue won't stay clouded much longer. I'm giving it another twenty-four hours, at most."

Though Harry Vincent specified nothing further, it was plain that he was planning for the grand clean-up when it came. Admiringly Rod Ballard watched him sort out his report sheets, adding details garnered to-night. Along with such data, Harry had rolls of film representing pictures that he had taken along the road. They included photographs of various low-number drivers, snapped at off-moments around lunch stands and other stopping places.

These would piece perfectly with well marked road maps, descriptions of hijacked cars and other evidence. All would be part of the grand pay-off which The Shadow was obviously intending to deliver. It would be a pay-off in reverse, where crime was concerned. In brief, it would prove again that crime was something that didn't pay.

CRIME CARAVAN

When, how, and where that climax would come, only The Shadow knew!

XV.

THE next afternoon, Harry and Rod again caught up with the caravan, or to put it more accurately, the caravan—what was left of it—caught up with them.

This happened in Colorado, not far from the Kansas border. It was a place where reserve drivers were supposed to assemble and did, for along with Rod and Harry, nearly twenty others appeared, all men who had piloted cars secretly across the Missouri marshes.

To a man they expressed surprise at learning that more cars had disappeared. In fact, they became more than surprised; they actually showed indignation. Things like this wouldn't happen, so they said, if the C.D.A. relied on trust-worthy low-number men like themselves.

The local inspector agreed with them. He was an honest fellow who hadn't any idea that he was talking to the very men who had manoeuvred another highjack job on a wholesale scale. He declared that when the caravan arrived, he would put these men at the wheels, thus insuring safe delivery of whatever cars were left.

Harry talked over that angle with Rod at the local post office, after opening a fat letter that was waiting there. The envelope contained fresh data from The Shadow, covering investigations by agents who had gone to towns that the caravan had left far behind.

"This clinches everything," assured Harry, as he arranged the new papers with his own. "This little bundle lists every phony inspector along the line. It has the names of all the local fixers—men like Kerringer—and just about takes care of the crooked mechanics who handle the garage work."

"What about the drivers?" inquired Rod. "You don't want to forget them."

"I haven't," said Harry. "Tabbing them was my business and it's done. But they'll be in for a general round-up tonight."

"Tonight?" echoed Rod. "You mean they're going to snatch another batch of cars?"

"Why not?" inquired Harry. "There's more than forty left out of the original hundred."

"But the inspector here is honest. I could tell that when I talked to him."

"That makes it all the better. If the Feds show up and try to make him talk, he won't have anything to tell."

Except that he put low-number men on the job. The Feds will be watching for that crowd to rejoin the caravan out in Nevada or somewhere."

"But they won't be back again, assured Harry, tapping his bundle of papers. "The chief has called the turn and this business of an honest inspector fits with it. Tonight is the blow-off. Our phony fellow-drivers will scatter and stay scattered; at least that's what they expect to do."

Rod began to understand Harry's reference to a round-up. Wherever the stolen cars would go, The Shadow would be there first. How that mysterious investigator intended to call the turn was a mystery to Rod until Harry unfolded a map and laid his finger right in the coffin corner.

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"There's such a thing as becoming too clever," declared Harry. "That's what has happened to this game."

"You mean Happy Jack has outsmarted himself?" queried Rod. "How?"

"By deciding to top everything with a certain stunt that every big-shot crook has hoped to try, but hasn't been able. State lines have always been helpful to criminals who want to confuse the law and this game has been based on that system."

"I know it has." Rod gave a recollective nod. "Each job could have happened in two states—or sometimes three."

"And this time, four," expressed Harry. "It's a natural, from a criminal's standpoint, to spring the blow-off near the one place in the country where four states meet!"

Harry lifted his finger and Rod stared at the cross-lines which bore the names of Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico.

"That isn't where the cars will be taken," stated Harry, "but it's where the crowd will head before they scatter. That's why it's a give-away, because the cars will naturally be dropped at the nearest place of convenient disposal. That place happens to be Pass City, another boom town where there is a big demand for used cars."

Harry didn't state how far Pass City was from the famous corner, nor did he bother to mention which of the four states it was in. Getting there would be an automatic process so far as Harry and Rod were concerned. The important fact was that The Shadow had foreseen the coming game and would be on hand to block it.

Proof of that was given when Harry and Rod returned to the parking lot and found the honest inspector in a dither. He had received a personal phone call from Thomas P. Marldon, president of the Cross-Country Delivery Association. He had given specific orders that cars should be entrusted only to low number drivers; that if there were not enough of these, any extra cars should be held until Marldon could supply new men from San Francisco, where he had arrived by plane.

Harry regarded Marldon's plane trip as good news, because if Marldon had flown to California, Cranston could have reached Colorado in the meantime. As for Marldon's trip, it was explained by a news report coming over the radio in the office at the parking lot. The news bulletin stated that a certain John Smiley, alias Happy Jack, was wanted as the brain in a crime ring that alternated bank robberies with car thefts. His identity exposed, Happy Jack was now a fugitive from justice, and any one learning of his whereabouts was to notify the F.B.I. direct. A ten-thousand dollar reward was being offered for his capture.

Small clusters of men began to discuss these new developments. It was interesting to hear them talk in a non-committal way, these men who carried low-number cards, as if they were not concerned with the matter in question. In a sense, they weren't, for they had no connection with the higher-ups. They were simply piece-workers, who for fifty dollars a delivery, brought in cars to the black market at designated centers. They didn't care about Happy Jack, so long as someone handled their end of the bargain.

The discussion was still going on when the caravan arrived. As usual, the drivers who came with it had no idea how or where the tail-end of their procession had been clipped off. They seemed very indignant over the whole thing, and some of them were anxious to be transferred to the rear cars of the bob-tailed caravan, just to make sure that no more highjacking occurred. They were promptly over-ruled by the inspector, who told them they were relieved from duty, which produced a fervid but useless outburst. Ignoring the argument entirely, the inspector began to assign the low-number drivers.

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This was really a pay-off, or at least the makings of one.

The only cars that were going out were being piloted by highjackers! With more than enough honest drivers to take the abbreviated caravan safely through, the inspector was putting them in the discard and giving precedence to crooks. All this was the result of the precaution adopted by Thomas P. Marldon himself. The only thing that was saving any of the cars was the lack of crooks to drive them!

Of course there was one honest man in the bunch, namely Rod Ballard. He was assigned to a coupe and Harry Vincent didn't have a chance to join him as a passenger, not in broad daylight. But Harry did the next best thing, by reaching in the window of Rod's car, plucking his friend's sleeve, and calling for a quick exchange of cards. Armed with Rod's card, Harry approached the inspector just as he was running short of drivers and flashed the low number in his face. This time Harry used his thumb to cover the name and the inspector, much harassed by high-number men who still wanted to drive cars, gave Harry the nod to take one on the strength of the low number.

Settling himself behind the wheel, Harry waited for the other cars to swing from the lot. Glancing indifferently at the angry men who were protesting their honesty, he noticed some who weren't. They formed a little cluster over beyond the booth and it was from their nods that Harry first recognized that something was wrong.

As they spread apart, their faces told him more. Maybe they did carry high numbers, but they were phonies. Viewed in a group, they were too much of a class to conceal their true character, which they might have done as individuals. But Harry knew those faces anyway, from thumb-nail photos that The Shadow had included in the packet sent by mail.

They were left-overs from Big Leo's strong-arm outfit, the same ilk as those bank robbers who had staged the job at Elcor. Like the highjackers, this crowd had been tagged as crooks employed by Happy Jack, or to put it more precisely, these were the very men whom the law had blamed for everything.

It simply added to the incongruity of the picture. When the Feds arrived here, as Harry was sure they shortly would, they would be given descriptions of the wrong crew and go chasing them instead of trailing the caravan. For the bank mob, having agreed upon something, were sidling out of the parking lot, apparently more than glad to be relieved from driving duty.

Watching them go, Harry saw that they were heading toward the railway station and he recalled that a west-bound train was due within the next half hour. Then, as a happy afterthought, Harry decided that when the Feds did arrive, they would probably trail the caravan for want of other clues. The F.B.I. was thorough in its measures and the sudden departure of known crooks, if checked, could be taken to mean they might have gone ahead to waylay the supposedly honest caravan drivers.

Sometimes ignorance of facts was better than knowledge. The law held the notion that Happy Jack was relying on a single but versatile crew that could rob or highjack as occasion called. That illusion would be dispelled, should this caravan be trailed and found wandering off its course; but if that didn't happen, The Shadow would still be set to disclose the whole game at Pass City. Whatever might happen, Harry wasn't, losing confidence in his chief.

Harry's reflections ended, as the inspector waved him out to the open road. In this country, where traffic was light and sunsets sudden, there wasn't the usual dusk hazard that complicated driving. Other complications lay along this road and Harry, as the last man in the line, might have a say at hampering them.

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Gazing off to the sun-tinted mountains in the distance, Harry Vincent set his speed at thirty and kept the proper interval between his car and the one ahead, while he speculated upon a little plan that might bring unexpected assistance to The Shadow!

XVI.

It was after dark and the cars were crawling up through the very mountains that Harry had admired in the distance. This was really a no-man's land, a lost segment of the Rockies, where almost anything could happen. Oddly however, the one thing that seemed impossible was the thing that was most certainly due.

These mountains were a long way from Pass City, with plenty of barren ranges between. Yet in a stretch of more than one hundred miles, there was nothing resembling a highway between. How the highjackers intended to get these cars to Pass City without using helicopter attachments was definitely a mystery to Harry, but he couldn't credit Happy Jack with designing crime of the future.

At least the situation carried intriguing features which made Harry anxious to witness their development. Usually, when crime unraveled in slow-motion fashion, it became unnerving, but on this occasion, Harry's appetite was whetted to the full. Despite himself he felt a dash of disappointment when he glanced back and saw tiny lights taking a bend in a mountain road, some ten miles back, allowing for the many horseshoe swings.

Those lights stood for cars that were coming faster than the caravan and Harry labeled them as belonging to the law. Though he'd been hoping for trailers of that sort, he hated to miss what lay ahead. If the Feds did overtake the caravan, tonight's trick might remain undisclosed and Harry wanted it to complete his records.

Within the next few miles, the answer came. The road was a downgrade and the cars were doing better than their accustomed thirty, as if the leader had suddenly decided to remove the clamps, now that everybody understood. Harry knew this road, because he'd checked it on the map. It descended almost to the level of an abandoned branch line railway before veering further off into the mountains.

It was just before the bend that the cars began to slacken speed. Instead of taking the curve, they struck a flat stretch that crinkled like a bed of cinders. Then, almost before Harry could grasp the fact, they were pulling up beside a line of freight cars standing silent on the railroad spur!

The doors of the box-cars were open and from each lay a runway slanting to the ground beside the track. One by one the automobiles were being warped right up into the freight cars by men stationed on the ground. Here was highjacking with a new and surprising twist!

Why Harry hadn't thought of it, he didn't know. It was the only answer, considering the circumstances. This branch railway went where highways didn't go and one place was to Pass City. Apparently these cars were empties ordered from another trunk line and the branch was being revived as a connecting link. Arranging the additional details was simply a job for the men who were to handle the fence work in Pass City.

The fault to this sudden discovery was the way it balked Harry's pet plan. As the last car in the caravan he had decided to linger and await the arriving Feds. It was too late for that, because a husky man in overalls was already coming up beside Harry's car and ordering him to get it on board the freight.

Harry complied. The next task was to haul in the runway. Harry gave the brawny man a hand, all the while watching along the mountain road, hoping to see the lights of approaching automobiles. None came and already Harry felt the jolt of a shifting engine taking up slack between the freight cars. With mere minutes to

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spare, Harry took a look at the brawny man beside him and saw what poked from the fellow's pocket.

It was a railroad flare that the crook carried while faking the part of a brakeman. Sliding his hand toward the pocket, Harry acquired the flare and waited until the husky jumped down from the car. The train was starting when Harry pulled away the cap and gave it the reverse tap that started the red light going.

Leaning out to pitch the flare at the right of way, Harry was stopped by the grip of a brawny hand. Into the red glare came a leering, vicious face, belonging to the very man whom Harry had so recently tricked. Evidently the fellow had missed the flare and come running along to climb back in Harry's car.

Wresting away from the big man's grip, Harry dropped back and threw up an arm to ward off punches. Next he was jabbing back to the tune of the clacking wheels, but not with fists alone. What Harry was using was the flare and it made a potent weapon. Each swing of that torch sent the husky reeling back, half-blinded by the searing red light that swabbed across his face.

But that wasn't bringing the result that Harry wanted. The train was clattering around a curve, away from the highway where the automobiles were due. With ten minutes to burn, the flare would at least attract attention, if planted where it belonged; but it belonged a long way back and this curve represented the limit of visibility.

Twisting toward the door, Harry chucked the flare dart-fashion and saw its spiked end strike the dirt beside the roadbed. The flare remained standing at an angle and Harry was around again to meet the savage attacker who was coming with new fury.

The fight that followed was a classic, one of the toughest brawls that Harry had ever encountered. What made it sporting was the way the reeling train helped and hindered it. The automobile was a factor too, since it occupied a good portion of the box-car. Dodging around past the radiator, Harry managed to ward off the fists that came slashing through the darkness, for his opponent hadn't shaken the dazzling effects of the red light. Harry's mistake came when he tried to carry the fight himself, from the far side of the car.

Meeting his big assailant with a series of point-blank punches, Harry expected to flatten him, but all that took punishment were Harry's knuckles. If the fellow's chin had a button, it couldn't be found in the dark, and his mode of retaliation was to fold Harry's arms inside his own. Next he was dragging Harry around the back of the automobile with the simple but direct intention of heaving him bodily from the train which was now hitting close to forty through some very rugged country.

Harry made a grab for the rear door of the very fancy sedan that had carried him into this predicament. He caught the door handle and nearly wrenched it from its socket while his shoulder threatened to do the same. Getting his other hand free, he found his assailant's weakness, which happened to be the big man's stomach. Doubling from that one punch, the husky suddenly straightened and came charging, head down, under full power.

The first impulse was to duck that drive, but Harry didn't yield to it. The place to duck was into the sedan, which was why Harry had started to open the door. It might have been that Harry couldn't duck, or that he was just groggy enough to mistake the door handle for the flare that he had chucked a while before. However, it seemed like a good weapon so he swung it and the door came along. Staggering as the freight hit a curve, Harry was out of the way when the door met the charging man, the sill on the exact level of his lowered forehead.

Then Harry was alone, hanging onto the flapping door while out from the open side of the box car went a spinning figure that had ricocheted from the head-on smash. Curving along a steep embankment the freight train seemed to be fringing the deepest valley in the Rockies, with nothing in between. The man without a

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button missed the brink. His arms were flapping wildly, his hands clawing at space when the valley swallowed him.

A swing of the train reeled Harry into the sedan. As he found the seat, he hauled the door shut after him. His head felt very weak as he fell across to the driver's seat and from then on, his ride seemed a weird whirl, interspersed with shooting stabs of red light that were an afterimage of the flare.

Blackness brought smoothness. There was something velvety about the way the train was riding. In fact Harry gradually realized that it wasn't moving at all when a hand came pounding at his window. Looking up, Harry saw the dim lights of an unloading platform outside the car and realized that the hand was gesturing for him to get the sedan into circulation.

Working the car out to the platform, Harry drove it down a ramp and fell in line with the other automobiles. In the dim light he saw a sign topping the end of an abandoned freight shed that had once served the old branch line. The sign said: PASS CITY

A short way off, a few lights revealed the town, but the cars were avoiding the main street. They swung along behind a batch of squatty buildings and coasted into the back door of the squattest of all. The place was the inevitable garage, with its usual crew, which included a few faces that Harry had seen before. Apparently these camouflage men were hustled from one highjacking center to another as fast as they completed their decorations.

Which made it all the merrier from Harry's viewpoint, even with his headache. He was feeling better now, and he grinned when he saw Rod looking anxiously in his direction. This was going to be more than the usual business of collecting fifty dollars in delivery money with some sort of bonus to conclude the final job.

The proof lay in the fact that some respectable-looking men were present, sorting bundles of money in a large suit-case that was lying flat and open on a work-bench. The men looked respectable, but their appearance was deceiving, because actually they were fixers and fences from other areas, assembled here for the blow-off.

A derby-hatted gentleman with the solemn, elongated face of an undertaker represented the accounting department. He answered to the name of Bradbury and was very meticulous in checking time accounts that others handed him. In fact, Mr. Bradbury made it quite evident that he represented somebody who would expect delivery of a very large lion's share, with probably a small but quite respectable commission for Mr. Bradbury.

While others were watching this procedure, Rod managed to work over beside Harry.

"Happy Jack's take," undertoned Rod. "I wonder in which of four states he's waiting to receive it."

"We'll find out if we watch Bradbury," returned Harry. "That looks like the full profits, including the sale here in Pass City."

"A hundred thousand bucks at least. But we oughtn't to let Bradbury get away with it."

"Don't worry. We won't."

Rod's face brightened.

"You mean your chief is sure to get here?" he asked. "But how are we going to know it when he does?"

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Harry smiled as he recalled The Shadow's past methods.

"We'll know it," began Harry, "because it will happen in a great big way—"

Something did happen in a great big way, large enough to interrupt Harry's description, by forcefulness alone. At that moment, every man in the garage was staggered by a heavy blast that shook the whole premises. The stolen cars seemed to come to life, the way their doors clattered and their bodies bounced on the springs, rattling the fenders like rustling leaves. Men reeled against the wall as they felt the floor creak under them. Bradbury dropped on his knees and wrapped his arms around the suit-case that contained the money. His derby tilted back instead of forward, which was why he was able to stare at the wall where nobody had been unlucky enough to be standing.

That wall had opened as if a giant had prodded it apart. Through it was gorging a cloud of blue-white smoke. If the devil himself had popped from such sulphurous fumes, none of these startled crooks would have been more horrified than they were.

How and why that blast had come, Harry Vincent didn't know, but he was sure it formed a prelude to the arrival of The Shadow!

XVII.

THE devil didn't pop.

What did come from the smoking hole in the wall was a sudden surge of sweated men, carrying guns in one hand, gripsacks in the other. Half a dozen in all, they swirled the smoke when they came through, and as it cleared, Harry saw the scene beyond. The building next door was the local bank, with teller's windows surrounding its tiled floor. Beyond was a big vault, wide-open, which the crooks had rifled before blowing a quick and handy exit. They must have managed to sneak in earlier and planned this for a finish.

That wasn't all.

The faces of this crew were familiar. They belonged to the tribe that had entrained that afternoon.

Their destination, like that of the highjacked cars, was Pass City, the town which lay so conveniently near so many state lines.

Two bands of criminals had crossed paths at last, which could be regarded as a tribute to the foresight of Happy Jack. Since this was the last job for both outfits, no climax could seem better than this meeting in Pass City.

There was just one flaw in the procedure. Neither group expected this sensational get-together. The highjackers, quiet men by nature, were thrown into alarm by the invasion of their reserves. Contrarily, the armed mob from the bank was not the sort to relish a horde of witnesses who stood gawking at what should have been an unhindered getaway.

The bank mob had a leader, whose name was promptly shouted by his followers. The name was Marty and in using it, his pals were calling his attention to Bradbury.

"Sock the guy with the derby, Marty!"

CRIME CARAVAN

"Pick up the moola, Marty! It's more than we took from the can we just cracked."

"We'll handle these lugs, Marty."

By "lugs" the mobbies meant the highjackers, who didn't like the term. They were quiet only on the surface, this crew which regarded Rod and Harry as members. They traveled equipped for trouble, though they didn't brandish their weapons openly, the way bank robbers did. But they could reach fast for guns, when occasion demanded. This was the occasion.

In his wildest dreams, Happy Jack Smiley had never pictured the scene that occurred.

The moment the highjackers began to reach, the mobbies began to shoot. That thinned the highjackers but not considerably, because most of them were on the dodge. Flinging their bags toward Marty, as if expecting him to take care of them, the bank robbers began to deploy too.

By then, Rod Ballard was flat on his face between two cars, where Harry Vincent purposely sprawled him. Before Rod could start to get up, Harry was down beside him, telling him to stay where he was.

Things happened very, very fast.

Flinging Bradbury back from the work bench, Marty slapped the money-laden suit-case shut and wheeled around with an ugly grin, intending to clear a circle with his gun. Instead the circle fired first. Their own revolvers out, the highjackers made the shortest possible work of Marty before bothering about his pals.

Savagely the bank mob doubled its fire, sending the highjackers scattering further. Coming to his feet, Bradbury saw Marty lying quite dead in the mess of satchels that the gang had brought from the bank. Being all for one, Bradbury gathered the whole lot along with his own suit-case. Staggering like an overburdened porter, he started for the door of the garage.

It wasn't the bags that increased Bradbury's stagger. What did it was bullets and plenty. Marty's boys took a little time out to avenge their leader and they did it all at once. Their shots overtook Bradbury so fast that they seemed to jolt him six steps forward. The bags went flying as he hit the floor face down and the derby hat went rolling ahead of him to the door he couldn't reach.

There was blackness at that door and it laughed.

Grim was the mockery that filled the momentary lull of gunfire. It announced an actor who had purposely ignored his cue to let the drama build.

Crooks knew their challenger:

The Shadow!

Only Harry Vincent fully understood. The Shadow had come to deal with each crew separately and more or less at leisure. Perhaps he had intended to handle the bank mob first and then begin the round-up of the highjackers. The turn of circumstances had altered that procedure.

The business of blowing the bank wall had brought men of crime together and they were of types that wouldn't mix. Instead of rushing into the scene, The Shadow had let it take care of itself, up to the present point. Having canceled some of each other off and rendered themselves leaderless, these factions had set themselves up for The Shadow's thrust.

CRIME CARAVAN

Only he could handle it now, for in taking shelter, the two tribes were making it harder to get at each other. In a waning battle, crooks were always apt to fraternize when they realized that their common enemy, the law, would soon be cracking down upon them. So The Shadow was forcing the inevitable, but with a purpose.

His big guns talked from the echoes of his laugh. Straining crooks went sprawling, spotted by the fiery tongue from those deadly automatics. Others dodged to escape the flanking fire that had curbed their friends, but in dodging they went helter-skelter. By then, the Shadow was really among them, before they could aim his way.

A streak of blackness, that was all.

It cleared the prone body of Bradbury and whirled, spurting fire like a cruiser's turret as it went past the spot where Marty lay. Shots sped between cars, under tables, and even probed the gaping hole that led back into the bank. Others were aimed at windows, which crashed as The Shadow fired, though the panes did not receive the bullets. What crashed the windows were the floundering forms of thugs who were hoping to climb out through and shoot back at The Shadow.

The Shadow's steel thunder was accompanied by the barks of revolvers, for plenty of his foemen were shooting too. Their trouble was they couldn't find a target in this dim garage where the shadows of their own stolen cars streaked the floor. The Shadow was in and out of everywhere, while the crooks stayed mostly in, and in some cases permanently.

Long practiced in The Shadow's service, Harry was doing some nice shooting too, and urging Rod to do the same. It was like a shooting gallery with The Shadow picking off the difficult moving targets while Harry was handling things like ducks on a rack. Yet Harry's work was highly valuable and good for Rod to copy, since Harry was giving preference to gunners who were holding steady while they took a bead on The Shadow.

The break came when the rats decided to desert a ship that they realized was already sunk. There were a lot of them still in circulation, though some were reasonably crippled. As soon as they saw that The Shadow was shooting elsewhere, they flung their empty guns away and dived for the broken windows. Some, with hands above their heads went running for the door.

They were sure that The Shadow wouldn't clip them when he saw that they couldn't fire back, and he didn't—with one exception. That came when a foolhardy crook stopped long enough to snatch at a money-laden satchel. What he received was a bullet in the hand and he ran out howling, clutching the wounded member with his other fist.

Harry nudged Rod and said:

"Come on."

They hurried across the deserted floor and stopped by the bags of money. Turning, Harry caught a gesture from The Shadow, which ended in a horizontal circle, delivered clockwise fashion. Rod didn't catch the purpose, but he did what Harry told him, which was to pick up the bags. With their divided burden, Harry led the way around the garage in the direction indicated by The Shadow.

There were shouts from the main street as they left it, accompanied by the bursts of shot-guns, which meant that the residents of Pass City were rounding up the crooks that The Shadow had scattered. But Harry and Rod were well away from all that tumult, when they reached the spot The Shadow had indicated.

CRIME CARAVAN

It was an express office, empty but lighted. Outside was standing a vacant car, with its motor throbbing slowly. Harry and Rod dumped the bags into the car; then Harry turned to look into the office. What Harry saw there was a square box addressed to J. Smiley.

The contents were easily guessed. Crooks wouldn't have been carrying proceeds from their previous robberies, so they had shipped such swag to Pass City in the name of Happy Jack, before he had become too notorious.

"Get hold of this," Harry told Rod. "We'll put it in the car with the rest of the stolen stuff and take it where crooks will never find it."

Guns in pockets, they were carrying the box when a happy chuckle intervened. The same thought must have crossed their minds at once, for both Harry and Rod were flashing looks of alarm when they turned.

Facing them with a great big gun was Happy Jack Smiley. He had come up from behind the counter.

"That's right, put it in the car." Happy Jack's gleaming grin was as ugly as his tone. "But I'll be the person who takes it, where nobody else will get it. I'll even tell you what state I'm going through. That's Arizona, because it's the shortest across to the Mexican border.

"What's in that box and those bags will be good anywhere." As he talked, Happy Jack was wangling his gun in a manner that kept Harry and Rod moving out to the car. "And what I've got in here"—he weighed the gun up and down—"will be good for both of you right now!"

Happy Jack said that, just as Harry and Rod were about to swing the box into the car. Their minds were still cooperative, for they had the same idea at once, and put it into practice. Reversing their heave, they flung the box at Happy Jack.

It might have saved one, but not both, for Happy Jack was quick to sidestep as he aimed. What did save both Harry and Rod was a lunging shape of blackness that came across the car hood in a flying dive, swinging a gun ahead of it. The Shadow had arrived sooner than Happy Jack expected, if Happy Jack expected The Shadow at all.

A quick shot might have failed to prevent Happy Jack from scoring a kill, but the lunge jolted his gun arm as he fired. His shot spouting high, Happy Jack turned to slug at The Shadow, who locked with him. Shouts came from somewhere, telling that the gunfire had been heard. The Shadow, while he beat off Happy Jack's attack, snapped a quick order to Harry

"Get to the airport." The Shadow's gun, beating away a swing by Happy Jack, finished with a gesture. "The plane is waiting. Take the bags to San Francisco—and the box—"

The box was in the car an instant later. Then Harry was behind the wheel with Rod beside him, driving away full tilt. The Shadow's plan was plain; he would personally add Happy Jack to the batch of captured crooks and perform one of his famous fade-outs. The matter of the missing money would be cleared up later, at the right time and place.

But this was one time when The Shadow's plans miscarried. Back in the light from the express office, two figures suddenly became a target for shots from darkness. The first arrivals there were a few crooks still at large, and they recognized their enemy, The Shadow.

CRIME CARAVAN

Sending Happy Jack spinning one direction, The Shadow whirled the other. He was gone into the darkness beside the railroad track, just as more shots rang from the flat platform of a chugging gasoline rail-car. The men who sprang from that contrivance were Feds who had spotted Harry's flare, from the mountain highway.

Leaving Happy Jack to be included in the round-up, The Shadow boarded the deserted rail-car and started it back along the branch, which led close enough to the airport for him to overtake Harry and Rod. But the little car was scarcely under way, before a lunging figure drove blindly through the dark and met The Shadow in a grapple.

It was Happy Jack again.

All the criminal activities attributed to Happy Jack were mild compared to the belated venom that he now exhibited. Harry's struggle with the husky in the box-car was mild compared to The Shadow's battle with this maddened fiend. The space was too limited for The Shadow to feint or sidestep to get in a telling gunstroke.

The tiny car was rollicking along the track at a speed never intended for it. Its motor full tilt, it was hitting the down-grade from Pass City on two wheels as often as four. Occasionally a muffled gun-shot sounded instead of the clash of swinging weapons, but the battle was still in doubt when the rocketing car hit the straight track of a tall, spidery trestle that crossed a narrow, two-hundred foot cavity known locally as Deep Rock Gulch.

There, in the moonlight, two figures swayed precariously on the very edge of the little car. One tilted outward, in the clutch of a cloaked attacker whose victory seemed sure.

Then, with a lucky twist, the circumstance was changed. The falling figure caught itself and hooked the car with one extended hand, while the cloaked form tripped forward, lost its hold and took the plunge.

Down went that tiny figure into the rocky bed of the dry gulch, the cloak dangling from its shoulder like a kite-tail. Scaling after it, drifting bat-like in the wind-swept canyon, scaled a slouch hat, its dips as crazy as the roll of Bradbury's derby.

Speeding onward, the gasoline car and its clinging victor vanished from the moonlight. Its wheels shrieked on the curve that followed the gulch and the motor gave a roaring spin. There was a clash of metal against rock and then a long, slow silence, broken finally by a loud, tinny clatter that sent its echoes pouring up from two hundred feet below.

Such was the double disaster that marked the finish of The Shadow's struggle with Happy Jack.

XVIII.

THE Frisco fog poured through the window and chilled Rod Ballard with the worst shivers he had ever experienced. Or maybe it wasn't the fog, though Harry Vincent seemed to be suffering the same misery.

Maybe it was the window, which they shouldn't be keeping open in weather like this, though to close it would be worse. For Harry and Rod had become two persons who belonged in the category of hunted men.

No word from The Shadow.

That wasn't saying they had heard no word of The Shadow. On the contrary, they had heard too much.

CRIME CARAVAN

The finding of a mangled body in the gulch near Pass City, was news of the last hour. It meant that Harry and Rod could consider themselves on their own, along with a few hundred thousand dollars that didn't belong to them.

They needed The Shadow's testimony.

This morning the newspapers had teemed with news from Pass City, where crooks who owned allegiance to Happy Jack had been rounded up to a man, on a basis of what was left of them. But some had certainly escaped, for the money that the prisoners talked about was gone.

Whoever had that money was wanted nearly as badly as was Happy Jack, who was still listed as at large.

The chills were getting Rod worse than ever. Harry arose, went over and slammed the window.

"It's no use," decided Harry. "If they spot us we may as well give up. Perhaps this evidence"—he tapped the packet in his inside pocket—"will stand us well, but I don't particularly care."

Rod gave an understanding nod.

"You mean on account of The Shadow?"

"That's it," replied Harry. "I feel as if we let him down. But on his account, I've got to find an out, where you're concerned. He wouldn't have wanted me to let you down."

"He was around when I needed him," said Rod. "I wouldn't be here if he hadn't been. I feel like you do, Harry. Pick up the telephone and call the Feds."

Harry shook his head.

"They wouldn't understand," said Harry. "I don't mean about us; we might square ourselves. I mean about The Shadow. They'd give him credit all right, but the world would have to know that he'd lost out at last."

"I think I understand," nodded Rod. "You'd like to carry on the old tradition."

"I would, and the Feds would like it, too. That's why they wouldn't thank me, even if they did believe me. You've seen what the mere thought of The Shadow can do to a pack of human rats. We're all working for the same cause, to exterminate that breed. But we'd be going nine steps backward if we let them know The Shadow wasn't with us any more.

The logic hit Rod hard. It wasn't just sentiment that was ruling Harry Vincent. It was loyalty of a sort that went beyond a question of life and death. It made all individual motives seem very small. Rod wished he could beat out his brains and thereby find some answer. Somehow his intensity and understanding inspired Harry, when he looked at his friend.

"Good chap." Harry clapped Rod on the shoulder. "You make me feel it's up to me, which it is. I've got to maneuver something that the chief would appreciate, if he still was with us. I think I have it."

"You have?"

"Yes." Harry gave a firm nod. "Let's pack this junk and take it right to the man who would appreciate it enough to listen to whatever we told him. I mean Thomas P. Marldon."

CRIME CARAVAN

It was a real inspiration, that one. Ten minutes later, Harry and Rod were in a taxicab, carrying two very large suit-cases, one practically a small trunk with a handle. When they arrived at the Hotel Fernandino, one of Frisco's best and most towering structures, Harry called the pent house and asked for Mr. Marldon.

The secretary, Foster, asked who Harry was. In return Harry gave the name of Lamont Cranston, one which Rod didn't recognize. Foster didn't remember the difference in the voice. He told Harry to come up.

When they reached the pent house, Foster saw the difference, but Harry handed him the biggest bag and brushed him aside with orders to follow along. Striding into a room that was furnished like an office, Harry found Marldon seated behind a desk, alternating between indignation and surprise. Introducing himself, Harry did the same for Rod. Taking the big suit-case from the befuddled Foster, he pushed the fellow out and closed the door.

Marldon was pushing buttons by that time, but he stopped when Harry opened the suit-cases. Next, Harry and Rod were piling bundles containing cash of all sorts and sizes right on Marldon's desk. Then, to convince the man of rugged face and eagle eye, Harry handed him the packet that contained crime's details.

"You'll find it all there," assured Harry. "The complete show-down on Happy Jack Smiley. How he hijacked cars belonging to your association, to a profit of more than a hundred thousand dollars. Along with the details of his other racket, under the head of bank robbery, engineered with the mob that once worked for Big Leo Trennick."

Marldon placed his head right between his hands and shook it.

"You've explained everything," he declared, "but it still has me dazed. I couldn't understand how my best drivers were all rounded up in Pass City. I tried to believe that they were there to block crime and the fight they made seemed to indicate such. But now I see the truth; Happy Jack didn't let one hand know what the other was doing. That was the great mistake that finished him."

Sitting back in his big chair, Marldon folded his hands across his ample chest and inquired:

"What would you like me to do next?"

"I don't know," replied Harry, frankly. "First, there was a lot more to this than meets the eye. For instance, the part The Shadow played."

"The Shadow?" queried Marldon. "You mean that he was in this?"

"Too much so," replied Harry, grimly. "He really handled everything. Rod and I were just helping in our small way. But The Shadow hit bad luck when he ran into Happy Jack."

"Ran into Happy Jack? Where?"

"On that hand-car that chased across the trestle. That was when The Shadow must have pitched into the gulch."

"I begin to understand," Marldon was nodding slowly. "You want me to help The Shadow myth."

"Call it a cause," corrected Harry. "You owe The Shadow as much as we do—even more, if judged from a cash basis. Suppose I give you my suggestions—"

CRIME CARAVAN

Marldon wasn't listening His face was frozen, like his eyes. Harry had seen that look before; it was the sort that came over a man when he faced a looming gun. Since Marldon was looking right between Harry and Rod, they both turned and became frozen, too.

Standing in the doorway was a bulky man whose square, block face looked as though it had been hammered down between his overbuilt shoulders. His features were coarse, except for his hair which was very thin and a trifle inclined toward baldness. But the most impressive point about the man, aside from his narrow eyes with their sharp look but droopy lids, was the fact that he was big.

That was the feature that brought the name from Harry's startled lips, in an incredulous tone:

"Big Leo Trennick!"

The big man nodded, or rather he gave his shoulders some hunches that moved his head.

"Back from the dead," announced Big Leo, while he moved the revolver that matched his size. "Just a rumor, that death of mine, and a very convenient one. I'm here to pick up what belongs to me, the money from those bank jobs. While I'm about it, I ought to collect on what's owing Happy Jack on his racket. He gave me enough trouble, moving in on my game without asking."

Never had Harry Vincent been swept by the dismay which now gripped him. Big Leo, returned from the dead, was one blow too much, coming on top of the actual tragedy that had involved The Shadow. In hoping to preserve his chief's tradition, Harry was finding himself more in need of The Shadow than ever.

The glint in Big Leo's eye spelled murder. He would have followed it through, as part of his urge for cash, if Marldon hadn't shifted in his chair. With that movement, Marldon accomplished what Harry had supposed that only The Shadow could do; namely, reverse a situation such as this.

There were French windows at the back of Marldon's office, like those in his New York residence. Both pairs split open and two men stepped into sight, servants who carried revolvers, trained straight upon Big Leo, whose head went wagging back and forth, his dreary eyes aghast.

With a smile that The Shadow could well have appreciated, Marldon reached forward and took the gun from the slumped hand of Big Leo.

XIX.

THE servants were gone and Marldon was toying with Big Leo's gun. All the while, Marldon smiled, for from the snarling lips of Big Leo was coming a confession that fitted with the evidence already gained. Harry Vincent was taking down the notes, feeling that this was all being done in a way The Shadow would have liked.

It was very simple, that business of the servants. They had arrived when Marldon first pressed the buzzers, but he had given them a gesture that waved them back, when he found that Harry and Rod had come to see him on an honest mission. Since the servants were still handy, Marldon had used them to confound Big Leo when that visitor made himself a menace.

"That's all there is," concluded Big Leo, in a sullen tone. "I faked my death when I had that night club fire, and why not? If I'd stayed around I'd have taken a rap instead of collecting the insurance through some guys who worked for me. Then I was all set to go in for knocking off banks.

CRIME CARAVAN

"It was a cinch using those caravans of yours to move my mob around. They just hopped on and off, whenever it suited them. I wasn't worried until I found that Larry Saugus was joining up. I thought he was doing it to check on me, but it turned out different. I sent the mob after him and they chased him in the river, then went back to his joint to see what they could find there, which wasn't anything. I still can't figure Saugus except that he was a double-crosser."

Waiting to make sure that Big Leo had finished, Marldon gestured to the money on the desk. He told Big Leo to sort the bank robbery cash from the highjacking money, which Big Leo did, wearing a glower.

"There it is," growled Big Leo, finally. "Now call the Feds and turn me over. I ought to have told you that before you made me count the dough that's really mine, even though I'm not going to get it."

"Why not?" inquired Marldon.

"Why not what?" demanded Big Leo. "I said the cash was mine—or could have been—"

"And is," completed Marldon. "Of course"—his eyes took on a sharp glitter as they moved from Rod to Harry—"we shall have to do something about these two men."

It was Big Leo who caught on first and did it with a huge gasp.

"You aren't fooling!" exclaimed Big Leo. "No, you couldn't be!"

"I am not fooling." Marldon's tone was crisp, the gun was tight in his hand. "I wouldn't interfere with another man's game any more than you would, Leo. We both made the same mistake; we thought Happy Jack was the other man."

Big Leo settled back, to give Marldon a better chance to keep the gun moving from Harry to Rod.

"Think of me being smart," laughed Big Leo. "Having the boys ship dough to Happy Jack at Pass City, just to pile up evidence on him—and all the while you were making a bigger fall guy out of the guy."

"Of course," nodded Marldon. "When I saw what a racket selling used cars could be, I decided to really get into it. So I posed as a man of absolute integrity and started those caravans moving. Happy Jack and his type sent cars through safely first, because as you put it, Happy Jack was to be the fall guy.

"Then came the caravan supplied by honest dealers belonging to the C.D.A. which I had sponsored. I arranged with Larry Saugus to hire the sort of drivers who would highjack those cars in nice large batches. I had local men to sell them in various towns, by holding off bus franchises.

"Incidentally, those franchises are now being granted. Those stolen cars, bought at high prices, will be sold off cheaply. I intend to acquire them and put them into the rising market. When demand gets ahead of supply, you must keep the supply rotating. I hope I make myself clear."

"Plenty clear," complimented Big Leo. "Say, mister, you're giving me lessons that are worth dough. Figure the charges and collect it from the take from my racket. It's laying right there where you can reach it."

"No charge for the lessons," said Marldon with a broad smile. "You have taught me a few things yourself. But to resume my story, I mistrusted Saugus as much as you did. So I had a car specially fitted to dispose of him with monoxide gas."

CRIME CARAVAN

That one left Harry staring at Rod. It was something they hadn't even begun to suspect.

"I told Saugus to sell one of his companies to Happy Jack," continued Marldon. "Then I suggested that he join the caravan and see that things went right. He began to get suspicious so he went to see Happy Jack. Fortunately, he must have died in that well-trapped car before he could talk."

"That's what he did do," blurted Rod, before Harry could warn him to keep quiet. "So Happy Jack talked me into joining the caravan, just to get me out of town, I guess."

"Unquestionably that was all," declared Marldon. "He didn't want Larry's body around, so he got rid of it. I suppose you thought later that he was trying to get rid of you, too."

Rod gave a rueful nod.

"We were trailing Saugus," chuckled Big Leo. "We really thought he drove himself into the river. Say—Happy Jack must have gone to Larry's joint first, to get rid of some papers there."

"He did," nodded Marldon. "He wanted to cover up that purchase of the Quick Deal company. But it wasn't long before Happy Jack discovered he was being framed by somebody a lot more important than Larry Saugus."

"So he got smart," acknowledged Big Leo. "We can't blame him for that. He thought of the same thing we did—"

"About those four state lines, interposed Marldon. "I should have realized that every man with a keen criminal brain would see the possibilities of that particular corner."

"You sort of forced me to it," said Big Leo. "But Happy Jack thought it up himself and went there to collect what he could—"

"And met The Shadow," added Marldon. "We were smarter. We waited to have our shares brought to us. I counted on a reliable chap named Bradbury."

"Marty was my man," declared Big Leo. "Only the two didn't get along."

"Neither did The Shadow and Happy Jack." Marldon reached for a radio beside his desk and turned the dial. "Fortunately, The Shadow was the one eliminated. There is a news bulletin coming through and I'd like to know if they've caught up with Happy Jack."

Big Leo gave a shrug to indicate that neither he nor Marldon would have to bother about Happy Jack, the man who knew nothing but was blamed for all.

"Happy Jack just went after what he thought he could get," began Big Leo. "What can he pin on us? Nothing. He won't even begin to figure—"

Marldon waved his hand as the news bulletin interrupted. A brisk voice came over the radio.

"Flash!" it said. "The body found in the gulch near Pass City has just been identified through a Florida dentist, who recognized the gold teeth as belonging to that notorious man of crime, Happy Jack Smiley. A man with gold teeth shouldn't bite off too much, but Happy Jack did. He tried to handle two groups of criminals without letting either know about the other. Instead of crime paying double, it didn't pay at all—"

CRIME CARAVAN

Marldon snapped off the radio and planked Big Leo's gun hard on the desk, crackling the glass top. Both he and Big Leo exclaimed a mutual thought:

"The Shadow!"

The laugh that came was the timeliest that Harry Vincent had ever heard. It came straight from the door, the same door through which Harry and Rod had preceded Big Leo. There, cloaked in his familiar garb, stood The Shadow, a gun in each hand, one for each master mind who faced him.

Of the two, Marldon was the more aghast.

"Your game revealed itself, declared The Shadow. "It wasn't Happy Jack Smiley who arranged those caravans with their trusted low-number drivers. It was Thomas P. Marldon from start to finish. You gave the law the facts you thought it needed, at times which suited your convenience.

"The other game, with its bold bank robberies, never fitted with the first. It was being engineered by Big Leo's mob, and it spelled Big Leo, over and over. It was the sort of thing a man would do, after faking his own death, which is nothing of a novelty. Big Leo wasn't the first man who ever tried it"—The Shadow paused, significantly—"nor the last."

By that, The Shadow was referring to himself, but he had said all his listeners wanted to hear. There were a dozen fine points of the double game that The Shadow could have analyzed, but the big point that concerned the master brains was to keep their winnings through a mutual stroke. Despite the menace of The Shadow's guns, they came to their feet, madly.

His big paws sweeping wide, Big Leo gathered Harry and Rod together with a single grab. By then, Marldon was yanking a gun of his own, while he slid Big Leo's where the latter could reach it. Harry gave Rod a shove one way and dived the other, so that neither would be a human shield. By then, Marldon and Big Leo were jabbing shots at the door.

Only The Shadow wasn't there.

The Shadow had reached the desk and was twisting it with a hard, rapid spin that sent Marldon flying one way and tumbled Big Leo the other. Marldon made a plunge through one French window to the roof outside and Big Leo copied his example, using the second window. The Shadow followed Marldon because he had gone first.

In from the main door came the two servants, but before they could learn the cause of the commotion they found themselves covered by Harry and Rod, whose guns Marldon had been disdainful to demand. Backing the servants into a corner, Harry and Rod took turns looking out to the roof, where The Shadow was the central figure in a three-way grapple, near a low rail that marked the end of an outdoor promenade.

They saw what had happened to Happy Jack, only this time it went double.

Marldon was gripping The Shadow, thrusting him backward toward the rail. With a fling, The Shadow sent his cloak almost inside out, hurling its folds over Marldon's head. It was Marldon, not The Shadow who now wore the cloak, as had been the case with Happy Jack when he went plunging into the gulch.

But Marldon didn't plunge—not yet.

CRIME CARAVAN

Savagely, he tried to fling those folds back over The Shadow's head. They were coming when The Shadow twisted, carrying Big Leo around with him. The man who was partly buried in the cloak was Big Leo, not The Shadow. Gun in hand, The Shadow was watching what would happen to two men who both thought they had a death grip on their worst enemy.

Both were winners; both were losers.

They hit the rail together and as they put their weight across it, they showed a mad desire to take their antagonist with them. The rail split as they toppled and, wrapped in The Shadow's cloak these self-accepted partners in crime made death their first mutual undertaking. Like a crazy whirligig they dwindled into the fog and vanished, the cloak still flapping from their shoulders.

After them drifted a slouch hat that had toppled from the broken rail. The fog was just swallowing it when the smack of the landing bodies resounded from the street, far below. Just as two bands of criminals had nullified each other, so had the masters of the double game.

In from the swirl of fog stepped Lamont Cranston, to seat himself at Marldon's desk. While Harry and Rod still kept the cowering servants covered, Cranston pushed the bundles of cash aside and reached for the telephone.

He was calling the right authorities to inform them of The Shadow's latest conquest over crime. THE END