

# **THE CRYSTAL SKULL**

Maxwell Grant

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# THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Maxwell Grant

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## CHAPTER I

BENEDICT WADE sat at his desk like a great spider crouching in the center of its web. A mighty web, indeed, if Wade included all that he could view from the windows of his office. The room was located in a lofty penthouse, surrounded by the mighty skyline of Manhattan.

He was a handsome spider, Benedict Wade, when he chose to be, but at present his broad face was relaxed into an ugly leer that represented the real self behind it. The glow of the setting sun reddened Wade's insidious countenance, giving it a Satanic touch. Yet Wade's expression was a mere copy of the grin from the skull that glared upward from his hand.

A rare curio, that skull. It was a miniature about a quarter the size of a human head, and it was entirely of crystal; a connoisseur would have recognized it as pure quartz. Wade himself knew the value of such art objects, for he dealt in them, but that was not the reason why he liked the crystal skull.

Holding the skull so that its crystalline depths reflected the dye of the blood-red sun, Benedict Wade swelled with the thought of power. His were the eyes of a human leech who bled men of their wealth and the skull was the amulet that made such practice possible!

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Yet there was in Wade's gaze a hunted expression that ownership of this trophy could not quell. For the moment, his eyes became restless, sidling nervous glances toward the windows, then at the strong, bolted doors of his isolated office. Convinced that this high citadel rendered him immune from the thing he feared, Wade uttered a hard laugh and put the skull away, deep in a desk drawer.

A moment later, a buzzer announced Wade's secretary. Recognizing the proper signal, Wade stepped to the door, unbolted it, and admitted a meek-faced man who tendered him a calling card. Wade read the name:

J. M. THORNTON

Stepping to the desk, Wade reached into the drawer as though to bring out the crystal skull. Then, hesitating because of the secretary's presence, Wade dropped the calling card into the desk drawer. Gesturing to the door that the secretary had entered, Wade ordered:

"Ask Thornton to wait in the little reception room. I am expecting other visitors and I must talk to them first."

Hardly had the secretary gone, when Wade reached into the desk and brought out both the calling card and the crystal skull. Holding the card beneath the skull, Wade studied it through the crystal. With a smile that again revealed the evil in his nature, Wade replaced the objects in the drawer, just as a musical chime announced the visitors he expected.

Usually, Wade would have bolted the door by which the secretary had left. Not only did he neglect that precaution on this occasion, he actually left the door a trifle ajar. Then stepping to the main door that led into his living room, Wade unlocked it. Opening the door he gave a welcoming gesture to two gentlemen who were just about to seat themselves in easy-chairs. Wade's face was genial, his booming tone well-modulated as he invited them into his office.

Wade knew these visitors well.

One was Artemus Glenfield; he was middle-aged, baldish and quite portly. Usually Glenfield was jolly, in keeping with his type, since he was rated as a millionaire. But today, Glenfield looked troubled and Wade knew why.

The other man was Lamont Cranston, also a millionaire, but never a man of moods. It was impossible to guess Cranston's thoughts by studying his features. Always his face was impassive; in the sunlight it seemed masklike. Even his eyes were changeless, though they gained a probing power when they fixed steadily on anyone.

"You're early, Glenfield," boomed Wade, cheerily. "Our meeting is not until nine o'clock. That is when we shall arrange to view the Amsterdam collection."

"I know." Glenfield gave a nod. "But I've already paid my share toward buying that collection. I'm beginning to get worried, Wade."

With a broad smile, Wade reached into the desk drawer. Taking special care not to disturb other objects there, he brought out a batch of official-looking papers.

"You've already seen these, Glenfield," reminded Wade indulgently. "But perhaps you'd like to look at them again, the affidavits and certificates proving that the Amsterdam collection was placed in storage immediately after it was unloaded."

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Nodding slowly, Glenfield turned to Cranston as though the latter was his adviser on the question. Wade's shrewd eyes were quick to take in the situation. Coolly, he said:

"Look them over, Cranston."

"They mean nothing," interposed Cranston, calmly. "Guy Culver showed me similar evidence covering a consignment of Chinese art treasures that were stored safely in a warehouse. I refused to contribute to their purchase and I was wise. The whole consignment turned out to be a fraud."

"But I contributed, Wade!" broke in Glenfield. "I lost every dollar that I put up! If I'd talked to Cranston then, I might have saved my money."

"You probably would have," agreed Wade. "And is that why you talked to Cranston about my proposition?"

Sheepishly, Glenfield nodded. Stepping around the desk, Wade gave Glenfield a friendly thwack on the shoulders.

"You did the right thing," assured Wade. "There is no comparison between Culver's proposition and mine. True, I have gathered three hundred thousand dollars toward purchasing the Amsterdam collection sight unseen, but I have positive proof that its listed items are intact and genuine."

Both Wade's handclap and his tone were reassuring to Glenfield. The portly man brightened immediately and turned happily to Cranston.

"You see, Cranston?" queried Glenfield. "Wade is willing to go to any lengths to prove himself. He tells me there is still a chance for someone to invest another fifty thousand –"

"Twenty-five thousand," interrupted Wade, blandly. "Half of the share I reserved for myself. Cranston is quite welcome to that portion if he wants it. I'm afraid he's still thinking about the Culver fiasco. But I don't think Culver was to blame for it. He died very suddenly, you know."

Cranston had turned. His eyes were fixed straight upon Wade's. With steady lips, Cranston spoke in his calm tone:

"I know."

Turning a trifle nervously, Wade picked up the documents and thrust them in Cranston's hands. With a slight nod to Glenfield, Wade gestured the portly man toward the door and saw him out into the living room.

"Good-by, Glenfield," said Wade. "If there is anything wrong with the proposition, Cranston can call you later. Let me talk to him a while. I am positive I can reassure him."

Closing the door, Wade locked it and came back around the desk. Seated there, Wade folded his arms and asked:

"Would you like a preview of the Amsterdam collection, Cranston?"

Cranston's eyes met Wade's across the documents. Calmly, Cranston nodded.

"It is stored in the strong room under the Green Star Line pier," informed Wade. "I can arrange for you to examine them before nine o'clock. That should settle everything happily, provided you know genuine art

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treasures when you see them. For example –"

Pausing, Wade reached into the desk drawer and brought out the crystal skull. Turning it so the hollow eyes were toward his visitor, he passed the skull across the desk to Cranston.

"As a test, Cranston," remarked Wade, "give me your opinion on this curio."

"It is rock crystal," returned Cranston, holding the skull into the sunlight, "and flawless. An exquisite piece of workmanship. Tell me, Wade, where did you acquire such a fine specimen?"

"I know real treasures," assured Wade. "The Amsterdam collection is worth ten times the asking price. Do you believe me, Cranston?"

There was no reply from Cranston. His gaze was probing further into the sockets that represented the eyes of the crystal skull.

"Here are the documents, Cranston" – Wade rustled the papers that his visitor had replaced upon the desk. "Have you finished with them?"

Again, Cranston did not reply. His eyes were fixed hard upon the skull. They had widened and their firm focus pleased Wade as much as Cranston's silence. Wade's face took on its uglier aspect as he raised from his chair and demanded in a sharp, penetrating tone:

"You knew Culver, didn't you, Cranston?"

In response to the stabbed question, Cranston spoke in a mechanical monotone.

"Yes. I knew Culver quite well."

"Answer this question," jabbed Wade. "What was the cause of Culver's death?"

"A heart attack," replied Cranston. "Such was the official verdict."

"I mean the real cause?"

"I know only the official verdict."

On his feet, Wade came around the desk. His hands were twitching murderously as though he planned to tighten them about Cranston's neck. Riveted, Cranston saw nothing of the approaching menace. He was gripped by the hypnotic influence of the crystal skull.

Restraining himself, Wade lowered his voice, but his tone became savage as he spoke close to Cranston's ear.

"Guy Culver was murdered," declared Wade, emphatically. "I want you to name the man who killed him."

"A heart attack," spoke Cranston. His voice, though it maintained the monotone, seemed like an echo from the past. "No evidence of murder."

"Did you kill Culver?" rasped Wade. "Come, Cranston, speak!"

"No one killed Culver."

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Angrily, Wade snatched the crystal skull from Cranston's unresisting hand. Clamping his brawny hands on his visitor's shoulders, Wade spun Cranston toward the door. There was no doubt that Cranston was hypnotized; he had reached a state of somnambulism under the mesmeric influence of the skull-shaped crystal, but his subconscious mind could still resist all questions that he had predetermined not to answer.

Acquainted with the subject of hypnotism, Wade happened to know its specific limitations and know that it would be impossible to break the subject's will. But there were other ways to deal with unruly individuals and Wade was ready to apply a suitable system. Choosing a line of less resistance, Wade spoke again in Cranston's ear.

"You would still like to see the Amsterdam collection?"

"Yes," replied Cranston in his echoed tone. "It is at the Green Star pier."

"But you must meet someone who will take you there."

"Meet someone –"

They were through the doorway. His hand behind him, Wade closed the door quite softly and began to pilot Cranston across the living room.

"The strong room is locked," asserted Wade. "There are watchmen on duty. You must meet someone who can arrange to let you in."

"Meet someone –"

Though Cranston's words were the same, his tone had changed. Apparently he had convinced himself, under Wade's persuasion, that a guide would be needed for the coming expedition.

"Wait at your club," ordered Wade. "You will receive a phone call at half-past eight. Go where the person who calls tells you."

"Wait at the club – call at half-past eight. Go where told –"

"And go alone, Cranston."

"Go alone."

Thrusting Cranston through a door on the far side of the living room, Wade stopped him in front of an elevator. Pressing a button with one hand, Wade snapped the thumb and fingers of his other. The action roused Cranston to a higher level of consciousness, yet did not fully rouse him. As the elevator arrived, Wade bowed his visitor into the car and said with a bow:

"Good-by, Cranston."

"Good-by, Wade."

"And remember, half-past eight, Cranston –"

"Half-past eight."

The door closed with a clang that would help rouse Cranston further from his hypnotic trance. To the elevator operator, Wade had simply said good-bye to a visitor who had responded quite in normal fashion. There was not a scrap of evidence to prove that Benedict Wade had started Lamont Cranston along a road to doom!

### CHAPTER II

WHEN Benedict Wade returned to his penthouse office, he closed and locked the door with one of his unpleasant smiles. Crossing the room, he changed expression as he neared the desk, his face becoming more benign. Wade intended to buzz his secretary and tell the fellow to admit Mr. J. M. Thornton.

Before Wade could press the buzzer, a glossed voice intervened. It was a tone that in a sense resembled Wade's because, by nature, it was harsh, though its owner had the judgment to smooth it. But in this case the veneer was thinner than with Wade. The man who spoke from over by the window could never have posed as a person of wealth or importance. He sounded more suited to a servant's part.

Turning, Wade saw a stocky man seated in an easy-chair and knew the arrival must be Thornton. The visitor had simply invited himself into the office through the private door that Wade had purposely left ajar. Like his voice, Thornton's blunt face had a gloss that wasn't sufficient to hide the hardness beneath. For the moment, Wade felt uneasy as he heard Thornton's words:

"Hello, there, Wade. Don't bother to buzz that dope you call a secretary. I told him you said he could go home."

Wade's eyes took on a glare of challenge until he followed Thornton's gaze. The stocky man was looking toward the desk directly at the crystal skull. Though it was too distant to produce a hypnotic effect on Thornton, the skull served a purpose. It was the mutual symbol that both Wade and Thornton acknowledged.

Seating himself behind the desk, Wade looked steadily at Thornton and said:

"When out, come in."

"Yeah," returned Thornton. "When in, stay in."

So far, the exchange of statements could have applied to Thornton's self-introduction to Wade's office, but that was not the purpose, as was proven by what followed next.

"When out," added Wade, "go out."

"When in," completed Thornton, "stay out."

Whatever the meaning of the rigmarole it immediately cemented the acquaintance between Wade and Thornton. Though it was apparent that the two had never met before, they promptly became confidential.

"You heard me talk to Cranston," declared Wade. "He is the man who is causing all the trouble."

"You put the hyp on him all right," conceded Thornton, "but it didn't prove anything, unless he told you more after you steered him out of here."

"He said nothing further," stated Wade, "but I told him to expect a call at his club at half-past eight. We'll be told where to meet someone who will take him to the Green Star pier."

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Thornton gave a chuckle.

"You mean the long way, don't you, Wade?"

"The long way," nodded Wade, "that never gets there. You will attend to that job, Thornton."

Thornton nodded and gestured to the desk.

"Any job you say," declared Thornton. "While you own that skull, you're boss. Only when I leave, I'd better take it where it belongs. You won't be needing it any longer, will you?"

"I have finished with it," returned Wade. "The Cranston problem still belongs to you, though."

"Of course. The order goes with the skull."

There was an indifference in Thornton's tone that bothered Wade. Leaning his bulky arms upon the desk, Wade looked across at Thornton and inquired sharply:

"You don't believe that Culver was murdered, do you, Thornton?"

"No, I don't," returned Thornton, bluntly. "He had everything under control. The suckers fell so hard for his talk of Chinese treasures that he didn't even have to take them to the warehouse before we switched the good stuff for junk."

Wade gave a reluctant nod.

"We sent the good stuff to the Big Skull," continued Thornton, "and nobody had any trouble on the way. The cash went, too, and Culver was just as happy as you are now. I know, because I stopped around to pick up the crystal skull so I could pass it along to you."

Thornton's term "happy" didn't properly apply to Wade. Creeping automatically across the desk, Wade's big hand clamped itself upon the crystal skull as though reluctant to part with the trophy. Wade was recalling that nothing had happened to Culver while the skull had been in his possession.

"I guess Culver was jittery," said Thornton to soothe Wade's qualms. "He looked like a fellow with a bum heart. It was kind of a strain keeping those suckers in line right up to the finish. Culver gave out, that was all."

Wade's nod was more assured.

"It is a strain," he admitted, "but Culver found it easier than I. Almost anybody was willing to listen to his proposition. When they found they were trimmed, they gave Culver some benefit of the doubt, but they weren't willing to fall again. I had to find a new crop."

"Except for Glenfield," reminded Thornton with a grin. "The way he acts, he'd fall for anything. When you gave him the convincers, he was ready to help sell Cranston."

"Where Glenfield helped most," affirmed Wade, "was in bringing Cranston here. If it hadn't been for that, I would have made a bad mistake."

Thornton raised his eyes in a puzzled look.

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"There is a man named Albert Osgood," explained Wade, "who was interested in Culver's deal and who has listened to my proposition, too. Only he didn't fall for either and it bothered me. Osgood is coming here this evening, but he isn't buying into the Amsterdam collection. That bothered me even more."

"I begin to get it," nodded Thornton. "You mean Osgood was at Culver's after I left with the crystal skull?"

"That's right. I figured Osgood could have knocked off Culver in order to get the cash that was no longer there. I began to wonder if he planned the same with me."

"A moocher in with a bunch of suckers!"

"Tonight I might have ordered you to dispose of Osgood," admitted Wade, "but fortunately Cranston came along. I took a chance that he might be the hidden rival who is trying to spoil our game, so I hypnotized him with the crystal skull –"

"And learned that he knew Culver," broke in Thornton. "Say – he fits into the picture as well as Osgood!"

"Better than Osgood," claimed Wade, "because he didn't show his hand. He must have visited Culver privately, as he visited me today. If Culver had only tested him with the crystal skull, he would have found out the thing that I have."

"I didn't think you found out anything, Wade."

For reply Wade first stared steadily at Thornton to impress the man that something important was to come. Then in a tone as vicious as it was sharp, Wade fairly hissed:

"I discovered that Cranston is The Shadow!"

Thornton came up from his chair as though jolted by the mere suggestion. To every man of crime, the name of The Shadow was a menace in itself. That Thornton was a professional crook of long standing was plainly evident from the frequency with which he lost his gloss and in this emergency it forsook him completely.

Staring at the door through which Cranston had gone, Thornton shoved his hand into his pocket and brought out a fat, but stubby, .38 that was patterned along his own proportions. Then, with a short laugh, Thornton let the revolver slip back into his pocket.

"The joke's on me, Wade," gruffed Thornton. "You really had me scared. Only Cranston couldn't be The Shadow. He wouldn't have let you push him around the way he did. You must have really had him hyped."

"Only to a degree," declared Wade. "The influence of the crystal skull is powerful. It is far more effective than the usual crystal ball and this specimen" – Wade picked up the skull – "is flawless and therefore ideal. I have tested it often, and Cranston is the only subject who resisted when I put a vital question."

Thornton still wasn't convinced. He was firm in his belief that The Shadow wouldn't stand a "push around," and as Thornton repeated that argument, Wade began to be impressed. At last Wade struck upon what seemed a compromise as well as a solution.

"Cranston is probably working for The Shadow," declared Wade. "In fact, he may be doing it unknowingly. The Shadow must certainly get around in high circles and would therefore meet men like Cranston."

That brought immediate approval from Thornton. This sort of talk was common among crooks.

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"The Shadow could have steered Cranston for the ordeal which I gave him," added Wade. "However, I was able to drive home by posthypnotic suggestion. Cranston will be waiting for that call at half-past eight."

"And he'll get it," snapped Thornton. "We'll grab the guy and find out if he's working with The Shadow. We won't need hypnotism to find it out. We'll use heat."

"Cranston may put up a fight –"

"If he does, it will be his last. I'm putting the special crew on the job, the local boys who don't know about the Big Skull. Say" – coming to his feet, Thornton groped through the dusk that was beginning to cloud the penthouse – "how about a drink before I leave? Got one handy?"

Wade turned on a desk lamp and reached to the bottom drawer which was slightly open. It contained some bottles of brandy and Wade took out one that was half filled. He handed it to Thornton and gestured to the living room, saying he would find a glass in there.

"Leave the bottle," added Wade. "My guests will probably want some when they come tonight."

Thornton reappeared with a filled glass in his hand. Before draining it, Thornton proposed a toast which he drank alone, though Wade furnished a smile of full agreement.

"Here's to the guest that won't be here," boasted Thornton. "The Shadow's friend – Lamont Cranston."

As he finished his drink, Thornton picked up the crystal skull and packed it in the pocket that didn't contain the gun. Watching the skull, Wade noted a curious effect. Though it was almost dark outdoors, the clear quartz picked up the last flicker of sunset and gathered it in a glimmer that shone like a vivid red eye.

To Wade it was a symbol of success, that glint that represented the eye of the crystal skull, but there was another factor that would prove more important.

That factor was Thornton, the man who, tonight, would be the Voice of the Skull, summoning a victim to disaster!

### CHAPTER III

IT was quarter-past eight when a polite attendant crossed the foyer of the exclusive Cobalt Club and informed Lamont Cranston that he was wanted on the telephone. There was nothing odd in the way that Cranston strolled to the phone booth to answer the call; in fact, the only oddity was that Cranston had been lounging around the foyer as long as he had.

Of course, the personnel at the club were not informed that Cranston had a dinner date at eight o'clock with Margo Lane, a vivacious brunette who frequently accompanied him on crime-hunting expeditions. She was on the telephone and she came right to the point.

"Dinner at eight?" queried Cranston in answer to Margo's reminder. "Why, yes, I'd almost forgotten it!"

"Almost!" echoed Margo across the wire. "It's quarter past eight already."

"I've been waiting for another call," apologized Cranston. "It's due at half-past eight."

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"But I thought we were going up to Wade's penthouse at nine," reminded Margo, "along with your friend, Glenfield."

"Wade's at nine." Cranston repeated the words mechanically. "Curious, I don't remember it, Margo."

"Are you going to be there – or somewhere else?"

"I really don't know, Margo."

"Who is going to tell me where you will be? Or did you call that appointment off?"

"I don't know."

There was a mechanical note to Cranston's tone, and as he spoke his hand replaced the receiver on the hook. Margo's voice was sounding again, asking for information about Wade's party, but Cranston gave it no heed. Mere emphasis on the question of half-past eight had induced the post-hypnotic state that Wade had promised as the aftermath of Cranston's treatment from the crystal skull.

Cranston was still in the booth when the phone bell rang again. Answering a call, he heard a voice that was smooth in a forced way, asking for Mr. Cranston. Stating his identity, Cranston listened while Thornton announced himself as the man that Cranston was to meet – and where. Mechanically, Cranston acknowledged the instructions and left the club.

Outside a taxicab slithered across the street and Cranston boarded it automatically. He gave an address in a careful tone that brought a quick look from the driver. It happened that this was Cranston's own special cab and Moe Shrevnitz, who piloted it, wasn't used to the faraway tone he heard.

"Is everything all right, chief?"

"Of course, Shrevvy." Cranston responded naturally to the question. "I'm to go alone, that's all."

Amid his response to the post-hypnosis, Lamont Cranston was acting normally when in familiar surroundings. This special cab – of which Wade knew nothing – was as natural a spot as the foyer of the Cobalt Club. There was a reason why Cranston kept the cab on call. It was his favorite conveyance when he embarked on missions that concerned his other self, The Shadow.

As Cranston, The Shadow could afford to take chances. He had accepted risk this very afternoon when he had allowed himself to be influenced by the crystal skull. It had fitted with his role as Cranston, and he had counted on his resistance as The Shadow to nullify the hypnotic effects that he knew Wade hoped to induce. Deliberately, Cranston had accepted the first phases of trance before he learned the high power of the skull's control. Yet the keen brain of The Shadow had restrained him from the depths.

And now, though still hanging in the balance, Cranston was acting as he always did when Shrevvy's cab was wheeling him to a place where uncertainty ruled.

Cranston was becoming his other self, The Shadow!

From beneath the rear seat, he was drawing a sliding shelf from which he produced a black cloak and a slouch hat. With a twist that brought him upright, Cranston slid the cloak over his shoulders and clamped the slouch hat on his head. The single operation gave the effect of a dwindling form that blended with the gloom inside the cab. In becoming The Shadow, Cranston had, in a sense, rendered himself invisible, though there

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were still traces of his almost nebulous presence when the cab passed lights that shone directly through its windows.

Completing his outfit with a pair of thin black gloves, The Shadow packed a brace of automatics beneath holsters under his Tuxedo jacket.

Now his mind was back to the last thing he remembered before Wade had begun to exercise the crystal skull; namely, Wade's invitation to visit the strong room of the Green Star pier and view the Amsterdam collection.

Since The Shadow wasn't expected to reach that pier at all, the place would probably be unguarded except by the regular watchmen. As the cab approached the looming bulk of the great, gaunt pier, the situation proved even better. Nobody was about. Pointing the cab to an obscure parking place, where he could reach it later, The Shadow alighted.

A ghost of its better days, the Green Star pier had once known a heavy transatlantic trade. There had been odd rumors just before such traffic ended. Professional smugglers had for some reason been switching to the Green Star Line during the last few months of its regular business. The Shadow was recalling these facts as he reached the heavy, metal-sheathed door that represented the strong room containing the Amsterdam collection.

The lock was intricate, but it yielded in due time under the influence of The Shadow's compact set of picks. Opening inward on groaning hinges, the door showed a flight of steps that led below. The groan was the sort that could dim other sounds, even where The Shadow's keen ears were concerned.

The Shadow learned that, when he turned to close the door. Another interloper had arrived upon the scene, profiting by the brief seconds when The Shadow had been off guard.

The Shadow was staring into the muzzle of a tiny revolver gripped by a hand that was equally petite. But there was no lack of menace in the alto tone that told The Shadow to stand where he was, nor in the tiny finger that he watched take up the trigger slack. The Shadow had found the woman in the case, or rather she had discovered him.

### CHAPTER IV

THE girl was a blonde with blue eyes.

Those were features that she had taken no effort to disguise, though she had used some ingenuity in otherwise preserving her identity. She was masked, in a fashion, by a blue polka-dot neckerchief that she had raised across her nose to also hide her lips and chin.

A blue polka-dot scarf that served as a partial mask matched the cuffs of the girl's dark dress and would pass as such.

"Stand where you are!" the girl ordered. "One move and I shall shoot. I mean it!"

Motionless, The Shadow studied his challenger further. The girl stood approximately five feet four; her weight was about one hundred and fifteen. Her preference for blue was evidenced by more than her dress. From a ring on the little finger of her gun hand, The Shadow saw the sparkle of a pear-shaped aquamarine. There was also a blue glint of tiny sapphires adorning a watch on her left wrist.

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In raising the neckerchief to conceal her face, the girl had unwisely revealed a pair of embroidered initials near the collar of her dress. Those initials, woven together, formed the letters D.D., which The Shadow added for future reference.

Meanwhile, The Shadow was conscious that something was happening elsewhere. Vague sounds were coming up the steps from the storeroom. They were sliding scrapes accompanied by the roving shuffle of feet. Close to the doorway The Shadow stood in a veritable sounding box which enabled him to detect those noises, though they did not reach the girl's ears.

Men were at work below, perhaps the very intruders that The Shadow hoped to foil, men sent here by Benedict Wade to engineer a last minute removal of the celebrated Amsterdam collection!

Did the girl know of their presence? Did she expect them to come to her aid? Or was the blonde acting independently with some purpose of her own?

There was a way to answer those questions and at the same time take a hand in matters below. Facing the girl's gun, The Shadow began a slow, wavering retreat. Not knowing that The Shadow was a fighter who never quailed, the girl thought he was recoiling from the gun threat.

Advancing, the girl thrust her gun closer to The Shadow. A few steps more, and she would have heard those noises for herself. But before the girl had quite reached the doorway, other sounds intervened.

Those sounds were the long shrieks of approaching sirens, announcing that police cars were coming in this direction. Though several blocks away, the wails seemed closer, presaging an imminent arrival of the law.

Quick as a flash, The Shadow had the answer.

The Shadow's tip-off to headquarters had been matched by Benedict Wade. When fugitive crooks had passed the word that The Shadow had slipped the death trap, someone higher up had guessed that his destination had been the Green Star pier. To prevent The Shadow from interfering with a job in progress there, the police had been given a tip by the crooks themselves.

When the police arrived it would be The Shadow who would bear the brunt of suspicion. That at least was the idea behind the tip-off. This wasn't the first time that crooks had tried to pin crime on The Shadow.

Whether she intended it or not, the meddling blonde with the initials D.D. was putting The Shadow on the very spot crooks wanted. Moreover, those siren wails were penetrating to the storeroom below, warning crime's workers that their own time was short!

It was now or never for The Shadow. He tightened as a siren shrieked anew, ready to snatch the slightest opportunity that he might gain. He was playing for the chance that the girl might provide a break, and she did. A flash of anxiety came to the eyes above the silk mask; involuntarily, the girl started to dart a look across her shoulder to see if the police had arrived. She caught herself, but not in time.

With a backward twirl, The Shadow went down the steps so suddenly that blackness seemed to swallow him!

His flinging foot catching the edge of the open door, The Shadow kicked it shut from midair. Slamming, the door's automatic catch barred the blonde from following. Hands thrusting ahead, The Shadow broke his fall with the skill of a professional tumbler and somersaulted into the storeroom.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Harsh shouts greeted The Shadow's advent into a dim-lit chamber. A trio of sweated men were at work, shoving a big crate over toward others that were stacked about the storeroom. Those crates purported to hold the Amsterdam art collection, but there was proof that they didn't. At the far end of the storeroom, a sliding door stood open like a panel in a wall that was set with upright beams. Out through that gap, The Shadow could see the end of another crate tilting from sight.

These three men and other helpers had already removed the genuine art treasures through the oversized secret panel and were just completing the task of leaving spurious items in their place!

There was one way to stop this thievery – with gunfire. The trouble was that crooks had the same idea about stopping The Shadow, and they saw him first. Revolvers came flashing into sight before The Shadow could reach his feet with the guns that he was drawing from his cloak. As he spied the glitter, The Shadow performed a sideward roll.

Revolvers blasted blackness, nothing more.

Hard upon the fury of those guns came The Shadow's mocking laugh, evasive in its taunt, giving no clue to the spot where he had finished his rolling fade. It was the sort of laugh that maddened foemen and caused them to waste shots with wild, futile aim. Against The Shadow, such policy was like a boxer flinging blind punches, for he was always ready to deliver timely jabs in return.

The opposing marksmen were bulwarked behind the crates near the open wall. Their job was done and they had more reason to retire than indulge in gunnery. Finally the howl of sirens had reached the water front and was being answered by a distant police boat somewhere down the river.

In response to men beyond the gaping wall, The Shadow's three opponents turned suddenly and dived out toward the river, slashing the big door shut behind them. To stop them, The Shadow lunged from darkness, cleared a crate, and thrust a gun into the crack just before the heavy panel closed. To discourage opposition from the other side, The Shadow fired a few shots, then swept the big door open.

The roar of a motor boat greeted The Shadow. The craft was low and rakish, a modernized version of an old-time rumrunner. In the boat, crouched beyond the stack of crates that formed its cargo, men with guns were ready to fight The Shadow should he challenge their getaway. It was dark, here, under the long pier that covered the watery runway to the river, but the odds favored the boat crew since they had the stolen crates as bulwarks.

The Shadow's laugh came low and elusive. With it, he made a sidling approach along some planking that led beside the rakish boat. He knew why these treasure snatchers hadn't started shooting. They were afraid that The Shadow's return shots would damage the rare paintings and other valuables that the crates contained. Why they were waiting, The Shadow wasn't certain, but there was a chance that they expected another passenger, the blonde whose status still remained undecided.

Unseen in the darkness, The Shadow was creeping closer, keeping utter silence. Listening for his laugh, crooks had tuned the motor low, and were straining their ears to the limit, without realizing that the cloaked Nemesis was almost beside them. In fact, The Shadow was leaning over the very edge of the boat, when the expected passenger arrived.

Squarely above The Shadow's head, a trapdoor dropped with a sudden clatter. A girl's form came plunging downward, as she uttered an involuntary shriek. Flashlights whipped upward at that instant and caught The Shadow in their glare.

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Receiving the girl's full weight, the cloaked fighter wavered across the side of the boat, almost pitching into the muzzles of quick-aiming guns. Then, with a surprising twist that accompanied a rapid shift of footing, The Shadow wheeled away across the planking, carrying the struggling girl with him.

Revolvers spurted wide and with their echoes came the stabs of an automatic. One crook howled as a bullet clipped him and the others ducked for the bottom of the boat. They couldn't see The Shadow nor the girl who was in his clutch, but his shots threatened to ruin their expedition. The pilot of the boat shoved the motor to full speed and with a spurt, the fast craft shot for the river to escape The Shadow's gun blasts.

Except for the burden of the struggling girl, The Shadow might have halted the flight of the treasure snatchers. As it was, he pursued them only with a laugh that carried promise of disaster to that crew, should they meet The Shadow in a future encounter. As for the girl, when she heard the weird mockery, she gasped and immediately ceased her struggle. Unceremoniously, he slid the girl into a chair that showed in the light from the cracked boarding; with whispered warning that she was not to make a move, The Shadow pressed an automatic against her breast, and tuned his flashlight toward girl's face.

The Shadow expected to see the blonde who wore the initials D.D., but he was disappointed. The girl from the dark was none other than Margo Lane, who only an hour before had agreed to call off a dinner date with Lamont Cranston, otherwise The Shadow!

## CHAPTER V

IN the living room of his lavish penthouse, Benedict Wade was keeping an eye on the clock as he shook hands with arriving guests. At this of all times, Wade was anxious to play the amiable host. Looking at the faces around him, Wade could well afford to smile. They thought themselves smart businessmen, this group of a dozen who had subscribed approximately a quarter million dollars to the purchase of the Amsterdam collection.

But they were dupes, like the men who had let Guy Culver hoax them into buying Chinese curios, and the living proof stood among them in the person of Artemus Glenfield. Not having heard from Cranston, Glenfield was taking the attitude that the Amsterdam collection must have been thoroughly approved and was saying so to the other men. Smugly confident of their own judgment they were forgetting that Glenfield rated as a sheep already fleeced.

There was one exception to the rule, a man who stood aside and eyed the rest with canny eye. This fellow's presence bothered Wade because the man didn't belong here, yet to show him out would be bad policy. The man in question was Albert Osgood who liked to listen to honeyed propositions without investing in them.

Osgood was a hatchet-faced individual whose features generally were as sharp as his gaze. He liked brandy and he was pouring himself another round from the bottle that Thornton had left on the living room sideboard. Approaching Osgood, Wade spoke warmly, which was his way of putting heat on potential customers.

"There's still a chance to buy into this deal," confided Wade. "I've kept a fifty-thousand-dollar interest for myself. I'm willing to split it with you, Osgood."

"It sounds good." Osgood paused to sip his brandy. "It only has one drawback Wade. Culver offered me the same last-minute proposition when he was peddling his Chinese junk."

Wade's face went sober. A few hours ago he would have shown traces of alarm at hearing such a direct reference from Osgood, the man who had rated as a rival to the owners of the crystal skull. In meeting

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Cranston, Wade had lost all fear of Osgood and felt he could handle him accordingly.

"Poor Culver," commented Wade. "I am convinced that he was honest. Some scoundrels must have taken advantage of his sudden death to stage a robbery at the warehouse, leaving worthless curios in place of the real treasures."

"I hope you're not planning to have a heart attack, Wade," observed Osgood, dryly. "Still, I imagine that the Amsterdam collection is safe enough in that strong room at the Green Star pier."

Wade turned away so that Osgood wouldn't see him wince at the suggestion of sudden death. Glenfield was approaching with a genial smile, carrying an empty glass in his hand, so Osgood politely poured him what was left in the brandy bottle and turned again to Wade. This time there was a change in Osgood's tone.

"Money is my trouble," confessed Osgood. "I couldn't raise it in time to participate in the Culver deal. I'm in the same situation in this case, Wade. You couldn't lend me twenty-five thousand, could you" – Osgood's eyes were narrowing sharply – "out of that fund you've already collected?"

"I've banked the money," returned Wade, hastily. "It wouldn't be safe to keep it here. Of course, I could take your note."

"The others might object," said Osgood. "It would have to be a legitimate transaction with actual cash involved. If you called the bank –"

The muffled ringing of a telephone bell proved a temporary lifesaver to Wade, who was finding Osgood's canny pressure a serious obstacle to other plans. Turning toward his office, Wade announced:

"It's the Green Star representative. He's phoning to arrange our trip to the pier. I'll be back shortly, gentlemen" – with a pause, Wade flashed one of his disarming smiles – "and I'll bring a fresh bottle of brandy."

Closing the door of his office behind him, Wade hastened to the telephone. Recognizing Thornton's voice, Wade demanded quickly:

"What luck?"

"They made the switch," came Thornton's voice, "but they didn't nail The Shadow."

"You mean the police didn't."

"No. I mean the crew. He barged right in on them. They were lucky to get away."

Wade gave an angry snarl, then eased his tone.

"At least we know that Cranston is The Shadow," began Wade. "That may help us later."

"Nobody is sure just who he is," objected Thornton. "He didn't show his face. He was too speedy for Cranston from what I hear. Maybe The Shadow picked up where Cranston left off."

"That links them, anyway," asserted Wade. "So Cranston is the man to watch. I felt sure about it all along. Cranston was a much more likely choice than Osgood."

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There was an acknowledgment cross the wire, but before Thornton finished it, Wade remembered something else.

"What about the Lane girl?" he questioned. "I sent her to the right place on the pier and told her she'd meet Cranston there. Did the crew grab her?"

"No," returned Thornton. "The Shadow did."

Again, Wade snarled. This time his tone didn't change.

"What's the matter with your men?" demanded Wade. "The girl phoned here to learn when the party started, and I played a hunch to get rid of her. This knocks my plan completely."

"It was knocked, anyway," reminded Thornton. "The Shadow is still loose. Remember? You'd better travel, Wade."

"That's right," said Wade, slowly. "I turned over the money and the goods are on their way. How far should I travel?"

There was a pause; then Thornton's voice came through with a cryptic reply:

"Half league."

"Good," exclaimed Wade. "And how should I ride?"

"Boldly and well."

Thornton's last words pleased Wade. With a smile, the big man replaced the telephone on its stand. Hastily, Wade opened a desk drawer and began to bring out papers which he stacked on the desk. Finding a revolver, Wade laid it handy, too, then produced more papers, which in his haste he heaped so that they nearly covered the gun.

Opening the bottom drawer, Wade heard the rattle of the brandy bottles. Despite his tension he smiled, because brandy was his favorite drink. He had promised to bring a bottle into the living room, but that promise wouldn't be kept, because Wade was going out by the other door, to head for parts unknown. However, he could use a drink of brandy on his own.

Carefully, Wade drew out a very special bottle. This was twenty-year-old stuff, imported; not the one-star domestic that he furnished his guests with apologies regarding the brandy shortage. Though liberal on everything else as a matter of business policy, Wade was stingy on the brandy question. This bottle of twenty-year imported was the last that he had found on the market.

The bottle had a cap that formed a drinking cup. Wade unscrewed it calmly, for he was beginning to feel that haste was foolish. Since he was still regarded as an honest man, Wade knew that the police would inform him of the crime at the Green Star pier. When they phoned, he would bluff them and then make his departure. Wasting time with his guests was different because they would only delay him even if he bluffed successfully.

Anything to throw the police off the trail would help. Pouring his drink, Wade gripped the cup in his hand to give it a good warmth. He looked at the telephone and smiled, but as he leaned back in his chair a sudden worry gripped him. No longer was he thinking of the police.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Benedict Wade was thinking of The Shadow.

Coming upright, Wade took his drink in one long swallow and followed it with another. Screwing the cap back on the brandy bottle, he began to reach for the papers. There wasn't time to sort them thoroughly; he would merely weed out the excess. From the papers, Wade pulled memo sheets and calling cards, which he flung into the wastebasket. Among the cards was one that bore the name:

J. M. THORNTON

Wade gave a short laugh. He started to tear the card, then paused and laid it by the brandy bottle. That card might be useful later on. The name "J. M. Thornton" would do for Wade as well as the man who used it. With that thought, Wade gave a reflective stare across the room and froze in his chair.

From the corner of his eye, Wade saw the window move. That was a bad sign in itself, but the direction of the motion made it worse. If the window had moved up or down as it normally should, Wade could have sprung to action.

Instead, the window moved inward!

That meant it was something other than the window. What Wade had seen was blackness, which normally should represent the window, but at present stood for a living figure. The inward surge of that blackness could only signify The Shadow!

How the cloaked invader could have reached the window from the sheer wall below it, was a mystery that Wade had no time to unravel. He had heard that the impossible could be rendered possible by The Shadow and the proof was at hand. Even now, blackness was creeping in along the floor, into the glow of Wade's desk lamp. As it reached the desk and climbed it, the inky threat took on the shape of a hawkish silhouette that made Wade shudder. He didn't dare look for the solid form that he knew must be advancing with that black-etched profile.

Fingering the papers, Wade found the gun. At the same time, his other hand moved toward the brandy bottle to stop by the desk lamp that gave the room its only illumination. A slight breeze from the window was cut off suddenly; guarding his glance beneath his heavy brows, Wade looked slightly upward and saw the bulky blackness that was nearing the desk, almost within reach.

It was living blackness; The Shadow!

There was a whisper that could have signified the intercepted breeze, but Wade gave it a more sinister interpretation. It chilled him, that whisper, for he imagined that it pronounced his name. This was the way in which The Shadow accosted men of crime. He stalked them, chilled their black hearts with fear, and made them confess their evil ways – or die!

His hand already felt the chill of his own gun and gave Wade confidence. He could see The Shadow now, and the cloaked invader had only begun to reach for an automatic. Viciously, Wade whipped to action.

His motion was like the lash of an attacking alligator, a demonstration of speed that found no handicap in bulk. Swiveling in his chair, Wade swept the desk lamp to the floor, producing darkness even before it struck, because the cord snapped loose. With the same action, Wade reached his feet and his other hand sped upward with the gun, scattering papers as it came.

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Amid that violent lunge, Wade started his trigger tug to blast pointblank at the darkness within darkness that he knew to be The Shadow.

One spurt of flame cleaved the blackness, the flash from Wade's revolver. No one, not even The Shadow, could have wheeled away within the split second that it took for Wade's finger to pull the gun trigger. With the echo of the report, there came the thud of a body striking the floor beside Wade's desk.

There was a long, ominous pause. It was broken suddenly by the click of a light switch on the wall. The glow that filled the room revealed The Shadow looking toward Wade's desk.

On the floor near the shattered desk lamp lay a supine figure with glazed eyes staring toward the ceiling. In the dead man's hand was clutched a revolver that still emitted a wisp of smoke from its muzzle. The man's other hand was clamped against his heart; the back tilt of his head showed that in a fit of sudden exertion, he had jolted backward, clear off balance.

In his urge for murder, Wade had overdone the deed. The internal pang that stabbed his heart had raised his tightened gun hand with the backward carry of his body. Timed for a normal rise that gun hand had whipped above The Shadow's head, before the trigger acted. With the added impetus of the gun's recoil, Wade had thudded to the floor a moment later.

### CHAPTER VI

THERE was little time for The Shadow to survey Wade's body. Already men were hammering at the office door, attracted there by the sound of the shot that Wade had fired. A glance at the brandy bottle represented the brief heed that The Shadow gave to the possible cause of Wade's death; then, as the pounding increased, the cloaked investigator began a quick search of the papers on the desk.

Again, this promised prolonged delay. The job was better suited to the police, who would soon be summoned by Wade's friends. In fact, the police might need no summoning, for the telephone bell began to ring while The Shadow was still glancing through the papers. Immediately, the pounding at the door became violent. The fact that Wade wasn't answering the phone call told the men outside that something serious had happened.

Turning his attention to the desk drawers, The Shadow made a rapid search for the crystal skull. When he didn't find it, he laughed, in a low reflective whisper. The disappearance of the crystal skull obviously meant that Wade had completed his part in crime. Unquestionably he had sent along the token to someone else.

Oddly, Wade's fate linked with the crystal skull. In relinquishing that talisman, he had placed himself in line for death. Wade's case was like Culver's, wherein a swindler had been slain immediately after accomplishing his crooked work. To find the link between those two cases was The Shadow's next problem.

The hammering at the door was taking on pile-driver proportions. Osgood, Glenfield, and other friends of Wade had decided that he must be dead and were determined to learn what had happened. The heavy door shivered under the improvised battering-ram that the men in the living room were using. The Shadow's time was almost at its limit.

Glancing from the desk to the wastebasket, The Shadow studied the contents of the latter to learn what sort of data Wade considered unimportant. In the wastebasket, The Shadow noted several calling cards; immediately his attention reversed to the desk itself. There, by the brandy bottle, The Shadow saw the card that bore the name J. M. Thornton.

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Here was evidence of a concrete sort. Wade had tossed out calling cards as worthless – with one exception. He had shown hesitancy in the case of Thornton's card. Evidently he had decided to take the card with him.

Smash!

The door was splintering under the impacts from outside. Quickly placing the calling card beneath his cloak, The Shadow turned and started toward the window.

Crash!

A whole panel caved in from the door under the drive of a floor lamp that was serving as a ram. As the base of the lamp pushed into the room, faces showed behind it.

Outside the window, blotted by the darkness around him, The Shadow was moving straight down the wall, using the rubber suction cups with which he could scale sheer heights. Applied to hands and feet, those concave disks gave The Shadow all the prowess of a human fly.

Looking up, The Shadow could see the faces at the window. Though he had so far escaped detection, he would be seen as soon as he reached the lower portion of the wall, where there was light from below, but there was a way of avoiding that discovery. The darkness that shrouded The Shadow was irregular, cast by the bulk of a neighboring building. Off to the right it narrowed almost to a point as it reached the corner of the wall to which The Shadow clung. Changing course, The Shadow sidled toward that point. No eyes followed him; even if they had suspected his plan, observers would not have deemed it feasible, for the path that The Shadow took seemed to taper to nothing, when viewed from above. In fact, The Shadow had to switch to a horizontal posture when he reached the end of the route. Probing with his suction cups, he clamped his hands around the corner, then drew his body farther, inchworm fashion.

Above, Osgood was calling for a flashlight. Someone brought one and the keen-eyed man flashed the beam below. Sweeping with the light, Osgood disclosed every square foot of the darkened wall, but he was just too late to glimpse the blotch of blackness that faded around the corner.

In Wade's office, Glenfield was answering the phone call. It was from Inspector Cardona, telling of crime at the Green Star pier. When Glenfield sprang the news of Wade's death, Cardona said he'd be right up to the penthouse. As The Shadow had anticipated, the law was about to pick up from the point where he left off.

MORE than an hour later, Cranston and Margo were finishing dinner in their favorite restaurant when a brusque man of domineering personality joined them in their booth. The arrival was the police commissioner, Ralph Weston. A friend of Cranston's, Weston was bristling with news to the pointed tips of his short-clipped mustache.

"What are you doing here?" Weston demanded. "I understood you two were expected at a party in Wade's penthouse."

"We are expected," corrected Cranston. "Haven't you heard that it is poor form to arrive at a party too early?"

"Maybe the commissioner isn't up on etiquette," suggested Margo, tartly. "Barging into a dining booth unannounced is hardly a custom in the best circles."

Weston threw Margo a withering glance that didn't even ruffle her. Then, concentrating on Cranston, the commissioner announced:

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"You're too late for Wade's party, Cranston. It's over."

Cranston gave a disappointed shrug.

"I wanted to see the Amsterdam collection," he admitted. "I didn't suppose that Wade would take the crowd to see it so soon. I understood that there was a lot of red tape to be considered and such complications require time."

"The arrangements weren't necessary," declared Weston. "Wade is dead and the Amsterdam collection has been stolen."

An expression of surprise came into Cranston's calm eyes. His gaze fixed as though viewing distant scenes. Then, in a reflective tone, Cranston stated:

"It's exactly like Culver's case, commissioner."

"From the standpoint of robbery, yes," conceded Weston. "But the matter of death was just a coincidence."

"Why so?" queried Cranston. "If the robbery was arranged, so was the murder."

"But Wade wasn't murdered. He died from a heart attack, like Culver."

Instead of expressing new surprise, Cranston took Weston's statement as something to be expected.

"That makes it the more evident," declared Cranston. "I take it that Wade must have died alone, under circumstances that made murder seem impossible."

Weston nodded.

"Exactly like Culver," affirmed Cranston, "and that clinches your case, commissioner."

Weston's brusque manner became exasperation. He detailed the circumstances of Wade's death, including the shot that the victim had fired, attributing the latter to hallucination on Wade's part, probably produced during the strain of the heart attack. When Weston finished, Cranston took over.

"You say there was a brandy bottle on Wade's desk," reminded Cranston. "Has it struck you that the liquor might have been poisoned?"

"We tested the brandy," returned Weston. "There are no traces in it and none in Wade's system."

"It could be an untraceable poison, commissioner."

"Preposterous, Cranston. Granting that some poison might prove untraceable in the victim, it would certainly show up in the brandy. Anyway, we're trying it on guinea pigs, so if there's anything in your theory we'll know by tomorrow."

Rising, Weston started to leave the booth, as though deciding that there was no further use in arguing with Cranston. As a parting shot, Weston put in a theory of his own.

"Wade answered a phone call," said the commissioner. "Someone may have told him about the robbery. The shock was too much for him, that was all. It brought on the heart attack."

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"Wrong again, commissioner," observed Cranston. "You're taking the view that Wade knew nothing about the robbery. I would say that far from knowing nothing, Wade actually engineered the crime."

Weston gave a hopeless gesture.

"You've been listening to the rumors about Culver," the commissioner asserted. "Some of the men who lost money on that Chinese hoax blamed him for it. Now you're trying to pin the same thing on Wade. You're making too much out of a coincidence, Cranston."

Stormily, the commissioner left, deciding that his friend had nothing constructive to offer. When Weston had stalked from the restaurant, Margo picked up the thread of his remarks.

"Perhaps it was a coincidence," said Margo. "After all, Lamont, such things do happen."

"Of course," agreed Cranston. "But we are dealing with more than one coincidence. It was actually a coincidence that Culver should have died at the very time a robbery was executed, wasn't it?"

"Why, yes, it was."

"And now the same thing has occurred with Wade. That's another coincidence, isn't it?"

"Yes, it must be."

"Considering that the two coincidences were exactly alike," declared Cranston, "my conclusion is that they are not coincidences at all. We're up against a very curious problem, Margo, but there is a simple way of tackling it."

"Just how, Lamont?"

"By moving ahead of the next coincidence," affirmed Cranston. "I should have foreseen what was going to happen to Wade. In a way, I did foresee it, but I gave him too much credit. I thought he would be able to avoid Culver's fate."

## CHAPTER VII

EARLY the next afternoon, Lamont Cranston arrived in the office that he infrequently visited to handle occasional business matters. He found Margo Lane awaiting him in a rather annoyed mood.

"I've been trying to reach you all morning," Margo began. "There have been half a dozen phone calls and —"

"I was experimenting with formula J," interposed Cranston. "It offered a few problems, but I finally smoothed them."

Margo's curiosity prompted her to temporarily forget the phone calls that were so important.

"What's formula J?" she asked.

"A comparatively common substance," replied Cranston, "that has an important medical value. I refer to it as 'formula J' because it also acts as an untraceable poison."

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"That reminds me," put in Margo. "One of the calls was from Commissioner Weston. The guinea pigs absorbed the brandy and they're still alive."

"Of course," acknowledged Cranston. "The poison wasn't in the brandy. That would have given it away."

"Then how –"

"I'll show you, Margo."

Taking a small bottle from his pocket, Cranston poured its liquid contents into a drinking glass. The stuff had a yellowish tinge which made it visible. Swishing it around the glass, he poured the liquid back into the bottle, but a coating still remained around the inside of the tumbler.

"This solution dries quickly," Cranston explained. "We'll give it a few minutes, then watch the next result."

At the end of the few minutes, Cranston held up the glass so that Margo could see that the inner coating had gained the appearance of a light shellac.

"This glass represents the cap of Wade's brandy bottle," Cranston explained. "He used it as a drinking cup. We'll pour some water into it."

Filling the glass with water, Cranston placed it on the desk. Margo saw that the yellowish coating began to detach itself and tinge the water, though the process was very slow. Such discoloration would not have been noticeable in brandy. When Margo said so, Cranston gave an approving nod.

"Very good, Margo," he stated. "But do you notice something else?"

"Why, yes," the girl replied. "The process is too slow."

"Exactly. That was the thing that stumped me for a while. Formula J is soluble in this form, and there's enough in that glass to knock out an elephant. But it must all dissolve, Margo, otherwise there will be a trace. I tried to make it act quicker without result until I remembered that brandy was Wade's favorite drink."

"What has brandy to do with it, Lamont?"

"Just this." Laying his hand half around the glass, Cranston lifted it so that Margo could see through the clear side. "Brandy drinkers prefer the stuff warm, Margo. They habitually let the glass receive the heat of their hand. Watch what happens to formula J under those conditions."

Margo watched amazed. The increasing warmth caused the yellow coating to run into the water as though Cranston were squeezing it like a lemon. When he poured out the water, all of the yellow lining went with it. Refilling the glass, Cranston showed it to be quite clear. As a further demonstration, one which made Margo gasp, he drank the second glass.

"Lamont!" the girl exclaimed. "Do you have the antidote for that poison?"

"There isn't any," returned Cranston, blandly. "There wasn't any poison in the drink I just took. It all dissolved in the first test. Well" – Cranston paused before another swallow – "here's to Weston's guinea pigs."

Margo sat down at the desk and buried her chin in her hands.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"So that solves Wade's case," said the girl. "What about Culver?"

"He was settled in some similar fashion," returned Cranston, indifferently. "We can probably learn how when we talk with somebody who knew Culver. Some minor clue may count heavily."

"Glenfield knew Culver," reminded Margo. "By the way, he phoned you, too, from his summer place in New England. He left last night at midnight. A house party is starting today."

"And we're invited?"

"Both of us."

"We'll fly up there this afternoon," decided Cranston. "It will only take a couple of hours. Call the airport, Margo, and make the arrangements."

WHEN Margo had completed the call, she noticed that Cranston was checking over a list of names. Finished with it, he passed the list across the desk. All the names were marked with penciled checks, some in red, others in blue.

"The reds are Culver's suckers," explained Cranston. "The blues are the men Wade duped. Do you notice any duplications, Margo?"

"Only one," replied Margo. "Artemus Glenfield."

"Right. Glenfield is the man who came back for more."

"Then he may tell you something about Culver –"

"Better than that, Margo, he may be a candidate for the next trim that is due. Culver and Wade aren't the only operators in this phony art racket. Don't you see why?"

Margo shook her head.

"It's a one-shot proposition," explained Cranston. "The man who stages it has to look as though he suffered, too, or else clear out for parts unknown. In either case, he can't repeat the game."

Cranston analyzed the deal quite simply. In arranging the purchase of genuine Chinese art treasures, Guy Culver had gathered in the cash and sent it somewhere. Then, being so closely connected with the whole affair, he had secretly maneuvered the theft of the treasures, with the placement of false curios in their stead. This two-way scheme had swindled the owners as well as the buyers.

Wade's process had been identical with the Amsterdam collection. Again, a huge fund of cash had gone somewhere and the genuine art collection had followed it. It was obvious that there must be more links in the chain that Culver and Wade had begun and those links must lead finally to a brain behind the entire game.

"For want of a better title," decided Cranston, "we can call him Crystal Skull. To find him, we must watch for the next swindle. Its perpetrator may be The Skull himself, though the chain is likely to continue further. However, the game is not working to the satisfaction of the individual swindlers, each of whom receives a skull of rock crystal when he begins a job, so that he gains the services of the lesser crooks connected with the game."

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Margo gave a nod.

"You mean somebody is preying on the swindlers themselves," she said. "Somebody who is killing them off as fast as they complete each job."

"That's right," acknowledged Cranston. "It's the reason why Wade was worried over Culver's sudden death."

"And Wade picked you as the menace –"

"Wade picked The Shadow," corrected Cranston. "But I can assure you, Margo, if anything had happened to Wade through action on my part – or let us say, under The Shadow's auspices – it would have taken place before the swindle was completed."

"That blonde you mentioned!" she exclaimed. "The one you called D.D. – is she working with the rival group?"

"We haven't cleared that question yet," replied Cranston. "D.D., whoever she is, struck me as a very independent person. Suppose we sidetrack her and consider the other factors."

"All right. First, there's a brain, who may be the next man that shows up with the crystal skull in his possession, unless the chain continues further. Am I right on that part?"

Cranston nodded his approval of Margo's summary.

"And there's a rival," continued Margo, "who is eliminating the chain link by link, hoping at the finish to take over all the profits in cash and art treasures that have been gathered under the auspices of the Crystal Skull."

To certify Margo's conclusions, Cranston handed her the list. The girl looked through it, much puzzled, until she struck a name that Cranston had not checked at all.

"Albert Osgood!" exclaimed Margo. "You mean that he –"

"The list explains itself," interposed Cranston. "Osgood is the only man who has refused to be swindled, excluding, of course, myself. Osgood dickered with both Culver and Wade. Therefore –"

"Therefore he knows all that's going on!" blurted Margo. "That means he must be the rival of the Crystal Skull, the man who is seeking wealth through murder!"

"Let us say that Osgood qualifies," modified Cranston. "At least he refuses to be duped, though he is very anxious to acquire wealth. Osgood needs close watching. He shall receive it."

Glancing at his watch, Cranston saw that it was nearly time to start for the airport. Picking up the telephone, he called Burbank, his contact man, and gave instructions regarding certain agents who were to watch matters in New York while their chief was away. After that call, Cranston and Margo left the office. This being a normal expedition in the daytime, they entered Cranston's limousine instead of Shrevvy's cab.

Through the speaking tube, Cranston gave the calm-toned order:

"The airport, Stanley."

## CHAPTER VIII

Banking above the rocky promontory that jutted its gray nose into the sea, the plane seemed to hang in air while Lamont Cranston pointed out the panorama that came swinging up to greet the eyes of Margo Lane.

"Cape Dolphin," defined Cranston, indicating the rocky point. "Something of a summer resort, as you can see by the hotel and the surrounding cottages."

"You're looking at Shelter Bay," continued Cranston. "It's several miles across, though it's hard to realize from this altitude. Watch how it changes shape as we fly above it."

Margo watched and was amazed. From an almost perfect circle, Shelter Bay began to take the appearance of a vast starfish, sprawled amid rocky shores that were backed by the solid olive tint of evergreen forests that crowded the mainland. The points of the jagged star were blue indentures that lost themselves in gorges hewn deep into the timber land.

"Tidal rivers," Cranston explained. "Most of them are blocked by sandbars, except at high tide. The tides in this area are very high, twenty feet or more."

Margo could see one sandbar plainly. It was out of water and the waves from the bay were flecking it with foam. As the plane banked above the bar, Margo noticed that the strip of sand ran completely across the inlet; from one bank of overhanging trees to the other.

"That's called Lost River," added Cranston. "It's merely an estuary, a serpentine cove, that carves a mile and a half into the mainland. I checked it on the map, when I was locating Baycliff, which is where we're going to land."

Baycliff was the name of Glenfield's estate. As the plane sloped to the landing field, trees came rushing up, and with them a gray stone building set well back from the bay. A landing field disclosed itself, near the end of a private road that zigzagged back into the forest to join the highway from Cape Dolphin.

The new guests were greeted the moment they stepped from the plane. The greeter was none other than Artemus Glenfield, wearing his usual smile. There were servants present to carry the bags, while Glenfield gestured the visitors toward a wooded path that led to the gray-stone mansion. But it was apparent, even under the gloom of the evergreens, that Glenfield's smile was purely the result of habit. Cranston noted it immediately.

"Too bad about last night," said Cranston. "The sooner you forget it, the better. Those things come and go, Glenfield. I've had my share of them."

"In my case it's always go," returned Glenfield, dejectedly. "I had bad luck in the Culver deal and when things went wrong with Wade... well, I've just about given up the idea of stocking Bayview Manor with my art treasures."

"Perhaps you'll find some future opportunities, Glenfield."

Momentarily, Glenfield's smile returned in response to Cranston's comment. Then, his lips straightening, Glenfield gave a headshake.

"I'm the perfect sucker," grumbled Glenfield. "Come in the house, Cranston, and I'll show you why. The tough luck that I had with Culver and Wade is merely part of it."

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Entering a side door of the manor, Glenfield warmed further to his theme. He gestured to the walls of a music room, where a dozen paintings hung in antique frames. Margo gave a pleased exclamation that brought a grunt from Glenfield.

"They look good," said the portly man, "but they are all fakes. I bought them at auction for a hundred times their value. Look at the furniture and the musical instruments. They are bogus antiques, too."

Leading the way into another room, Glenfield continued to blacklist the furnishings.

"Persian rugs made in Belgium," he growled. "Idols from India, faked in Indiana. If you want to see the pay-off, come over here."

Stepping to an alcove, Glenfield gestured toward a little outdoor garden walled with a high, prickly Barbary hedge that fenced it all around except for a small rustic gateway. The garden was sunken, and could be viewed from the bay window which was just above the level of the hedge.

In the garden stood a cluster of life-sized statues surrounding a marble fountain wherein a stream of water sprayed from a lotus-shaped bowl surrounding a five-foot pedestal. Descending, the spray became a fine drizzle that was iridescent in the sunlight.

From the corners of this mist-creating pool, smaller founts furnished lesser sprays that mingled with the whole to produce a musical tinkle. Through its sheer beauty the fountain was refreshing to the sight and Margo's gaze of admiration turned to fascination.

Glenfield promptly broke the spell.

"Granite statues," he scoffed. "That's what I was told when I bought them. Fine examples of the Italian Renaissance. They turned out to be poured concrete, molded in New Jersey and aged three years in a clay pit."

"But the fountain," began Margo. "It's beautiful –"

"A beautiful fake," interrupted Glenfield. "It came from the Garden of Versailles, so I was informed. I even saw an old picture of it, taken in its former setting. After I bought it, I went to France and saw Versailles. The statue was still there."

"Then this is a replica?" inquired Cranston.

"Exactly," replied Glenfield. "Sold to me as the original and at a proportionate price. I could have duplicated it myself for a tenth of the price I paid."

"After all these experiences," remarked Cranston, dryly, "why do you still want to buy art treasures?"

"Because I still want some genuine ones," retorted Glenfield. "I want to junk this stuff and put in something real. Come out to the sun porch and wait there while I bring you a few other samples of my folly. I need advice, Cranston, and you're the man to give it."

The sun porch was on the other side of the house. It overlooked the bay, and a great slope of forest. While to the right, Cranston and Margo could see a narrow curve amid the green, marking the winding course of Lost River, which came almost to the edge of Glenfield's premises.

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There was a closer sight, however, that attracted immediate attention. At the edge of the brief lawn that descended sharply toward the woods, was a swimming pool hewn from native rock and reinforced with concrete. It was a sizable pool with a high diving board. Several of Glenfield's guests were enjoying an afternoon swim. Around the pool were some colorful beach umbrellas that captured Margo's attention, until she noted that Cranston was looking elsewhere.

Margo's eyebrows raised as she followed Cranston's gaze. The attraction was a girl in a blue bathing suit, a two-piece affair with polka-dots that seemed purposely small to allow for the scant proportions of the outfit.

"Lovely scenery, Lamont," observed Margo. "Or wouldn't you know?"

Cranston's eyes narrowed in appraisal.

"That girl in the blue-bathing suit," remarked Cranston. "I'll say she is about five feet four and weighs approximately one hundred and fifteen."

"The specifications are probably correct," said Margo, "considering that there's not much to hamper the estimate. You might allow a few ounces for the bathing suit."

"I'm trying to picture her in a dark dress," continued Cranston, "wearing a dotted head band to match the sleeves and scarf."

The girl at that moment was removing a blue bathing cap to unloose a shower of blond hair that she straightened with a toss of her head.

"Lamont!" Margo's tone was breathless. "You can't mean – she can't be the girl who was at the Green Star pier?"

"I think so, Margo." Cranston watched the blonde turn toward a beach umbrella and studied every motion of her trim form. "If I could only see her speak to someone –"

The girl had paused. She was stopping to put on a pair of bathing slippers. As she came erect, she did speak to someone under the umbrella, and, though her manner was carefree, it carried just enough of her former poise to convince Cranston that his guess was right. Nodding, Cranston turned away from the window; before Margo could speak, he undertoned:

"Here comes Glenfield."

With him, Glenfield was bringing some jewel cases, which he opened to reveal a fine display of gems.

"These gems represent a lost fortune," declared Glenfield. "Here is one stone that I bought as an emerald" – he picked a green gem from the lot – "but it happens to be an olivine, which is simply a green garnet. This red gem is not a ruby, though it came from the proper locality. It is a rubicelle or variety of spinel."

Fingering through the gems, Glenfield finally came to a large yellow gem which he held toward the window to catch the rays of the setting sun.

"I bought this for a topaz," declared Glenfield. "It happens to be a citrine, which is nothing more than a form of yellow quartz. Its color is due to ferric oxide. Otherwise it would be ordinary rock crystal!"

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The term "rock crystal" caused Margo to glance quickly toward Cranston, who responded with a slight warning gesture. Then, boldly swinging the subject to suit his own purpose, Cranston remarked casually:

"Some rock crystal is valuable. Glenfield."

"All minerals are valuable," conceded Glenfield, "if the specimens are flawless and large enough. I learned that from Culver, it was one of the reasons why I trusted him. When a man has something he won't sell, he must be honest when he says he values it."

"What was it that Culver wouldn't sell?" asked Cranston.

"A beautiful specimen of rock crystal," replied Glenfield. "It was larger than my fist, and it was shaped like a skull. When people say Culver was crooked, I can't believe them, because that crystal skull disappeared when Culver died. Somebody must have stolen it."

"Wade had a crystal skull," remarked Cranston. "He kept it in his desk. Didn't you ever see it, Glenfield?"

Glenfield shook his head, then gave an exclamation of surprise.

"We searched that desk last night, Cranston! If Wade owned a crystal skull, it was stolen, too! Do you think —"

Before Glenfield could continue, a servant entered to announce that the guests were coming from the pool. Glenfield suggested that Cranston continue to look through the gems until he returned. As soon as Glenfield left, Cranston undertoned to Margo:

"Why don't you go along? I'll say you wanted to walk around the grounds. It might be a good idea to meet some of the guests."

With a nod, Margo left. She found a flight of stairs that led her outdoors and when she looked around, she saw that she was close to the rustic gate that led into the hedged fountain. At that moment a girl came past the corner of the house and paused, taking Margo for a stranger.

"I'm looking for Mr. Glenfield," began Margo. "I just arrived this afternoon. I'm Margo Lane —"

"My name is Diane Devereux," the other girl replied. "You'll find Mr. Glenfield in the little garden. I just saw him go there."

Diane Devereux!

The name fairly shouted its initials: D.D., the very clue that Cranston sought. As for the girl, she was the blonde who had finished her swim a short while before, and she was wearing her polka-dot ensemble, even to the neckerchief that had served her as a mask in her encounter with The Shadow!

## CHAPTER IX

FOR three days, Police Commissioner Weston had been trying to find his friend, Cranston, with no results at all. Finally, Weston had learned that Cranston had gone on a vacation in New England, as a house guest at the country manor of Artemus Glenfield.

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Naturally, Weston had wired to Cape Dolphin, the nearest town to Baycliff, where Glenfield lived. He was seated alone in the grill room of the Cobalt Club when someone clapped him on the back.

Undecided whether to chide Cranston for his absence or show gratitude over the wanderer's return, Weston compromised by getting right down to business.

"We're inclining to your theory, Cranston," asserted Weston. "There may have been some connection between Culver and Wade. More important, however, is the fact that each was murdered on the eve of an important business transaction."

"We do agree, commissioner," complimented Cranston. "At last you call those cases murder."

"Inspector Cardona has been conducting an investigation," continued Weston, "and he has brought in definite proof that a band of unknown criminals stole the Chinese treasures from their warehouse and removed the Amsterdam collection from the Green Star pier.

"Goods were sometimes stored there under seal," explained Weston. "The place was fixed so that such imports could be removed without the customs men knowing it. But there was another thing we discovered, an automatic trapdoor in the pier itself."

Weston went on to describe the trap through which Margo had pitched when The Shadow saved her from capture by the unknown crew that served the Crystal Skull. Its purpose was simple. In the balmy days of the Green Star Line, smugglers coming ashore with illicit suitcases had planted them on that spot and let them drop through to a waiting boat below. As he disclosed the workings of that game, Weston did not realize that he was branding Wade as a man mixed with robbery. It was Wade who had told Margo to meet Cranston at that exact spot on the Green Star pier!

"Getting back to the main issue, Cranston," proceeded the commissioner, "there is only one way to catch this tribe of rogues who are stealing imported treasures wholesale."

"Culver and Wade might have sent their funds away, commissioner –"

"To someone working with the ring?" snapped Weston. "Sheer guesswork, Cranston! We have found nothing to incriminate either of those victims. Let us stick to facts."

Obligingly, Cranston sat back and waited.

"If the ring is still in operation," asserted Weston wisely, "the chance to trap the criminals will come when they attempt another robbery. At that same time, there may be a murder threat, assuming of course that murder is involved. That is where you can help us, Cranston."

"You mean that I'm to watch for new transactions where goods are offered by men like Culver and Wade?"

"That's it," replied Weston. "Vast numbers of treasures have been shipped to America for safe-keeping from war-torn sections of the world. When they are offered on the market, it is usually done privately to avoid complications."

"And to facilitate swindles," added Cranston. "Have you thought of that?"

Weston's fist pounded the table until the dishes rattled.

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"Forget the swindle talk!" The commissioner stormed. "We're dealing with robbery."

"I can't forget that purchasers were swindled," declared Cranston. "My name isn't on the average sucker list. You should think in terms of a man whose name is."

"And who would he be?"

"Artemus Glenfield," replied Cranston. "I've just come from his summer place. In three days I've looked over the greatest accumulation of assorted junk that it has been my pleasure ever to examine."

Weston's eyes lighted. Disregarding the swindle angle, he recalled that Glenfield had put up money toward the propositions offered by both Culver and Wade.

"Unfortunately, Glenfield is cured," remarked Cranston. "I think it would require some persuasion to convince him to invest again. He was even talking about passing up another proposition that is coming due tomorrow night."

Weston fairly bounced from his chair, demanding to know what the proposition was. Cranston couldn't remember, so he said, because Glenfield had decided to forgo the matter and therefore hadn't discussed its details. However, Glenfield was coming back to town tomorrow, and Cranston was sure he could locate him in time to arrange matters.

With that promise, Cranston left, while Weston was phoning Cardona to tell him the good news. Cranston had another engagement. He was dining with Margo Lane at an obscure restaurant where he knew that Weston wouldn't look for them.

Margo was already there when Cranston arrived. He was wearing a poker-faced expression that made it impossible to determine how he had fared. Almost anxiously, Margo asked:

"What luck, Lamont?"

"Weston is interested," replied Cranston. "I told him that Glenfield might consider another buy in art treasures."

"Consider it!" exclaimed Margo. "Why, he told us that this would be a sure thing. He said that Trent Jarrock actually has the curios in his own home where they can be examined –"

"Which is just what I couldn't tell Weston," put in Cranston. "Glenfield said that Jarrock is making a confidential offer, didn't he?"

"Why, yes."

"And what would happen to that offer if the police came romping out to Jarrock's house on Long Island and wanted to tear the place apart as a preliminary gesture?"

"Why... why I guess Jarrock would call the whole deal off. If he's anything like Culver or Wade or –"

"Exactly, Margo. So Weston isn't going to hear from us until tomorrow evening when the deal is actually under way. I'll have to keep him guessing until then. By the way, were there any messages at the office?"

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Margo handed one across the table. It had been forwarded by Burbank from Harry Vincent, one of The Shadow's active agents. Opening the message, Cranston read it; the message was in a code he knew by sight, and as he finished its lines, they began to disappear, which was the way with all messages between The Shadow and his agents. Their special brand of fading ink, that began to vanish at contact with the air, had served them well in concealing their communications.

"Very good," approved Cranston, as he laid the blank paper aside. "Vincent learned a lot in one visit to Jarrock's place. It tallied with all that Glenfield told us – and more."

"And more?" echoed Margo.

"Yes," replied Cranston. "Do you remember what Glenfield told us when we asked about Diane Devereaux?"

"He said she had left quite suddenly to catch a plane to the coast. Though he wasn't sure, Glenfield thought that Diane was accepting a movie offer."

"Apparently she wasn't."

Margo threw a glance at the blank paper that so recently had represented a message from Harry Vincent. With a smile, Cranston laid his forefinger a few inches above the lower edge and ran it across the sheet.

"It's right here in the last line, Margo," said Cranston. "When Vincent came back on the train from Middlewood, where Jarrock lives, he was attracted by a very striking passenger, a lovely blonde with innocent blue eyes –"

## CHAPTER X

IT was late in the afternoon when Lamont Cranston and Artemus Glenfield arrived at the house on Long Island. They came by train and were met at Middlewood station by a car that Jarrock sent. They were not the only persons so favored; there were at least a dozen persons coming to the house and Jarrock sent cars for all of them.

The house itself was modern and pretentious, boasting at least fifteen rooms. The garage held seven cars and it was filled, which accounted for Jarrock's generosity in bringing the guests from the station. Having more than seven servants on the premises, Jarrock could keep all his cars in operation.

Parked on an obscure lane that flanked Jarrock's premises, Harry Vincent and Margo Lane were seated in a roadster watching the parade of sedans and limousines. Margo couldn't understand why Jarrock kept so many cars, until Harry explained the situation.

"Jarrock bought them with the house," stated Harry. "The whole works belonged to a wealthy old man who had relatives in Central Europe. They couldn't claim the estate when the old man died."

"Who did?" asked Margo.

"The place was taken over by the alien property custodian," said Harry. "It was auctioned off to the highest bidder, who happened to be Jarrock. He bought everything at twenty cents on the dollar!"

"Including the curios he wants to sell?"

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"No. Those were stored the same as the others, but Jarrock brought them here yesterday. I saw the vans arrive. There were three loads altogether."

"But why does Jarrock have so many servants?"

"They're only temporary," explained Harry. "Jarrock hired them to arrange the curios and watch the house. He claims his collection is worth half a million dollars."

Inside the house, Trent Jarrock was showing his visitors the actual wares. Every room on the ground floor looked like a portion of an antique shop. Nor was there any doubt as to the authenticity of these rarities. Though Jarrock himself was a man of shifty manner with an unconvincing smile that rendered his sallow face more ugly, there were persons present whose reliability stood unquestioned along with their reputation for judging art treasures.

This was no case of buying sight unseen, or even trusting that genuine goods would be on hand when called for. Among the visitors were actual dealers who stopped to examine every article and appraise it. Naturally, Artemus Glenfield was pleased at being in such company, but there was another man who seemed even more impressed.

That man was Albert Osgood. His hatchet face was perpetually eager as he inspected Jarrock's possessions. It was plain to see that Osgood knew values, in everything from Chinese porcelains to Persian tapestries. Cranston, too, was interested in the items, but as the tour proceeded he let the others discuss their authenticity while he studied the treasures from the standpoint of Jarrock's taste.

Though Jarrock himself was somewhat uncouth, he had shown a delicacy in choosing art objects. Not that the goods were fragile, except for the occasional porcelains; rather, all were highly ornamental and exquisite instead of large. In one room, Cranston appraised the contents from that standpoint.

"Come along," suggested Jarrock, dryly. "It took three vans to bring my treasures here, and you haven't seen half of what I have to offer. Or should I say offered?"

Glenfield's face became worried when he saw some of the other guests smile. Jarrock noted the expression.

"You are too late, Glenfield," said Jarrock. "All these goods have been sold. Most of these gentlemen were here yesterday. They paid with cash and certified checks when they arrived today. I have already sent the purchase money into town."

"But I mailed you a check," insisted Glenfield. "I sent fifty thousand dollars as a deposit to be apportioned later."

"It must have arrived after I left the office," declared Jarrock. "However, I shall take your word for it. There are some items that I intended to keep for my personal collection. I can let you have them, but I insist that you have some of these dealers appraise them."

Glancing across at Glenfield, Cranston saw disappointment on the man's face. Apparently Glenfield had at last found a genuine buy, only to learn that his opportunity was gone. Still it was difficult to define Glenfield's sentiments.

As Jarrock led the way into another room, servants promptly entered the one vacated to rearrange the various items and tag them with the names of the purchasers. Jarrock paused to give precise instructions that each room should be locked. After dinner, the purchasers could arrange for separate removal of whatever items

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

they had bought.

Jarrock had even planned that detail. As he crossed the hallway, followed by his guests, he paused to beckon to a blocky man who had just entered from the side yard. The man looked like Jarrock's head servant and in studying him, Cranston noted a peculiar hardness behind the fellow's smooth, glossed features.

"Did you arrange for the delivery truck?" queried Jarrock. "I ordered it to be here early, Thornton."

The name Thornton shot home to Cranston. It fitted with the card that he had found in Wade's office. Evidently Thornton was sure that Wade had destroyed the card and therefore hadn't bothered to change his alias. Here was a real link to the Crystal Skull; Thornton, the unknown factor in Wade's case, a servant in Jarrock's bargain residence!

"The truck is here, Mr. Jarrock," declared Thornton, in blunt monotone. "You said the purchasers could take turns using it if they wanted to remove their goods tonight."

"That is the plan," returned Jarrock. "It is only a half an hour's trip to town, and the truck will carry individual shipments. There will be time for several round trips. Of course" – Jarrock turned to his guests – "anyone may leave his purchases if he prefers. They will be under lock and key and you are all welcome to stay overnight."

The others began to discuss the arrangements. None noticed that one member of the group was absent. Cranston was putting in a call to the nearest police precinct.

Just within the extended limits of metropolitan New York, Jarrock's residence was in territory under Weston's jurisdiction. Only a few hours ago Cranston had informed the commissioner regarding the destination named by Glenfield. Already, Weston had dispatched his ace inspector, Joe Cardona, to the precinct close at hand. It was Cardona who answered Cranston's call.

"Everything is in order here, inspector," undertoned Cranston in his calm style. "The guests are still looking at the art exhibits, but I've just learned that all sales have been completed."

Cardona caught the significance. He announced that he'd be moving up with a picked squad at once, to throw a cordon around Jarrock's premises. Dusk was already settling and the maneuver would pass unobserved.

"We'll spot any crooks that show up," promised Cardona. "There's only one question, Mr. Cranston. Is there any chance that somebody is staging an inside job?"

Cranston would have preferred to pass that question, but since Cardona had put it, there was no alternative. Briefly, Cranston described the man who called himself Thornton and stated that he might bear watching.

"I'll keep Thornton in mind," assured the inspector. "You do the same, Mr. Cranston. We'll be closing in ten minutes from now. I'll blink a signal from the gate. If you need us, give an answer."

Strolling out into the hallway, Cranston joined the group that was coming from the last exhibit room. The doors to the other rooms were still open and the servants were busy tagging the various purchases according to the lists that Jarrock had given them. Most of the ten minutes passed in conversation regarding the undisputed worth of Jarrock's unusual collection; then, while the group still chatted, Cranston drifted through a doorway leading to a veranda.

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From that vantage spot, Cranston witnessed the signal that Cardona had promised, a brief succession of flashlight blinks. In the dusk, he observed the empty delivery truck standing in front of the garage where Jarrock's collection of secondhand automobiles had been stowed. Over beyond was the lane where Harry and Margo watched from the roadster.

There was no need to answer Cardona's signal. In the thickening darkness, all was quiet, free from menace. Through the open doorway came the melodious clang of a golden gong that belonged among the curios, signifying that dinner was ready to be served. Turning, Cranston entered the house.

Low was the whispered laugh that came from Cranston's lips, a token of his other self, The Shadow. Somehow the complete serenity of these surroundings marked them as a setting for crime.

### CHAPTER XI

THE guests were seating themselves at the dinner table when Cranston joined them. From the hallway came the voices of the servants, checking off the final lists. As doors began to close, Jarrock turned from his seat at the head of the table and called for Thornton, who promptly appeared.

"Bring the duplicate lists, Thornton," ordered Jarrock. "You will find them in my study. Each purchaser can then check off the items that he bought."

"I was just in the study, sir," returned Thornton, "but I couldn't find the lists. You must have locked them in the top drawer of the desk."

"I don't remember putting them there," remarked Jarrock. "In fact, I don't recall locking the desk drawer. Well, I at least have my keys" – as he spoke, Jarrock brought a jingling key ring from his pocket, while he fished deep, as though expecting to find something else – "and I suppose I'll have to go to the study anyway."

All this while, Cranston's eyes were fixed on Thornton, studying the man's peculiar face. The dining room was illuminated by old-fashioned candles and in the flickery glow, Thornton's features showed all the hardness that the man habitually tried to conceal.

Despite his precautions, Thornton's identity was plain. The face that Cranston studied in the candle glow belonged to a most questionable character who, when deprived of half a dozen aliases like Thornton, answered to the name of Nebo Thurling.

With the keen vision of The Shadow, Cranston had already seen through the thin disguise of the man who called himself Thornton. In describing the fellow to Cardona, Cranston had actually pictured Thurling.

The very name of Nebo Thurling spelled trouble. The man had worked as organizer for several racket rings, always slipping from the scene just before the law cracked down. The small fry that he kept in line never knew anything about Nebo when they came to be questioned. Nevertheless, Nebo had stepped out of bounds a few times too often, specifically in the matter of carrying a gun. Slugs from his favorite .38 had been dug from the walls of gambling rooms and horse-race parlors on several occasions. Hence Nebo was regarded as capable of committing murder, though he had never been charged with that particular crime.

Unquestionably, Cardona had recognized Nebo from Cranston's description of Thornton. Knowing the ways of the ace inspector, The Shadow expected Cardona to play a careful hand. Just how Cardona was playing it would be something else again.

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In this case, it was something on which The Shadow had not calculated, yet which was to prove of vital moment in the affair of the Crystal Skull!

While Jarrock was rising to go to his study, Nebo, alias Thornton, must have sensed the gaze of analyzing eyes, for he turned nervously to search the faces around the dining room table. At that moment, Cranston was casually lighting a cigarette, hence Nebo's eyes roved past him. Still, Nebo must have felt uneasy, for he withdrew to a corner of the dining room.

One of the guests suggested that they while the time with some drinks from the bottles that cluttered an ample sideboard. The idea meeting with approval, Nebo began to supply the customers, acting in the polite style that suited the part of Thornton. Drifting from the group, Cranston stepped through a French door that was partly open and made an unnoticed exit to the side lawn.

Half a minute later, Harry and Margo were hearing the whispered tone of The Shadow, so close that it actually seemed to be with them in their parked car. The low voice spoke a single word:

"Report."

"All quiet so far," reported Harry. "The servants have been backing some of Jarrock's cars into the garage. I guess they won't need all of them to take the guests back to the station."

Harry's opinion was sound, since any of the guests who did leave would probably be going on different trains. So The Shadow ordered Harry to keep close check on the delivery truck that was parked on Jarrock's driveway. Then:

"Watch anything occurring from the direction of the Sound," added The Shadow. "Cardona and his squad have closed in, but they may have neglected to move along the shore."

Not only in tone, but in garb, Cranston had become The Shadow when he gave that order. From the rear of the car, he had taken garments of black, cloak and slouch hat, to become his mysterious self. Like a fragment of the night, this unseen figure moved away. The Shadow was making his own rounds to learn how well Cardona and the police squad were posted.

It chanced that The Shadow was looking in the wrong place for Inspector Joe Cardona.

IN his study, Trent Jarrock had found the duplicate lists in the drawer that Thornton mentioned and with them a small bottle of pills that Jarrock habitually used before meals. The pill bottle was the thing that Jarrock had felt for when bringing the keys from his pocket. Uncorking the bottle, Jarrock slid out three pills and took them all with a single swallow, without bothering about a drink of water to follow.

Jarrock's throat was still making gulpy motions when he took out the lists and left the bottle in their stead. Hearing footsteps coming from the hall, Jarrock spoke testily, while staring at the desk drawer.

"I thought you said this drawer was locked," declared Jarrock. "What was the idea, Thornton? Did you want an excuse to speak to me privately?"

"I'd like to speak to you privately, Mr. Jarrock."

The responding tone was neither Nebo's own nor the variation he used as Thornton. Looking up, Jarrock saw a swarthy man of stocky build facing him across the desk. From the coat lapel that the stranger turned in reverse, came the glimmer of an official badge.

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There wasn't a change in Jarrock's face. Rather, his features froze, which was to his advantage, since Jarrock wasn't smiling and therefore held a somewhat convincing pose. To a degree, Jarrock looked startled, which was to be expected.

Restraining the snarl, Jarrock kept his tone to an even purr, as he asked:

"Who are you – and who let you in here?"

"I'm Inspector Cardona," returned the intruder. "I walked in because there was nobody around to stop me. What's happened to your servants, Mr. Jarrock?"

"They've finished locking the curio rooms and are putting the cars away. I'm glad you came, inspector. My guests will feel more at ease when they know you are here."

"One moment." Cardona raised a hand as Jarrock started out from behind the desk. "There's one servant I wanted to ask about. His name is Thornton."

"A very capable man, Thornton."

"How long has he worked for you?"

"Only a short while. All the servants are new. I only hired them to look after the curios."

"Was Thornton the man who hired them for you?"

"Why, no. Thornton came separately."

Cardona gave a short, gruff laugh.

"He's getting smarter, Nebo is," said Joe. "There used to be a time when Nebo Thurling did all the hiring himself."

Jarrock tilted his head with a perplexed air.

"Who is Nebo Thurling?"

"Ask who Thornton is," returned Cardona, cryptically, "and you've given yourself the answer. They're one and the same, Mr. Jarrock."

The explanation didn't seem to enlighten Jarrock, so Cardona proceeded to clarify it, in the manner of a police official.

"This fellow Nebo," put in Cardona, "or Thornton to you, Mr. Jarrock. He doesn't happen to carry a gun, does he?"

"Why, yes," returned Jarrock. "He needs a gun to help protect this house while the curios are here."

"You gave him the gun, then?"

"No. He brought his own. He said he had a permit."

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"But you didn't see the permit, did you?"

"No. I saw the gun, though –"

"A short, stubby gun," interrupted Cardona. "Heavy, though, a .38 caliber. An imported revolver with an initial on the handle."

Jarrock nodded as though amazed.

"The initial T stands for Thurling," added Cardona. "Not for Thornton, the name he gave you. I figured Nebo would be carrying that fancy rod of his. It's pocket size, but it packs a wallop. Suppose you call the guy in here, Mr. Jarrock, I'll step out of sight until the right time."

Taking a few steps toward the door, Jarrock stopped suddenly. Turning back to the desk, he fumbled for something in the top drawer. Wondering what Jarrock was after, Cardona was starting to draw his own revolver, when he saw that Jarrock was simply producing an object that at first sight resembled a large chunk of glass.

"Perhaps this is important," said Jarrock. "It is a curio I bought recently, a skull formed of pure rock crystal. I noticed that Thornton – I mean Nebo – seemed to take a special interest in it."

Cardona took the skull and began to examine it. On the desk lay a pin, which Jarrock picked up with one hand while with the other he reached to a vase containing soma roses. Choosing a rose, Jarrock used the pin to fasten it to his coat lapel, all the while watching Cardona from the corner of his eye. At that moment, Cardona was gazing right into the eyes of the crystal skull.

"Examine it closely, inspector," purred Jarrock. "The longer you look the more you will see."

Already Cardona was seeing enough. He was undergoing the same experience that Cranston had at Wades, but in Cardona's case the hypnotic effect of the crystal skull was more rapid and emphatic. Joe's eyes showed the effect; usually they were narrow in their gaze, at present they were wide open.

No longer did Cardona have his sharp and penetrating manner; his stare was vacant. In a mere glance, Jarrock could tell that his visitor was completely hypnotized. Reaching across the desk, Jarrock plucked the crystal skull from Cardona's grasp. Leaning close, Jarrock purred the question:

"You hear me, inspector?"

"I hear you."

Cardona's tone was mechanical.

"You will do as I command," continued Jarrock in his persuasive tone. "You will go to the window and order your men to move back from their stations."

There was no reply from Cardona. Instead, he turned abruptly from the desk and walked to the window in the stiff fashion of a robot. Following close behind him, Jarrock kept away from the window, but retained a position from which he could still purr commands. In his hand, Jarrock kept the crystal skull, should it be needed to control Cardona further.

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A demoniac glint flashed from Jarrock's eyes while he held his head half tilted, listening for sounds that came from the great hallway. Those sounds were stealthy, and they evidently pleased Jarrock for his sallow lips widened in a smile that added to his satanic expression.

Trent Jarrock had marked himself as a man of crime. More than that, he was taking the law into his own hands, thanks to his complete control of Inspector Cardona.

Again, the power of the Crystal Skull was manifest, despite the precautions of The Shadow!

### CHAPTER XII

OUTSIDE Jarrock's great mansion, The Shadow paused amid the darkness. He had finished a half circuit around the fringe of the lawn and was about to move toward the house itself when something made him change his mind.

The something was a peculiar stir amid the shrubbery near the lawn edge. The Shadow could hear mutters that receded as he listened; through the darkness, his penetrating gaze made out vague figures that were withdrawing from the grounds. They were the hand-picked plain clothes men who made up Cardona's special squad. Man by man The Shadow had located them during his silent, invisible patrol, with the sole exception of Joe Cardona. The Shadow had taken it for granted that Cardona was somewhere in the offing, but he was no longer sure.

Having moved his men to well advanced positions, Cardona wasn't the sort to give up the advantage thus gained. Sensing a mystery in the thing, The Shadow postponed his excursion toward the mansion and began to retrace the wide semicircle.

Muttered voices, continually receding, made it evident that the police were acting under orders. Gaining no explanation, The Shadow paused in the shelter of a clumpy bush and looked toward the house.

There The Shadow saw the answer.

Standing between the curtains of a heavily draped window was Joe Cardona, clearly outlined by the strong light behind him. He was making mechanical gestures with his hands, sweeping them forward and outward. There was no mistaking the signal. It meant: "Back!"

Thinking in terms of Cardona only, the members of the police squad were obeying the injunction. It was The Shadow who thought in other terms. He knew that the window belonged to Jarrock's study and Jarrock himself had gone there just before The Shadow began his outdoor tour.

Assuming Cardona to be hypnotized, as his mechanical motions indicated, The Shadow knew that Jarrock was actually giving the command for the police to retire.

There was a way to countermand that order. The Shadow put it into action without a moment's hesitation. Coming up from the bush, The Shadow drew an automatic from beneath his cloak. Starting a sudden dash toward the mansion, he began firing shots in air.

Cardona's orders no longer counted. By the time The Shadow had reached the front door of the mansion, shouts from beyond the lawn told that the police were starting for the house to learn the cause of the gunfire.

In the house, the sound of those gunshots created a similar commotion.

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Trent Jarrock heard the sharp reports and swung about in fury. Then, thinking that Cardona's men had begun the gunfire, Jarrock snarled a command at the man who still stood at the window.

"Stop ordering them back!" spat Jarrock. "Leave the window and follow me!"

Still clutching the crystal skull, Jarrock started for the study door the moment that Cardona turned to follow. Jarrock's face was purple with fury; in brief seconds he had become a madman. Whatever Jarrock's schemes, they evidently depended upon a brief time limit which The Shadow's shots had broken. Violent in action as well as temper, Jarrock was dashing full tilt for the door, when he stopped as though a trip hammer had jolted him.

Rearing to full height, Jarrock gave a gargly scream as he threw his free hand to his throat. From purple his face went red under the spasm that seized him. Once taut; Jarrock never relaxed. Like a wooden figure his body flung forward to the floor, struck and rolled over, turning his face toward the ceiling.

Leaving Jarrock's other hand, the crystal skull bounced across the floor and stopped a few feet from the door, its transparent countenance leering back in happy pleasure at the sight of a new victim. Jarrock's own eyes were as glassy as the skull's. Like Culver and Wade, this temporary owner of the crystal skull had been chopped into oblivion by some unknown rival who moved even faster than The Shadow in dealing with the ring of crooks who formed the clan of the Crystal Skull!

As Jarrock's body finished its death pitch, Cardona halted his mechanical advance. The hypnotized police inspector was obeying the final command. Jarrock had said, "Follow me," and Cardona could follow him no farther.

In the dining room, startled guests stared at one another as they heard the shots. They weren't sure what the gunfire meant and no one apparently wanted to be the first man to find out. The first to move was Osgood, but halfway to the dining-room door, the hatchet-faced man thought better of it. Turning about, Osgood caught questioning glances from the other guests, particularly Glenfield.

"I suppose some one else had better go," conceded Osgood. Then, glancing about for a candidate, he added: "What about you, Thornton?"

Nebo's lips twitched away a smile. It was just the order that the crooked servant wanted. Nebo started from the dining room, out into the great hall.

Already The Shadow was entering the front door, coming with swift strides, carrying a smoking automatic in his hand. The Shadow saw three of Jarrock's hirelings busy in the hallway. The doors of the curio rooms were closed, indicating that the treasures in those rooms were still intact, but how long they would be was a question.

[Through the far doorway, The Shadow saw Nebo leaving the dining room, sneaking down the great hall toward the rear of the house. He followed silently, appearing as a wave of blackness that moved soundlessly down the great hall after Nebo.

Nebo went out the door, The Shadow close behind him. In the thickening darkness, The Shadow saw the large old truck that had previously been parked in front of the garage. It was now parked by one of the side doors of the house. The back of the truck was open; one thug was in the driver's seat and two others were loading a rolled-up tapestry onto it.

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The Shadow spun rapidly in that direction, his movements against the light of the doorway drawing the attention of the truckers, who recognized the dark figure.

Pulling revolvers, they jumped aboard the tail of the open-backed truck, stabbing shots at The Shadow as they did so. In their haste, their shots went wild. Quick shots from The Shadow's gun shattered the air. He leaped on to the back of the truck like a black avalanche as the truck took off.

Cardona's men saw the struggle as the truck zipped past and shouted to their fellows to stop it; two leaped aboard the running board in an attempt to forestall escape.

Slugging blows from gun barrels; sharp reports from muzzles were attempts by the truckers to strike at The Shadow. The swinging guns reached his head, but the shots didn't harm him, for by then The Shadow was slugging back at the heavy-handed pair. His blows diverted the shots; the valuable tapestry took the slugs intended for the whirlwind in black, but that was all the damage done.

While groggy truckers were dropping away from The Shadow's swings, the truck was racing for the corner of the house. The Shadow perceived that the tapestry was all that the truck contained in the way of stolen treasures.

To forestall further crime The Shadow leaped clear of the truck, and pulled one of the truckers with him as he landed in the hedge that the truck was passing. Cardona's two men were still hanging on its running board.

In the study, Joe Cardona was still staring at Trent Jarrock. As the hypnotized police inspector stood there, a stealthy figure entered the room. The person quickly saw the crystal skull lying on the floor a few feet from the door, and picked it up, looking at Cardona.

He approached Cardona, recognizing his hypnotic state. He held it up so that Cardona could gaze into the eyes of the crystal skull.

He spoke in a low tone to Cardona, then departed with the crystal skull in his possession, leaving Cardona standing in the same position as before.

In the dining room, the French doors suddenly flew open, alarming the guests. The men who hurled the French doors open so hurriedly were a pair of Jarrock's guests, dashing up to report that the truck was out back, manned by huskies who were stealing the treasures.

They were already late with this news, as the truck was rapidly fleeing the scene.

Nebo watched the police pursue the truck that was taking away The Shadow. He turned towards the house and the study.]

Listening, Nebo could hear shouts from the far side of the house, accompanied by a crash that meant the French doors were being flung open. The guests from the dining room had heard the hue and cry.

With a harsh, satisfied laugh, Nebo turned and went in through the side door. Going under the archway, he reached Jarrock's study. There, Nebo paused to view an odd scene. On the floor lay Jarrock, sprawled in death; beyond him Cardona, staring vacantly at the body, his lips moving slowly as though he sought to speak.

The scene pleased Nebo. Again he grated a laugh that fitted his own character, not Thornton's. Owing no more loyalty to Jarrock than he had to Wade or Culver, Nebo felt no regrets. Indeed, from the smile that

showed on his hard lips, Nebo must have played a part in the making of this situation.

Most of all, Nebo relished the dumb-stricken condition of Joe Cardona. Addressing the hypnotized inspector, Nebo sneered:

"This is one time, flatfoot, that nobody can help you." As he spoke, Nebo drew his stubby .38 from his pocket. "Nobody, not even The Shadow!"

Leveling the revolver, Nebo shifted to aim straight for Cardona's heart. Nebo Thurling, alias Thornton, had found his opportunity to dispose of the man who had come here to expose him!

### CHAPTER XIII

Only the impossible could intervene and Nebo wasn't thinking in such terms. That was, he didn't consider the impossible until it happened.

Low, whispered close to Nebo's ear, a strange laugh disturbed the surrounding hush. It was like an echo of Nebo's own imagination. He'd heard of The Shadow's vengeful laugh, but this could not possibly be it.

Yet the laugh persisted and its tone froze Nebo. Nervously the intended murderer flung a glance across his shoulder. He saw blackness, but it was only the gloom of the little hallway beyond the study door. With a hoarse laugh of his own, Nebo turned to sight his gun again.

The gun was gone!

Nothing could be more mysterious than the disappearance of the revolver from Nebo's hand. What rendered it all the more astounding was that Nebo could still feel the gun in his grasp, though he couldn't see it. Then, with eyes as wide as Cardona's, Nebo saw where the gun had gone.

It hadn't vanished; it was merely obscured. Still in Nebo's hand, the revolver was covered by a clutching thing so black that Nebo had mistaken it for ordinary darkness.

The hand of The Shadow!

Looking quickly across his other shoulder, Nebo saw the glint of steel-cold eyes staring squarely into his own. He glimpsed the mere outline of the hawklike face that went with those eyes. The rest was obscured by blackness that formed the shape of a slouch hat, above a pair of cloaked shoulders!

Madly, Nebo made a gun jab at The Shadow, pulling his trigger finger in the same motion.

Nothing happened.

No longer did Nebo have his gun, His own grip, plus The Shadow's added pressure, gave him the impression that he still held it, but it was gone the moment that Nebo wrenched his hand away. The weapon was in The Shadow's clutch and he was giving it a tantalizing juggle. The Shadow pointed the gun toward Nebo, to hold him at a distance.

With a quick side-step, Nebo charged. He was sure he could reach The Shadow before the latter aimed the revolver. But Nebo never managed to get that far. The Shadow, using the flat side of the gun, hooked Nebo at the back of the neck, giving his vertebrae a paralyzing blow. Jolting stiff, Nebo took a spin like a toy top finishing its whirl and landed close beside Jarrock's body. The difference was that while Jarrock's form

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remained rigid, Nebo's crumpled in disjointed fashion.

All this while, Joe Cardona had been staring at Trent Jarrock. The collapse of Nebo Thurling produced no change in Cardona's gaze. In his hypnotic state, Joe's attention was fixed on its original object.

No longer did Cardona mutter. He was speaking plainly and with slow, precise emphasis.

"I killed him." Cardona sounded thoroughly convinced. "I went crazy when I started to choke him. Maybe his heart went back on him, but I was to blame. I killed him."

"You didn't kill him," spoke The Shadow. "Snap out of it, Cardona."

The words made no impression on Cardona.

"I killed him," Joe repeated.

"They will ask me if I killed him. I must tell them the truth. I did."

The Shadow's tone became suddenly sharp.

"Who did you kill, Cardona?"

"I killed him, that man lying on the floor. I meant to kill him, when I choked him. I went crazy."

Stooping beside Jarrock's body, The Shadow saw clearly that the man was dead. Letting Cardona continue his self-accusations, The Shadow went to Jarrock's desk and looked quickly through the drawers. He was searching for a crystal skull, but there was none in the desk.

Only a crystal skull could account for Cardona's present state. This fit with The Shadow's earlier observation when he had seen Joe standing at the study window. It must have been Jarrock who had shown him the skull originally, but it couldn't have been Jarrock who had impressed Joe's mind with the present fixation. The things that Cardona was saying were statements that he wouldn't be able to shake, even when roused. They were the sort that would have a post-hypnotic effect.

Jarrock no longer had the crystal skull, nor did Nebo. As Thornton, Nebo might have been told to acquire the crystal skull, as he had done at Wade's. But Nebo's readiness to kill Cardona was proof that he hadn't been the man who forced Joe to accept the blame for murder. If he had listened long enough to hear Cardona accuse himself of crime, Nebo wouldn't have wanted to kill the ace inspector.

In Jarrock's desk, The Shadow found the pill bottle. Shaking it, he noticed something that Jarrock hadn't. All the remaining pills were lightly stuck together; it would take a much harder shake to loosen them. Obviously these were ordinary pills, the only loose ones must have contained the same poison that disposed of Wade. Again The Shadow had evidence of death by an untraceable poison.

Probably this was Nebo's work, part of his duty as Thornton. But the rest of it, the business involving Cardona, had been accomplished by someone who had come into this room while Nebo was outdoors watching the police pursue the truck that was taking away The Shadow.

Though The Shadow had escaped in time to return soon after Nebo, there had been several minutes in between, time enough for the unknown master mind to visit Jarrock's study. The man in question was certainly the Crystal Skull and as one of the guests he had probably joined in the chase after his brief session

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with Cardona.

Crime had failed in one purpose, since the servants who took the truck had been unable to get away with anything except a tapestry that The Shadow had been forced to damage. The curio rooms were still locked. The Shadow could hear voices of men in the hallway, reserves of Cardona's squad who were staying here in case of further trouble. But crime stood winner in one respect.

Joe Cardona, the law's best bet against the Crystal Skull, was determined to confess his guilt of a murder in which he had played no part whatever!

A curious laugh whispered from The Shadow's lips as he studied the bodies lying on the floor. Cardona's fixed gaze saw only one, that of the dead man, Trent Jarrock. The Shadow saw Nebo Thurling, still alive. Nebo began to stir.

Carefully, steadily, The Shadow aimed Nebo's revolver and pulled the trigger. With a sharp report, the stubby .38 delivered its message, a bullet straight through the heart of the dead man, Trent Jarrock!

With a quick, stooping sweep, The Shadow transferred the smoking gun from his gloved hand to Nebo's open fist. As Nebo's fingers felt the cold metal, they closed instinctively. The Shadow added a clamp that tightened them around the gun; then, with a swift glide, the cloaked visitor reached the darkened hall and paused momentarily at the lighted archway.

Pounding feet sounded from another direction. The reserves had heard the shot and were trying to locate it. Not knowing where the archway led, they were taking another way around. Noting that the large hall was empty, The Shadow strode across it and took the side door that led outdoors.

Back in the study, Joe Cardona had jarred from his trance. The sharp bark of the revolver had awakened him, but he was still trying to shake off the effects of his recent stupor. As a carry-over from that condition, Cardona was repeating the phrases impressed upon him.

"I killed him," declared Cardona. "I choked him –"

Pausing, Cardona blinked and shook his head. He stared, a trifle bewildered, at two detectives who had arrived in the study and were stooping above the forms that lay there.

"I went crazy," added Cardona. "I must tell the truth. Maybe his heart went back on him, but I was to blame."

"Who did you kill, inspector?" queried one of the detectives. "Tell us, will you?"

"That man lying on the floor," replied Cardona. "That man lying right there."

Cardona's gesture could have meant either Jarrock or Nebo.

"You didn't choke this guy," informed the detective, pointing to Jarrock. "He's dead all right, but he was shot right through the heart. The other fellow got him, inspector. See? Here's his gun, right in his mitt. He's the killer and he must be the one you choked."

"Only this killer ain't dead." The detective plucked away the gun from Nebo's hand. "Look, he's waking up. Say, inspector, I guess he's the bird you were talking about – Nebo Thurling. This time you got him, with the goods."

Facts were straightening in Cardona's mind and though they weren't correct, they fitted the case to a T, which included the initial on Nebo's gun. Joe was sure he'd fought it out with somebody, and he thought he'd killed the man in question, but it could have been Nebo instead of Jarrock.

### CHAPTER XIV

WHILE The Shadow was settling matters in Jarrock's mansion, a strange chase was in progress outdoors. It began when the light delivery truck wheeled around the corner of the house with two cops hanging on its running board.

With its first swerve, the truck threw off one of the clingers, while the other hit the gravel when the truck veered in the opposite direction. This happened near the garage, where the man at the truck wheel decided to follow a narrow driveway leading off into the woods behind the garage.

By then, a flock of guests had poured through the French door from the dining room. They were headed by Osgood, who shouted to a cluster of Jarrock's servants, who were putting the cars into the garage. There were seven of these servants, one for each car, and they responded promptly and efficiently to Osgood's demand that they take up the chase.

As each car wheeled into line, guests and police poured into it. Before the taillights of the truck were out of sight, a big limousine was pursuing it and close behind came an assortment of limousines and sedans, each with its quota of guests and police.

All this was observed by Harry and Margo in their parked roadster. They were in a lane outside of Jarrock's grounds, but the only barrier was a high hedge that was rather thin in spots. Picking a weak place in the bush wall, Harry drove the roadster right through it and took a short cut across Jarrock's lawn, avoiding some stray trees and shrubs. Coming onto a narrow drive, Harry saw that it led in the direction of the chase, so he followed it. When this driveway converged with the other, Harry sliced into the procession of pursuing cars, rating number four in the line.

The fugitive truck was behaving like a scared rabbit. It darted suddenly from the winding driveway and took to a dirt bridle path that led deeper into the woods. At a fork, it took the dirt road to the left, and Harry saw that the cars behind it went alternately left and right.

"We'll take to the right," Harry told Margo. "These fellows evidently know these bridle paths. Probably we're taking a short cut."

Swinging a curve in the wide dirt path, he and Margo saw the truck again. It was coming right toward them, trying to double the trail. Seeing that he was blocked, the driver shied away from the headlights, whipped the truck across a little rustic bridge and was off on another trail, with cars converging after him.

All during this chase, there were staccato gunbursts from pursuing cars. Cardona's men were aiming at the truck tires, but their cars were bouncing so badly that their aim went wide. Jarrock's estate covered some thirty acres which were honeycombed with these bridle trails. Intended for horseback riders only, the paths, though wide enough for automobiles, were surfaced with soft dirt that began to kick up clouds of dust. Apparently the men in the truck expected to escape under cover of their own dust and they would leave, if they had been following an ordinary road.

As it was, the pursuing cars simply diverged, whenever the dust became too heavy, and Harry followed suit. Sooner or later, the truck always came in sight again, bobbing somewhere from the maze of bridle paths. In spreading far apart, the eight cars literally boxed the truck among the interlacing paths.

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Tense though he was, Harry was impressed by the humor of this chase and when he began to laugh, Margo joined in.

"They're trying to work out to the front gates," chuckled Harry.

"I wonder who is in the truck," speculated Harry. "A couple of Jarrock's servants, I suppose. The chief was sure there would be a few phonies in the crowd."

"The others certainly are loyal," declared Margo. "They didn't lose a minute in taking up the chase, and they've been doing a good job ever since. But I'm wondering what's in the truck."

"I can answer that one." As he spoke, Harry wheeled into a bridle path where the truck had just performed a hairpin turn. "There's nothing in it. A loaded truck couldn't stage the zigzags that one has."

"Then there hasn't been any robbery," exclaimed Margo, much pleased. "The Shadow must have nipped it in the bud. This is one time the Crystal Skull has lost out."

At that moment, the truck came back to a gravel driveway. With all its detours among the bridle paths, it wasn't more than a hundred yards from Jarrock's mansion. But the truck was in back of the big house and cars were swinging from the direction of the mansion to block it off. Turning the other way, the truck began a last mad dash.

"This is the wind-up," assured Harry, as he swung the roadster into the gravel drive. "They're on a road that has no outlet, unless they want to try Long Island Sound. But I don't think they will. That truck is no amphibian."

The roadster had become the first of the pursuing cars. Harry and Margo were close enough to see the truck wheel up beside a darkened boathouse that formed a part of a short pier. Two men jumped from the truck and dashed into the boathouse as the roadster arrived. Gun in hand, Harry sprang from the car, beckoning for Margo to follow.

"I'm going after them," announced Harry. "Get out to the end of the pier in case they duck out another door. If they do, hurry back and tell me."

The fugitives had slammed the door behind them. Harry heaved his shoulder against the door and was rewarded with a creak. A few good jolts promised to weaken the woodwork until either the bolt or the hinges would yield. Some of the big cars were coming into sight, which meant that Harry would soon have help in battering the barrier.

Meanwhile, Margo was arriving at the end of the pier. She saw at once that there was another door to the boathouse, a big one that occupied the whole front of the structure down below the water level. The great door was closed, but from within the boathouse, Margo could hear the faltering chugs of a motor, indicating that the crooks were planning a getaway by water.

Turning, Margo was about to dash back and summon Harry when she heard something else. It came from the outer corner of the pier, the scrape of a small boat against the pilings. Margo shouldn't have waited, but curiosity impelled her. Turning about, she took a few steps toward the pier end, then halted, stock-still.

Over the edge of the pier came a revolver, pointed straight at Margo. It was a tiny gun that glinted in the moonlight, but it meant business. Margo Lane recognized Diane Devereux in the same chic bathing suit she had sported at Glenfield's pool in New England.

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"Get into this boat," ordered Diane. "You are going with me. Nothing will happen to you, if you do as I order. Maybe you know what's in back of this –"

Diane was interrupted by a combined rumble and roar from the boathouse. The big door was rolling upward and a speed boat was starting to spurt forth. Diane made a hurried gesture with her gun, ordering Margo to hurry. The gesture came just as Margo was stepping forward and the opportunity was too good to miss. On quick impulse, Margo turned her step into a kick that found its mark. As Diane gave a yelp of pain, the gun went flying from her hand. Margo's shoe went with it and both objects splashed into the water beyond the boat.

Angrily, Diane made a grab to haul Margo into the boat. They landed, grappling in the bottom of the tiny racer, just as a big speedboat zoomed out from the boathouse.

The wake of the speedboat tossed the racer like a cork. Coming to their feet as they grappled, Margo and Diane were tossed overboard.

Shots sounded from the pier. The police had arrived and were trying to stop Jarrock's fugitive servants, but the pair were making good their escape. Nobody on the pier saw Diane's little racer as it drifted, so Margo tried to yell to them. Diane clamped her hand on top of Margo's head and shoved her face under water.

Margo came up spluttering. Hardly able to get her breath, she floundered back to the pier and grabbed a ladder there. By then, Diane had made the most of further opportunity, overtook the drifting racing boat and rolling over the side, grabbed the helm and tugged the starting cord of the outboard motor. The little racer sped off like a whippet.

Spotting it, the police fired a few shots that missed it by yards. If the tiny craft had gotten off to an immediate start, it could have kept pace with the speedboat, but the latter, with full three minutes' start, was out of sight beyond a point. By the time Margo climbed the ladder, the racer was lost from sight against the shore line.

Harry was introducing himself as a friend of Cranston. He said that he and Margo had just arrived at Jarrock's when the chase began. Walking back to the shore, Margo entered the roadster and waited for Harry to join her. There was a brief delay while the police inspected the truck and found it empty. So they climbed into the big cars that were chauffeured by Jarrock's servants and ordered the men to drive them back to the mansion.

Most of the guests were with the police. When they reached the mansion, they found two others standing by the side door: Lamont Cranston and Artemus Glenfield. They were the only two who had been too late to join the crowd that had taken up the blind chase. With them was Joe Cardona. Addressing the men who got out of the cars, the inspector announced the news of Jarrock's death.

"Trent Jarrock was murdered," declared Cardona, grimly, "but we have apprehended the killer. All the rest of you are free to leave. These cars will take you to the station and leave some of my men at the gates to stay on guard.

"You won't have to worry about the curios you bought. They will all be delivered tomorrow. We are going to keep these premises under strict surveillance. I can assure you there will be no robbery tonight."

The cars pulled away, taking the guests with them. Osgood went along, as did Glenfield. The only one who remained was Cranston. As a friend of the police commissioner, he preferred to remain and confer with Cardona. Harry stayed, too, since he was to drive Cranston back to town, while Margo hobbled upstairs on one shoe to see if she could find some dry clothes.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

In the great hall, Cardona produced a key ring that he had found in Jarrock's pocket. Handing lists to Cranston and Harry, Cardona unlocked the doors of the curio rooms.

"We're going to have an official check-up," declared Cardona. "I know there must be tons of stuff, but I'm responsible for all of it. We're not going to overlook a single item."

Cardona opened the first door and stared.

There was a sudden glint from Cranston's eyes. Stepping quickly to the doorway, he looked across Cardona's shoulder. Immediately he turned about and went to another door. Flinging it open, Cranston took a single glance, and stepped to the next door. For once, Harry could have sworn that he saw perplexity written across his chief's face. As for Cardona, he was utterly dumfounded.

Harry found out why, when he followed Cardona, who was making the rounds as rapidly as Cranston opened the doors. There wasn't any need to make a check-up of the fabulous curios that now belonged to Jarrock's guests, at least technically. The buyers would have to find them to claim them.

Never before had The Shadow been confronted with such incredible crime. Every room was vacant, denuded of its treasures, large and small. However this wholesale theft had been accomplished, it must have happened during the time when the guests were in the dining room, a mere ten minutes at most.

It was fantastic, this robbery, twofold in its challenge. It wasn't just a question of how the treasures had been stolen, but where they could have gone. Tons of curios covering hundreds of square feet of floor space, all vanished almost in a trice!

This was indeed a riddle for The Shadow, an enigma worthy of the master brain who had propounded it, a supercriminal whose lone token – also missing – was a crystal skull!

### CHAPTER XV

IT was only the word of Lamont Cranston that made Joe Cardona believe the thing that had happened. Reading over the list of stolen curios, Cardona itemized them aloud, just to make sure his senses hadn't left him.

"Gold screen, elephant table, two large silver vases, pair of inlaid taborets, two golden idols –"

Cardona paused abruptly and threw a quizzical look at Cranston.

"How big were those idols, Mr. Cranston?"

"About two feet high," replied Cranston. "The other items were all much larger."

Cardona shook his head. Then:

"Dragon tapestries, mosaic portraits," read Joe. "One large teakwood stand, six golden vases, one pair of Siva statues, four ornamental clocks."

All these were the contents of a single room, with numerous lesser items. That was bad enough, but when Cardona turned a page and read the next listing, he gave up.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"When a room load of furniture disappears," asserted Cardona, "I'm through. Look at this stuff: high-backed chairs, footstools, tables, full-length paintings. Honest, Mr. Cranston, were all those things there?"

"They were," acknowledged Cranston. "You'll have plenty of testimony to that effect, inspector. Vincent just called the station. Some of the buyers are coming back."

"What's more important is where the stuff went to."

"There is one man who might tell you, inspector. That's Nebo Thurling."

Cardona grunted.

"Why should Nebo talk?" demanded Joe. "He's due for the hottest rap the law can hand him. We can't pass up the murder charge, no matter what Nebo tells us. It's too bad he had to shoot Jarrock."

Little did Cardona realize that the case was the other way around. But for that bullet in Jarrock's heart, Cardona would personally be taking the blame for Jarrock's death, by Joe's own insistence. Nor did The Shadow agree that Nebo would not talk. On the contrary, The Shadow had fixed that very point. Nebo would talk plenty to anyone who would believe him when he told the truth; namely that he hadn't slain Jarrock.

However, that would come later. Nebo was no longer at Jarrock's. Cardona had sent him to headquarters in a police car, intending to quiz him when the commissioner arrived there. For the present, therefore, The Shadow, now disguised as Cranston, was more interested in gathering evidence on the scene itself.

"It's funny I can't remember what happened here," said Cardona. "There was something that bothered Jarrock. It was some sort of a curio shaped like a glass skull. I must have still been looking at it when Nebo popped in here and shot Jarrock."

"When did Jarrock show you the skull?" queried Cranston. "Before or after he pinned that rose on his own lapel?"

Cardona stared speculatively at the rose, which was dangling loose from Jarrock's coat.

"He wasn't wearing it when he left the dining room," declared Cranston. "He must have taken the rose from that vase."

"That's what he did do," recalled Cardona, slowly. His thoughts seemed to be groping out of a deep haze. "Just as I started looking at the skull, Jarrock picked up a pin that was lying on the desk. Then he reached for a rose. After that he said something; what it was I can't remember."

Stooping beside the body, Cranston apparently studied the rose. What he was particularly noticing was the pin, which had a rather large, flat head. As Cranston touched the rose, it fell loose from the lapel. Deftly, Cranston drew the pin from the cloth. Cardona thought the rose had fallen accidentally; he didn't notice that Cranston took the pin.

"I must have gone to the window," continued Cardona, turning that direction. "It had something to do with the men outside. Then I was following Jarrock, only I stopped when he did. That must have been when Nebo shot him."

Cranston was carefully attaching the pin to a calling card that he drew from his pocket. It was the card that bore the name: J. M. Thornton. Cranston put card and pin into his pocket as Cardona turned around.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"But I don't remember the shot right then," continued Cardona. "There was another voice that spoke to me. It didn't sound like Jarrock or Nebo, either. Maybe it was just a crazy idea that popped into my head when Nebo shot Jarrock. I must have gone berserk right then. I guess I rushed Nebo before he could shoot me, too. Things like that leave your mind kind of blank."

Other things could produce mental lapses, for instance, objects like a crystal skull that had hypnotic qualities.

"What became of the crystal skull, inspector?"

"Say, I never thought of that!" exclaimed Cardona. "Jarrock must have dropped it!"

"Over there, for instance?"

The Shadow pointed to a deep dent in the finely polished floor. Comparing it with the position of Jarrock's hand, Cardona decided that it must be the spot where the skull had landed.

"Nebo may have snatched it," decided Joe. "Say – maybe that's why he shot Jarrock, because he had the skull! There's something funny about that skull, Cranston. I'm going to ask Nebo about it when I quiz him."

Voices were coming from the hallway. Some of the curio buyers had returned. Beckoning to Cranston, Cardona went out to meet them. He didn't have to tell them what had happened. They were already looking at the empty curio rooms.

Cardona was glad that he had taken Cranston at his word. Half a dozen men were shouting the same facts all at once.

They, too, had examined the art treasures, item by item, and were overwhelmed by the incredible fact that three van loads of such bulky objects had completely disappeared. They were stamping the floors, pounding the walls, trying to find some solution to the utter impossibility. Cranston stood calmly by, for he and Cardona had gone over all that territory themselves.

Again, Cardona was glad that he had taken Cranston's word. It was Cranston who became Cardona's staunch supporter when accusations began to fly.

The curio buyers argued that the robbery must have occurred after they left for the station. Cranston assured them that it hadn't, in terms so firm that they were forced to believe him. When they suggested that it might have happened while they were chasing the decoy truck, Cranston again announced otherwise. He and Cardona had been in the house all during that time. Glenfield and a pair of plain-clothes men had also been on the scene. They hadn't stepped outdoors until they heard the cars coming back. Even then, the headquarters men had remained on duty in the hallway.

Looking at the stunned group, Cranston noted that only about half of Jarrock's guests had returned. When he inquired about the others, he learned that they had caught the train to town. Glenfield and Osgood were among that first group. These others had been waiting at the station when Harry's call reached them.

"The robbery happened immediately after we inspected the curios," affirmed Cranston. "But it would have taken more than two men to accomplish it, in such short time. Suppose we call in the rest of the servants after they put the cars in the garage."

"They ought to be back already," spoke up a curio buyer. "They started back here as soon as they dropped us at the station. We had to hire a couple of cabs for the return trip."

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Cardona gave a puzzled stare, then strode to the dining room. From the French doorway he looked at the driveway and the garage beyond. There wasn't a car in sight. Turning abruptly, Cardona saw that everyone had followed him.

"They're crooks, the lot of them!" exclaimed the inspector. "All that bunch of servants! They've gone off with Jarrock's cars. No wonder you didn't catch that truck. They were giving you the run around. All of the servants were phonies."

Cardona saw Cranston give a corroborating nod.

"That establishes the time of the robbery," declared Cranston, quietly. "It began when the servants began to close the curio rooms. They must have moved everything right out."

"But where did they put the stuff?" demanded Cardona. "They didn't pack any of it in the truck and it wasn't big enough to take a quarter of the load. They couldn't have carried any of it very far."

"No farther than the garage," remarked Cranston.

The words were electric. With one accord the swindled curio buyers dashed for the garage. Finding a light switch, they flooded the interior with a brilliant glow, expecting to see their lost treasures filling the place. Instead, the garage was empty.

"Maybe behind the garage," snapped Cardona. "They couldn't have taken any of the stuff in those old-fashioned cars. You were all riding in them and the servants didn't even get out after they came back from the boathouse."

"They couldn't have stowed anything in the luggage compartments," added Cranston. "The limousines didn't have any. As I recall it there were two sedans that had luggage compartments, and they contained only the suitcases that you gentlemen brought."

The curio buyers nodded. The servants had opened the luggage compartments and taken out the suitcases at the station. When the ex-guests hired the cabs, they had brought their suitcases back with them.

"Behind the garage," repeated Cardona, leading the way with a flashlight. "Those crooks are hoping we won't find anything out until morning. They'll sneak the cars in by the lane and slide the stuff out through the hedge."

By then, Cardona was around behind the garage. His flashlight cut a swath along the wall, but it revealed nothing in the shape of stolen treasures. Playing a wild hunch that the crooked servants might already have returned, Cardona hurried out to the lane and used his flashlight there.

Only one pair of tire tracks showed, those of Harry's roadster.

There was only one thing to do. That was to institute a search of the entire lawn and carry it into the fringing woods. Since most of his squad was still on hand, Cardona put the plan into immediate execution, calling upon the curio buyers to help.

One man alone was disinterested Lamont Cranston.

Margo Lane had dried out in the kitchen; she and Harry Vincent were ready to go back to town. Cranston decided to go with them in the roadster, but he paused for a few parting words with Cardona.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"I wish you luck, inspector," said Cranston, referring to the widespread search that was already under way. "If you don't have any, you can still question Nebo."

"Which I'm going to do," returned Cardona, grimly. "Only there's another man I think I'll talk to first."

Cranston's eyes showed interest.

"I mean Albert Osgood," declared Cardona. "He's the only guest who wasn't buying curios. Outside of yourself, of course, but you were here because the commissioner sent you. Some of these fellows who were gyped have been talking about Osgood. I'm going to find out what he knows."

"A good idea," approved Cranston. "Well, inspector, I'll see you back in town."

Out of earshot of the gates, Cranston uttered a whispered laugh.

In analyzing the amazing robbery, the keen brain of The Shadow had struck upon a solution as ingenious as the crime was incredible. Picturing the array of curios that Jarrock had personally chosen, The Shadow could actually fit the pieces of his theory.

The Shadow knew why the servants had fled so promptly; he could also explain why they had not returned. All that remained was to interview the man who could tell: Nebo Thurling. Having once unsealed Nebo's lips, The Shadow could prompt the fellow to repeat his confession to the police.

This was to be The Shadow's coming mission.

## CHAPTER XVI

ON the way into town, Margo repeated the details of her brief encounter with Diane Devereux. Though he listened closely, Lamont Cranston did not render a verdict. He remarked merely that Diane was still an unknown quantity.

"Unquestionably Diane knows something," declared Cranston. "How much is another matter."

"She's working for the Crystal Skull, all right," argued Margo. "We've both learned that, Lamont. Why, she was covering that robbery down at the Green Star pier, and she was on the job at Jarrock's dock tonight. What else do you have to know about her?"

"I want to know why she was needed," replied Cranston. "These crooks have been working too smoothly to require a spare hand."

"You're the one who ought to talk to Osgood," prompted Margo. "I'd say Diane is his private snooper. I'll bet she tells him everything that goes on."

"We are still looking for the man behind the game," conceded Cranston. "But you must remember, Margo, that new links keep coming into it. Culver – Wade – finally Jarrock. Each owned the crystal skull, but now it has gone along to someone else."

"You mean there'll be another and a bigger robbery?" queried Harry. "Or more, perhaps? This Jarrock job ought to qualify as the climax. It would be pretty hard to beat."

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"Jarrock may have been the master mind," admitted Cranston. "In that case, there is a rival to the Crystal Skull, who has finally canceled the entire ring. Culver, Wade and Jarrock all made the same mistake. They were thinking in the wrong terms."

The Shadow could have told them that another hand was to be feared. Therefore his own problem still was twofold. It predicated two factors: a man even bigger than Jarrock, who represented the Crystal Skull; and an archplotter who bore no title, yet who outwitted crooks at their own game, using murder as a method to eventually acquire the spoils that they had gained through crafty crime.

Balancing those factors would be the only solution to this case. In so doing, The Shadow could not afford to make the mistake of thinking in the wrong terms. At present, the stepping-stone to the true solution happened to be Nebo Thurling.

When the roadster reached Manhattan, Cranston left it. Pausing briefly at the rear of the halted car, he became The Shadow. His cloaked figure blended promptly with the dingy building fronts along the obscure street that he had chosen. From then on The Shadow's course was untraceable until he arrived in a black-walled room where he turned on a bluish light above a polished table.

This was The Shadow's sanctum, his hidden habitat. Under the blue glow, his ungloved hands became busy. They produced the card that bore Thornton's name, and removed the pin that had been on Jarrock's lapel. Next, The Shadow drew a powerful microscope toward him.

Highly magnified, the card disclosed a curious feature. The two dots following Thornton's initials proved to be anything but solid. They separated into letters that spelled two words; in each word, the letters enlarged up to the central one. The dots became a name:

### CRYSTAL SKULL

The naked eye could never have detected the secret of those dots. In fact, the average microscope would not have disclosed it. The Shadow was using a high-powered lens and with good reason. When examining the crystal skull that he had seen on Wade's desk, he had noted that it possessed tremendous magnifying qualities when held at an angle where the eye could see down through one side of the skull to the opposite jaw.

Therefore The Shadow had thought in terms of microscopics with every clue involved. Probably Wade had examined all calling cards under the magnifying power of the crystal skull. It could well have been Nebo, alias Thornton, who had received the skull from Wade and delivered it later to Jarrock.

Yet Nebo, trusted by both those men, could have been the person who arranged their sudden deaths through an untraceable poison. Assuming that Nebo had visited Culver also, he stood as the regular emissary of death. Jarrock's case was the test of this theory. It was Nebo who, as Thornton, had talked Jarrock into returning to his study. Once there, Jarrock had found the pills that he had happened to forget; pills that were in this instance prepared to dispose of the man who swallowed them!

Here was strong evidence that Nebo was the traitor in the camp of the Crystal Skull. Indeed, Nebo could qualify as the rival feared by all members of that band. As Thornton, he had probably suggested that Culver's death and later Wade's had been the handiwork of The Shadow. In turn, Wade and Jarrock would have swallowed that suggestion as easily as they had taken brandy and pills.

Nebo was certainly the man who could tell much The Shadow needed to know. However, just as the calling card had revealed valuable information, so could the pin that The Shadow had taken from Jarrock's coat lapel. Jarrock must have used the skull as a magnifier and his quick way of disposing of the pin indicated that it had

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some special importance.

Putting the pin under the powerful microscope The Shadow studied its head. What seemed only tiny scratches instantly became engraved letters. Conforming to the circle represented by the pin head, they spelled this cryptic message:

HALF

A LEAGUE

BOLDLY THEY

RODE AND

WELL

There was a whispered laugh as The Shadow clicked off the bluish light. Armed with this new information, he was departing amid Stygian darkness to hold an interview with Nebo. Even if Cardona had already started in from Long Island, there would still be time, since Cardona intended to stop at Osgood's first.

HUDDLED in a cell at headquarters, Nebo Thurling was staring glumly at the gloom in the corridor. Every time footsteps announced a passing guard, Nebo winced. To him, that sound was prophecy, a forerunner of the death walk that he would eventually take to the electric chair at Sing Sing.

Outside the cell, the gloom thickened. Blinking his eyes, Nebo wondered why, until he fancied he saw a cloaked shape beyond the bars. Groping forward, Nebo clutched the bars and stared, hoping he could drive away this phantasm of his imagination. Darkness moved closer; from it spoke a whispered voice:

"This is your opportunity, Nebo, to save yourself from paying for a crime you did not do!"

The Shadow!

Before Nebo could cringe away, a gloved hand was gripping his wrist through the bars. Staring, Nebo saw that the clouding blackness was indeed a cloaked shape. From it gleamed burning eyes of penetrating power, as hypnotic as the crystal skull.

A sudden hope swayed Nebo.

Those words, the final words, still rang through his harried brain. The Shadow had said: "For a crime you did not do."

A sickly smile crept to Nebo's lips. Apparently The Shadow had not analyzed the deaths of Culver, Wade, and Jarrock. He wasn't blaming Nebo for any of them. Therefore, Nebo still had a chance. A good chance, maybe, because it wouldn't be like The Shadow to send a man to the electric chair, all on the strength of a frame-up.

"Honest, Shadow," pleaded Nebo, hoarsely. "I didn't croak Jarrock. I don't even know who did."

"State how the crystal skull was involved," ordained The Shadow. "Speak the full truth, Nebo, and the truth will later be stated in your case."

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Nebo overlooked the full significance of that remark. He took it that he would be relieved of the present accusation regarding Jarrock's death, not realizing that The Shadow could relate the truth of triple murder.

"Each guy called himself the Crystal Skull," affirmed Nebo. "That is, each fellow ran the racket while he was finishing his job. You know the guys I mean: Culver, Wade, Jarrock –"

"And each awaited a message," interposed The Shadow. "It said: 'Half a league –'"

Nebo licked his lips, then nodded.

"Yeah, that was it, Shadow. Half a league – that was all there was to it."

"Not all, Nebo. There was more. Something about riding boldly and well. You remember, don't you, Nebo."

"Yeah, I remember."

With that admission, Nebo bit his lips as though to hold back further information. But his eyes, meeting The Shadow's were submitting to the mesmeric influence of the burning gaze.

"There were other things, Nebo." The Shadow spoke in positive tone, even though he now was utilizing guesswork. "Something, for instance, that must have been said between you and Wade after you gave him the calling card that bore the name of Thornton."

From the way The Shadow spoke, Nebo believed that the cloaked questioner must actually have been present at that interview. On that quick assumption; Nebo saw a chance to prove his sincerity to The Shadow.

"We used passwords," admitted Nebo. "That's how you convince a guy you're working for the Crystal Skull. When somebody says 'When out, come in,' you answer him by saying 'When in, stay in.' Next you say 'When out, go out,' and the answer to that is 'When in, stay out.' That's the way I talked with Wade."

As The Shadow mentally considered the significance of those countersigns, footsteps sounded along the corridor. The cloaked shape seemed to melt in front of Nebo's astonished eyes, leaving Nebo blinking in utter amazement when a turnkey stopped to unlock the door.

"Come on, Nebo," growled the turnkey. "You got a date with a guy named Joe."

"A guy named Joe?"

"Yeah. Joe Cardona. Inspector Cardona to you. Here's your escort" – the turnkey gestured to a couple of burly policemen who had followed him – "so let's get going."

Blended with the darkness at the end of the corridor, The Shadow watched the officers march Nebo off between them. As echoing footsteps died, a whispered laugh stirred the gloom. With it, The Shadow faded like a trickle of smoke, off through a side corridor.

## CHAPTER XVII

ARRIVING at headquarters, Inspector Joe Cardona had found that Fritz, the janitor, had trapped a rat. So Cardona had borrowed the rat-trap and its occupant. The trap, shaped like a cage, was resting on a table right in front of Nebo Thurling.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Nebo shifted uneasily under the glaring light as Inspector Joe Cardona grilled him.

"That's you, Nebo," declared Cardona. "Brother rats, the two of you. The only difference is, we're going to drown that specimen in the cage, while you'll get the hot seat."

Nebo didn't answer. He was staring at the rat. When it started to squeal and gnaw the bars of the cage, Nebo shifted uneasily. Suddenly Nebo broke loose with words.

"I didn't shoot Jarrock!" he pleaded. "Honest, I didn't. It was the big guy must have done it and planted the job on me."

Cardona held back his next question. This mention of a "big guy" was interesting enough to give Nebo a brief break.

"Maybe you're right, Nebo," said Cardona. "We know a lot about the big guy. Suppose you tell us some more."

The light was glaring straight into Nebo's eyes. As he lowered his gaze, it became fixed. What Nebo was seeing was a huge black blur, the aftereffect of the glare. To his strained imagination that blur took on the outlines of The Shadow. Thinking that the cloaked questioner had followed him here, Nebo began to blab the things he had stated in his cell.

"Half a league," declared Nebo. "That's how far they travel and they ride boldly and well. Only they didn't get there, any of them."

"Who didn't get there?" demanded Cardona.

"The guys who were in the racket," replied Nebo. "The Crystal Skull crowd. There was other stuff they had to know: When out, come in; when in, stay in; when out, go out; when in, stay out."

The rigmarole didn't make sense to Cardona, although he wrote it in his notebook. Coming out of his daze, Nebo wiped the perspiration from his pocket and eased back in his chair.

"I'll tell you everything, Joe," promised Nebo, "if you'll only believe I didn't croak Jarrock."

"If you didn't croak him," queried Cardona, "who did?"

"The big guy," replied Nebo. "Of course, he'll say I did it. But I wouldn't be telling you if I'd had a hand in it. Would I, Joe?"

"You probably wouldn't, Nebo."

"All right, then," spoke Nebo. "They were all in it and I was supposed to work with them. First, Culver, then Wade, next Jarrock."

"And which was the big guy?"

"None of them. They were all working for him."

"And he knocked them off?"

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"That's it, Joe." Nebo became very earnest. "Don't you see the game? They were grabbing swag and shipping it to the big guy. Each had a crystal skull to show he was boss of his own racket, only it was the same skull, because they passed it along. As soon as each deal was finished, the real Crystal Skull knocked off the fellow who had pulled it. Culver came first –"

"And what did Wade and Jarrock think about that?"

"They thought some other guy was doing it," explained Nebo. "They even figured it was The Shadow. Only it wasn't. The real guy behind it was Crystal Skull himself. He got rid of Wade next, then Jarrock in the same way."

There was a pause while Nebo heard Cardona hold a brief talk with Weston who was behind the glaring light. Then:

"The commissioner wants to know how Culver and Wade were murdered," said Cardona. "What's the answer, Nebo?"

"They were poisoned," began Nebo. "The stuff was untraceable. It's called formula J, and it's sure death." Pausing, Nebo squinted as though the light annoyed him; again, his features showed their ratlike craft. "That's all I know about it, Joe."

"Then why wasn't Jarrock poisoned, too?"

"He was, only there's no way to tell it. That shooting was all a fake. That's all I know, Joe. Now go easy on me."

Cardona promptly turned off the brilliant light. Nebo found himself in an ordinary office with several men present. Those beside Weston and Cardona were detectives who had been on the Jarrock case. Mopping his forehead, Nebo relaxed further.

"Give me a smoke, will you, Joe?" he pleaded. "And stick that rat-trap over in the corner. It bothers me."

One of the detectives produced a pack of cigarettes, but Nebo shook his head. He wanted a cigar and he had seen a row of them in Cardona's pocket. Producing a cigar, Joe handed it to Nebo who chewed the end from it. Cardona was more fastidious. He brought out a cigar cutter to chop the tip from his cigar.

"Here's what we want to know, Nebo," declared Cardona, weighing his cigar while he referred to his notebook. "First, who is this Crystal Skull. Second, how did he get away with the stuff at Jarrock's. Third, where has he taken the swag from all three robberies. Can you give me the answers?"

Nebo nodded, almost eagerly. He was leaning forward to speak when a knock came at the door. Nebo shrank back, worried, and chewed the end of his cigar, while reaching for a match that he couldn't seem to find. A detective opened the door to admit Lamont Cranston. The commissioner beckoned for his friend to join the group.

Nebo sat back and grinned. If linked with The Shadow, Cranston might even be a help to Nebo, who believed that he had bluffed his cloaked questioner during the recent quiz outside the cell. His lips spread wider, until his expression became a leer, which wasn't good policy at a time when Nebo was trying to convince people of his innocence. Nor were Nebo's eyes helpful; the glare they gave was ugly. Indeed his whole face was hideous as it fixed in frozen style.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

The chewed cigar dropped from between Nebo's teeth and struck his knee. As it bounded to the floor, Nebo made a curious motion toward picking it up. Instead of merely stooping; he sidled downward, shoulder first. The odd tilt caused him to lose his balance and he tumbled to the floor, the chair clattering with him.

Cardona sprang forward and stooped to grab the prisoner, wondering what sort of fakery this was. At sight of Nebo's glazed eyes and lipless grin, Cardona wheeled about.

"He's dead!" exclaimed Joe. "Stone-dead, commissioner! Say – maybe there's something to what he said about the Crystal Skull. Only this couldn't be poison. Whatever hit Nebo must have come right out of nowhere!"

"You heard Nebo talking about poison," remarked Cranston, calmly. "What else could have killed him? And the only way he could have gotten it was from that cigar. You gave it to him, didn't you, inspector?"

Dumbly, Cardona nodded. Ripping tobacco from the end of Cardona's own cigar, Cranston wadded it in a pellet which he tossed into the rat cage. The hungry rat was ready to try anything. It gnawed the gift as though it relished tobacco. While Weston and Cardona drew closer to witness the results, the rat's gnawing ceased. Subsiding at the bottom of the cage, the rodent rolled over dead.

"Better than your guinea pigs, commissioner," observed Cranston, coolly. "There is such a thing as an untraceable poison. It is known as formula J and it produces death that passes as a heart attack. Three men have already died from it; the problem was to prove it could have been administered. You now have proof in the case of Nebo's death."

Pausing, Cranston turned to Cardona with the query:

"Where did you get those cigars, inspector?"

"From Osgood," returned Cardona, abruptly. "I stopped at his apartment on the way in here. He opened a new box of cigars and gave me a handful."

"Who else was there?"

"Nobody else. Osgood had just seen Glenfield off at Grand Central. He said that Glenfield was going back to his place in New England. Osgood was getting packed for a business trip. He said he was flying West tonight."

"Was that all you learned?"

"That was all. Osgood didn't have any idea who stole the stuff at Jarrock's. When I asked him why he hadn't put up any money on any of the curio deals, he asked what I'd have done." Cardona paused, gave a shrug and added: "I said I didn't figure myself a sucker. Osgood just laughed and said he thought that way about himself. That was the way we left it."

There being no further reason to remain at headquarters, Cranston strolled out and reached Shrevvy's cab which was parked on the street. Before he could enter the cab, Harry's roadster pulled up and Margo leaped out.

"There's no use going to Osgood's, Lamont," informed Margo. "Harry and I just went around there on a hunch. He was leaving and we were too late to stop him. Our car got tied up in a traffic jam."

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"How did Osgood leave?" queried Cranston. "By cab, or in another car?"

"In another car," replied Margo, sweetly, "and you'd never guess who was driving it. A very nice young lady, a blonde named Diane Devereux."

Lamont Cranston gave a whimsical laugh, quite unlike The Shadow's, as he said in a complacent tone:

"It looks like a good time for a vacation. So we'll take one, Margo. Harry will go with us and we'll invite Inspector Cardona. He needs a vacation, too."

### CHAPTER XVIII

SEATED on the sun porch at Baycliff Manor, Lamont Cranston and Margo Lane were gazing off across Shelter Bay to Cape Dolphin. This was the third day of their vacation and Margo would have been enjoying it, if she hadn't felt that something sinister was at stake. Since they were alone, Margo felt that she could broach her sentiments to Cranston.

"We came here on a hunch, Lamont," reminded Margo. "Every time the Crystal Skull has figured in an art swindle, Artemus Glenfield has been one of the losers. Am I right?"

Cranston gave a sleepy nod.

"And therefore," continued Margo, "if the Crystal Skull gets busy again, Glenfield will probably be included on the sucker list. So by watching Glenfield, you might manage to get ahead of the game."

"If there is another game," reminded Cranston. "You've only mentioned one reason why we came here, Margo."

"You would remember the other," chided Margo. "You figured you'd find Diane Devereux here and you did. Can't you ever get that blonde off your mind?"

"When last seen in New York," spoke Cranston, methodically, "Diane Devereux was with Albert Osgood, the gentleman who passes out potent cigars. I am convinced that Osgood is somewhere in this neighborhood."

"You're right, I suppose," admitted Margo. "He'd naturally be watching Glenfield. But you haven't found Osgood yet."

"Cardona is searching the woods," remarked Cranston, "and Vincent is making the rounds of the bay. I've phoned them every evening at their hotel on Cape Dolphin."

"There's a lot of woods," reminded Margo, "and a lot of bay. Meanwhile what have you been doing, Lamont? Nothing!"

As though stirred by Margo's criticism, Cranston rose in his chair and stared intently from the window toward Glenfield's swimming pool. Glenfield himself was there, chatting with some of the guests, but the group didn't interest Cranston. His eyes were on a lithe feminine figure that had just come into sight. Following Lamont's gaze, Margo saw Diane. Attired in a bathing suit, the blonde was on her way to take a swim.

"She's wearing a red bathing outfit instead of a blue one," remarked Cranston.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"So you've been noticing her bathing suit," snapped Margo. "Well, since clothes are the attraction, why weren't you around this noon, when Diane went horseback riding? She was wearing the loveliest riding habit."

"I know." Cranston rose from his chair. "I was around, Margo. You just didn't happen to see me. Neither did Diane, when I followed her."

Margo's eyes opened wide.

"She went about two miles, Margo," continued Cranston. "Naturally, she outdistanced me, but I saw her coming back. I found a path where her horse had stopped. I have an idea that it leads to a cabin hidden in the woods."

"Then that's where Osgood is!" exclaimed Margo. "Diane went to tell him what's going on around here."

"Very probably. Just what she could report is a question. But Osgood could very easily approach these premises from that fringe of woods" – Cranston pointed in the general direction of the winding inlet called Lost River – "and if he does, he would see the swimming pool. Now if Diane had some way of telling him that it would be safe to approach the house –"

"The red bathing suit!" broke in Margo. "That's why she's wearing it instead of blue. But red is a danger signal."

"That wouldn't matter," smiled Cranston. "Diane probably only has two bathing suits. If Osgood comes here, that will give me a chance to go to his cabin."

"And meanwhile?"

"You can keep an eye on Osgood. If anything unusual occurs, notify Vincent. He will be stopping his boat at Glenfield's dock in about an hour. Meanwhile, I may contact Cardona. He's somewhere in the woods beyond the spot where Osgood's cabin ought to be."

LEAVING the sun porch, Cranston went out the other side of the house. He didn't go in the direction from which he expected Osgood to appear; instead, he detoured to the dirt road that Diane had taken at noon. In less than half an hour, Cranston reached the path that he had mentioned and began his search for the cabin.

The path itself was hardly more than a few cleared stretches between ledges of rock. It was another half mile before Cranston came upon the cabin and found that another path led from it, one that Osgood could have taken. Entering the cabin, Cranston found that it consisted of two rooms with a closet between.

There was a table in the corner, beside a window. On it lay a printed sheet of paper which proved to be an advertisement for a little steamship line that plied Shelter Bay. At the bottom of the printed wording was a row of tiny dots, set close together. Reaching to a drawer of the table, Cranston drew it open. The drawer contained a single object that rattled heavily.

It was the missing crystal skull!

Picking up the skull, Cranston held it at an angle toward the printed paper. Immediately the dots sprang to enormous size, separating themselves into letters. Dot by dot, Cranston read the printed message. Instead of containing instructions for followers of the Crystal Skull, it was an edict which could have been prepared expressly for The Shadow!

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

The message read:

YOU HAVE BEEN WATCHED FROM THE TIME YOU CAME HERE

AND YOU CAN NOW EXPECT THE PENALTY

Creaking sounds reached Cranston's ears. He could picture men approaching through the doors, of which there were three, though Cranston could see none, being faced toward the window. Scraping noises indicated that others were outside the windows of the cabin, ready to pop into sight at a single signal.

This was one expedition that Cranston had taken unarmed in the belief that if he encountered anyone it would be Osgood alone. To attempt a battle under such conditions would be folly. As himself, Cranston could at least introduce some element of bluff and his lack of any weapons might prove helpful to that game. Nevertheless, the brain of The Shadow was at work, calculating future prospects.

With a contempt amounting to indifference, The Shadow acted in Cranston's style. Crumpling the paper, he tossed it to the floor. With his other hand he planted the crystal skull upon the window ledge, calmly pausing to shift it slightly after he had placed it there. Then, as though mildly surprised, the complacent Mr. Cranston turned to meet six masked intruders.

They recognized Cranston, of course. That also was to be expected. The question was: had they marked him as The Shadow or merely as someone whose cause The Shadow had once sustained? Cranston's mind reverting to the night when the trail beginning with Cranston had ended with The Shadow's meeting these very men at the Green Star pier. Much hinged upon the opinion that criminals had formed that night. Much, in the shape of The Shadow's future.

The answer was plain as the six men gestured with their guns, ordering Cranston to raise his arms. They didn't class him as The Shadow or they would have started shooting.

Instead, when Cranston complied with their request, the three men from the doors advanced, pocketed their guns, and pinned Cranston's arms behind him.

Ten minutes later, Cranston was completely bound with ropes that were augmented with lengths of wire.

So thorough were the bonds that he could not possibly hope to extricate himself for hours. He was gagged so tightly that his jaw ached and his captors finished by dumping him in the closet, which had no door.

As they left, one masked man snarled back a threat:

"We'll be back here in an hour. If you're the guy the Crystal Skull is out to get, it will be curtains for you this time."

As a reminder, Cranston's captors left the miniature crystal skull that their prisoner had placed upon the window sill. It leered at Cranston as he stared from the closet, that token which stood for coming doom. Victory, it seemed, belonged to the Crystal Skull.

## CHAPTER XIX

FROM her vantage spot on Glenfield's sun porch, Margo Lane was watching the fringe of woods. Her vigil at last was bringing results, for she could see a figure stealing from that thick green patch. As the man skirted toward the house, Margo was sure that she recognized Osgood.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

To check, Margo looked toward the pool. There she gained the proof she wanted. Diane was finishing her swim and starting back to the house, wrapped in a large beach towel that served her as a dressing gown. Margo was sure that the blonde intended to meet Osgood and arrange some plan that would produce more trouble for Glenfield.

Leaving the sun porch, Margo went out through the door that led behind the house. Keeping close to the doorway, she saw Osgood steal past and enter the rustic gate into the garden where the fountain played. Confident that Diane would soon be along, Margo reached into her handbag and brought out a small-size automatic. Since Diane liked guns, Margo would show her that two could play at that game.

Moving to the gate, Margo peered beyond it. The gun gave her courage and she decided that she would confront Osgood before dealing with Diane. Even though Cranston hadn't suggested such procedure, Margo felt that it was fully warranted. Here at Glenfield's she was among friends who would rally to her aid if called.

Such was Margo's opinion as she thrust herself through the gate and looked about for Osgood. As she stared, Margo's forehead began to wrinkle. She was sure she had seen Osgood enter here, yet there wasn't a trace of him. The fountain was spraying merrily amid the statues, otherwise the garden was totally empty.

So completely did the thing baffle, Margo, that luck alone stood in her stead when the next occurrence came. Having looked everywhere else, Margo turned toward the garden gate, even though she was positive that Osgood couldn't have left that way. Just in time to hear the gate creak, Margo saw Diane stepping through.

An instant later, Diane was learning what it meant to be covered by a gun. Margo didn't give the other girl a chance to produce a revolver even if she had one. Thrusting her automatic straight at Diane, Margo told her to raise her hands. Diane did, though her hands were entangled in the beach towel. Then, after a steady stare at Margo, Diane spoke in a low tone:

"When out, go in."

The countersign of the Crystal Skull, which Margo had heard from Cranston!

"When in," said Margo, "stay in."

"When out," added Diane, "go out."

"When in, stay out," completed Margo, "and that settles you, Miss Devereux. If you were hoping that I belonged to your crooked crowd, you're wrong, even though I do know the answers. Whatever that double talk means, I don't care. I'm going to put you in something that you'll stay in."

Before Diane could utter a protest, Margo's gun was against the middle of her back. Marching Diane around the house, Margo looked for a suitable cellar entrance, hoping she would find a nice deep coal bin somewhere below. At last she saw the door she wanted, so she told Diane to halt. Gesturing her gun, Margo ordered:

"Go in there."

It was bad policy, that gun gesture. Diane saw it and acted on the spur of the moment. Whipping about, she gave a quick fling of the drooping beach towel and blanketed Margo inside it. Tripping backward, Margo found herself completely encumbered, even though she did retain her gun. By the time Margo shook off the heavy towel, Diane was a streak of red, disappearing into the woods in back of the manor.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

There was no use taking up the pursuit. Diane's only refuge was the hidden cabin in the woods, the one Cranston had mentioned. Her bathing slippers were better running shoes than Margo's high-heeled mules and Diane knew the way to the cabin. It didn't matter, because when she reached there, Lamont would intercept her.

So Margo thought, not realizing the present predicament of the man who doubled as The Shadow!

Scarcely had Diane disappeared before Margo saw Glenfield come around the house. Apparently he, too, was going to the garden and Margo foresaw trouble if Osgood still happened to be there, though how he could be was a mystery. Hurrying after Glenfield, Margo was sure she heard a creak from the rustic gate as she rounded the corner of the house.

Then, reaching the garden, Margo again stopped short. Like Osgood, Glenfield had disappeared!

Again, Margo viewed the tinkling fountain with its spraying lotus leaves and mist-laden pool, surrounded by the silent statues. She felt that she must have been mistaken when she thought that Glenfield had entered the garden; still, she was positive that she had seen Osgood go there.

REACHING the dock, Margo found Harry waiting in a motorboat. Almost in one breath, she poured out the entire story. Eyeing Margo steadily, Harry put the facts together, which meant that he accepted all of it except the details of the double vanish performed by Osgood and Glenfield. As Margo finished, Harry beckoned her into the boat and started the motor.

"Where are we going?" queried Margo, quite puzzled. "You're taking us away from everywhere that counts."

"You mentioned a cabin, didn't you?" returned Harry. "Somewhere deep in the woods, past the end of Lost River?"

Margo nodded.

"Lamont went there," she said, "but maybe he has left by now. Anyway, I'm sure that Diane has gone there."

"So that's where we're going," returned Harry. "By the shortest route. We're cutting in through Lost River."

"You can't," argued Margo. "There's a sandbar blocking Lost River and right now it's low tide. We'd have to wait for hours to get across that bar."

"So you think," retorted Harry, "but take a look. We're coming to the sandbar and we're going to dodge around it."

Slackening speed, Harry cut straight into a patch of trees that overhung the shore. Then, to Margo's amazement he was guiding the boat through a narrow channel that was barely visible, deep below the tree boughs, with the sandbar rearing at the other side.

"Found it a few hours ago," boasted Harry. "It's only good at low tide, which is why nobody would think to look for it. If the water was higher, the tree branches would stop us."

The boat eased through the channel, its speed increased by the sweep of the incoming tide. As they passed the bar, the water literally boiled behind them. Glancing back, Harry pointed out a rising crest of foam.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"They call it the bore," he explained. "The tide comes in so fast it clogs itself. When that wave overtakes us, there will be no stopping us."

As Harry finished, the wave arrived. Swept by the flooding bore, the boat sped through the curving gorge so fast that Harry was just able to negotiate the turns. Breathlessly, Margo exclaimed:

"Why, we'll be to the end of this in no time! It's only a mile and a half to the end of Lost River. Lamont said so."

"A mile and a half?" queried Harry. "That's odd!"

"I don't know whether it's odd or even," shouted Margo, above the roar of the terrific tide, "if that's what you mean."

"It isn't what I mean." Harry gave the boat a swing to avoid an infringing point of rock that towered to the gorge top. "Do you know the length of a league, Margo?"

Margo shook her head.

"It's three miles," declared Harry, answering his own question. "I checked it. Half of three miles is a mile and a half!"

Understanding dawned on Margo.

"You mean that business of the Crystal Skull!" she exclaimed. "That talk about traveling half a league. It could have meant Lost River!"

Harry nodded as he veered the boat toward what seemed that final bend.

"Half a league onward," declaimed Harry. "It's from the poem, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.' I remembered it this morning. In the third stanza there's a line that goes: 'Boldly they rode and well' –"

"Why, that was an instruction given by the Crystal Skull!" exclaimed Margo. "It must have been a clue. What is the next line, Harry?"

"It goes: 'Into the jaws of death' –"

As he spoke, Harry's eyes were riveted straight ahead. Turning, Margo saw the thing that awaited them past the final bend. A huge, gray cliff loomed straight ahead, rising to a bulging, rounded summit. Had this been high tide, it would have been a cliff and nothing more.

But this was low tide, a time at which no one would ordinarily try to navigate Lost River. Dead ahead, Harry and Margo were viewing something that only the initiated had ever seen. The low water, not yet replenished by the insurging tide, had dropped below the water mark upon the cliff. Only a few feet below that line, the cliff ended.

Instead of solid rock, there was a great, yawning gap, juttied by hanging chunks of stone that were much like mammoth teeth. Under those teeth, a ten-foot space formed the entrance of a great tunnel into which the boat was traveling. One glance sufficed to show what that opening represented in relation to the bulging rock above.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

The great cliff formed a mighty skull; the gap beneath it was the mouth. The hideous monster of solid stone was gulping in the tide so fast that the boat was being swallowed with it. The sunset, striking the rock, reflected the glint of mica with which the cliff was studded, giving it the effect of a great crystal skull.

The sight told its own story. This was the abode of Crystal Skull himself. The passengers in the onrushing boat were being swallowed by the jaws of death!

### CHAPTER XX

INSPECTOR JOE CARDONA was dashing toward a cabin where smoke was issuing from every window. Behind him were half a dozen men, local searchers he had hired to help scour the wood. They had seen the rising smoke a mile away and were at last within sight of its cause. Reaching the cabin steps, Cardona took them three at a time.

As Joe reached the threshold, he encountered two people. One was a girl in a bathing suit, the other a man who was bound with ropes. Giving the girl a hand, Cardona helped carry the man down the steps to safety. Then, after blinking the smoke from his eyes, Cardona stared in amazement.

The rescued man was Lamont Cranston!

"It's all right, inspector," coughed Cranston. "There's still time to get in there and bring the crystal skull. You'll find it on the window sill."

Cardona's companions were arriving to throw sand and dirt on the flames inside the cabin. Cardona went in and came out again, bringing the trophy that Cranston had mentioned. As Joe began to chop away Cranston's bonds, he heard the explanation.

"They really thought they had me," stated Cranston. "I knew what was coming, though, and I prepared for it. I put the skull on the window sill, right where the sun would catch it. The angle was just right for the skull to act as a burning glass. It ignited a wad of paper that I'd tossed on the floor."

"And that set fire to the cabin?" queried Joe.

"It did," returned Cranston, "and it brought you as I knew it would. It was my only chance for rescue before the Crystal Skull came here. It worked more quickly than I thought it would."

Cardona took a look at the trim blonde who had arrived ahead of him.

"This is Diane Devereux," introduced Cranston. "She happened to get here first. She loosened my gag and was helping me out of the cabin."

"Diane Devereux!" returned Cardona. "I thought she was working with Osgood!"

"She not only was, but is," declared Cranston. "She probably came here to look for him."

"No, I didn't," put in Diane. "I know where he has gone, though. We'll have to find him right away. Everything has reached a state where I don't know what will happen next."

"Time is more valuable than speech," reminded Cranston. "Save your breath, Diane, because we're in a hurry and you'll need it. Show us where Osgood went and we'll do the rest."

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Diane gestured toward Baycliff Manor and they started off on the double-quick. When they reached the little garden, Diane gestured to the rustic gate. Cranston shoved it open and the girl continued through.

Arriving at the lotus-topped fountain, Diane pressed her foot against one of the corner founts. Stepping back, Diane found herself still breathless, so she merely gestured. At that moment an amazing thing happened.

The fountain itself hinged downward. Not for a moment did the spray cease. Anyone outside the garden would have seen the fountain still in play above the hedge. The water was spreading from a pipe that ran five feet up from the ground. Between the lotus leaves of the fountain top was a slight gap that continued down the fluted column below. Invisible amid the spray, that five-foot slit allowed the fountain to tilt over without disturbing the upright pipe.

Part of the basin lifted with the fountain, pouring the surrounding water into the rest of the great bowl. Below that tilted segment was a steep flight of stone steps, leading down into the ground. Without a moment's hesitation, Cardona started down into the gap, followed by the five men who were with him, while Diane came last. After the girl had passed, the fountain tilted back in place. It operated by pressure from the stone steps.

Dim light greeted the arrivals as they reached the bottom of the steps. Next they followed a descending passage, that burrowed far through the rock. As they came to another flight of downward steps, they could hear the swash of an underground tide. Then, brilliance greeted them.

The searchers had reached a cavern where the walls and ceiling were of crystal. The cave fairly scintillated from the sunlight that was reflected up from the water that surged through a great gap below. The sun was setting and its color tinted the crystal formation with myriad shades of red. But Joe Cardona wasn't interested in the beauty of the setting.

Ahead stood a man whose face caught that same glow and from it gained a ruddy tint that would have satisfied a demon. The man was gesturing to another who was seated, bound against a pillar of rough-hewn crystal. The standing man was Artemus Glenfield; his prisoner, Albert Osgood!

Beyond were other captives, unbound but helpless. Harry Vincent and Margo Lane were standing with upraised hands at the points of guns held by two men whose faces Cardona recognized. The pair were servants who had worked for Trent Jarrock.

Gesturing to the rest of his party, Cardona stood back unseen and listened.

"Your suspicions are fully realized, Osgood," sneered Glenfield. "You learned of the crystal skull through Culver and from then on you were trying to find out more."

"I only wanted what belonged to me," returned Osgood. "I owned an interest in those treasures that were brought from China. When they proved to be false, I suspected that Culver must have switched them. When I heard that Wade was arranging a similar sale with the Amsterdam collection, I felt sure he belonged to the sane ring of swindlers."

"Perhaps you even thought Wade murdered Culver."

"I didn't suspect murder at that time. If I had, I wouldn't have asked Diane Devereux to help me check on Wade. While I was watching Wade, she was visiting the Green Star pier."

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Glenfield's eyebrows lifted with interest at this fact he hadn't known. It cleared another point on which Glenfield was ignorant, that of Diane's first meeting with The Shadow and the reason why the blonde had treated the cloaked intruder with suspicion.

"Diane owns a share of the genuine Amsterdam collection," added Osgood. "It was only right that I should have warned her that the Dutch treasures might be replaced with spurious curios. So I did. She offered to help me solve the game. The next trail led to Jarrock."

"And meanwhile," jeered Glenfield, "you sent Diane here to spy on me."

"We wanted to protect you, Glenfield. Diane and I agreed that you were first choice as a victim in every swindle. After Culver died we had to learn who the next owner of the skull would be. We were sure that whoever he was, he would prey on you."

"All part of the game," declared Glenfield with a satisfied chuckle. "I was master mind, chief rival, and biggest dupe, rolled into one. I talked Culver, Wade and Jarrock into selling treasures and collecting the money. They sent it all to me, the man who had coaxed others into being swindled, by throwing away cash that promptly came back to me, along with the stolen goods."

"Diane found that out," returned Osgood. "She noticed that you disappeared from the garden where the fountain was. So she watched the garden and today she saw you work the trick. Diane came to the cabin where I was hiding and told me –"

Glenfield gave an angry gesture that interrupted Osgood. The master of the skull was not interested in hearing of his mistakes. He preferred to continue with his original theme.

"So I became my own rival," boasted Glenfield. "I disposed of my partners one by one, with the aid of Nebo Thurling, who you met as Thornton. Of course, I told the others that someone else was doing it. I made them think it was The Shadow."

Finishing with a laugh that echoed from the crystalline surroundings, Glenfield became more serious of tone.

"You were a trouble maker, Osgood," he declared. "That is why I sent you the box of cigars that you opened by a happy chance. You gave some to Inspector Cardona, who handed one to Nebo and disposed of him in very timely fashion. I'm sorry you left New York without bringing any of those cigars with you, Osgood. Even more, I regret that Inspector Cardona did not smoke one himself."

Glenfield spat the last words in a tone of such contempt that Cardona could wait no longer. Beckoning to his companions, Joe strode forward, drawing a revolver as he advanced. He had taken no more than half a dozen steps when Glenfield wheeled and faced him.

"Stay where you are, Cardona," sneered Glenfield. "You and your friends are helpless, too."

As Glenfield gestured, Cardona turned his head from side to side. Stepping from among the pillars of blood-tinted crystal were the remaining members of Glenfield's secret crew!

All were armed, with their guns covering the helpless group. Tilting back his head, Glenfield laughed in a long, happy cackle that echoed from all about the cave. Then, as the mirth was fading, it took on a peculiar shudder, which should have been the ending note.

Instead, the shudder rose.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

It rose to a tremendous crescendo of defiant mockery that seemed to coarise from everywhere. As startled as his followers, Glenfield wheeled about, looking for the author of that taunt. Sidling from behind Cardona's helpless group, Glenfield saw a living patch of blackness. Madly, the archcrook aimed his gun and fired.

Glenfield had seen The Shadow; more than that, his aim was straight. What he didn't see was the crystal pillar that intervened between him and the cloaked avenger. The bullet chipped the mass of quartz; deflected, it missed its target.

The Shadow's answer didn't miss.

From past the pillar, his automatic tongued a straight shot to Glenfield's chest. As other crooks wheeled, a pair of guns began to talk, dropping The Shadow's foemen before they could complete their aim. As suddenly, The Shadow's gunfire ceased and with good reason. Cardona and his companions were charging the staggering followers of Glenfield, the Crystal Skull.

Harry Vincent was leaping between Margo Lane and the two men near the mouth of the cave. Turning to aim for The Shadow that pair wheeled about. Harry bowled over the first man; before the other could supply a shot, The Shadow clipped him at long range. The round up of the crew that served the Crystal Skull was complete.

Strange, weird was the parting laugh, within that amazing cavern where Artemus Glenfield once had ruled as the Crystal Skull. It marked the departure of The Shadow, but not of his other self, Lamont Cranston. Only a minute later, Cranston appeared from the stone steps where he had apparently lagged while Cardona and the rest were shoving themselves into disaster.

"So it was Glenfield," remarked Cranston, casually, as he surveyed the sprawled form of the master plotter, "Do you know" – he turned to Cardona – "I should have realized it all along, inspector."

Cardona's face became incredulous.

"Somebody took the crystal skull from Jarrock's," recalled Cranston. "Someone who came into the study while you were hypnotized, inspector, and who talked you into accepting blame for murder."

The recollection of that scene came slowly to Cardona's mind. Joe nodded.

"It could only have been Glenfield," added Cranston. "Osgood was chasing the truck that acted as a decoy and all of the other guests went with him. That is, all except Glenfield. Remember?"

Cardona remembered and with it, he recalled how the curios had vanished from Jarrock's wholesale. Looking around the crystal cavern, Joe saw huge crates of goods that represented the robberies engineered by Wade and Culver, but the Jarrock case still baffled him. It was Cranston who probed further, to a batch of smaller boxes that formed a uniform stack. They were fairly long, those boxes, but they were thin and narrow.

"Odd boxes, those," remarked Cranston. "Just the size to be packed under the seats of an automobile. They would fit well in cars like large sedans or limousines, particularly if the seats were specially hollowed or deepened to receive them."

Cardona ordered the boxes to be opened. What followed was a thing amazing in itself. Out of those boxes came Jarrock's curios, so closely packed that they seemed to expand as they were separated. Those treasures had been chosen with an eye to portability as well as rarity, all with a purpose toward crime.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

From the first box came the golden screen. It stood nearly five feet high when it was lifted from the crate where it was packed lengthwise. The four panels of the screen were arranged so they formed the side of a square that served as a lining to the packing box, which had been constructed to the screen's measure.

Inside this square golden tube were other trophies. The elephant table, wide but low stood inside the horizontal screens. Between the legs of that table were the inlaid taborets, laid horizontally. Their legs were alternated so that they interlocked when pressed together, each from an opposite direction. The legs grooved thus for about half their length so that the taborets formed a closed cylinder a little more than four feet long.

Pulled apart, the cylinder proved to be full. They contained another cylinder consisting of the four-foot silver vases. One vase was slightly larger in diameter than the other and they had been shoved together, mouth to mouth. When these were pulled apart, out rolled the golden Buddhas. The three-foot idols fitted exactly in the vases, one being inverted to occupy the space left by the other.

As for the mosaic plaques, they had been placed like a pile of hot cakes on one of the taborets when the screen was set around the tight-packed cylinder. Tapestries were stuffed in the end of the screen to keep the plaques from rattling. Thus had half a roomful of curios been consigned to a single crate!

Similarly, another crate disgorged a high but narrow teak-wood chest that contained six golden vases stacked like drinking cups, inside them two Siva statues with bristling arms embraced. Packed in the other section of the chest were the blocky, ornamental clocks, fitting to the last inch. The pendulums had been removed and the interior of the clocks were filled with porcelain bric-a-brac, all of which fitted like the pieces of a Chinese puzzle. Again, tapestries filled the remaining space and served to keep the packing very tight.

Even more amazing were crates that disgorged huge quantities of furniture. Jarrock's choice of narrow, high-backed chairs had made this possible. The chairs alternated up and down. The seats were placed flat together so that the back of each chair was against the front legs of the other. Each pair of chairs occupied a crate and within the legs of the chairs were the heavy, ornate footstools. At the sides of the chairs were the five-foot full-length portraits of the royal children, narrow slides that filled the few inches of space between the chairs and the walls of each crate.

Low, flattish tables completed the arrangement. Ingeniously packed, their legs poked between those of the chairs and the openwork of the footstools. Yet all these items could be fitted together as rapidly as they were taken apart, provided that the men who did the packing had practiced the job.

These curios had been brought to Jarrock's house in vans, by regular movers who knew nothing of their portability. Actually there were three van loads of treasures, when transported like any other furnishings. That fact was obvious when Cardona's helpers had finally unpacked the dozen crates. The whole interior of the crystalline cave teemed with curios beside which the flat packing boxes looked trivial.

Thus was the final riddle of the Crystal Skull explained. In this hidden cave where he had quartered his crooked followers, Artemus Glenfield lay dead, amid his spoils of crime. His henchmen were prisoners, due to receive their share of penalty for the murders in which they had participated.

From the wall of this cavern, Glenfield had hewn the block of perfect crystal from which he carved the miniature skull. He had loaned it to others – Culver, Wade and Jarrock – as a token of authority, but to them it had become a talisman of death while Glenfield reaped the profits of three robberies.

Murder had been necessary to Glenfield's scheme, for he had been forced to take his partners into full confidence regarding this cave to which the treasures were brought and stored. The key to the game lay in those passwords used by men who served the Crystal Skull.

## THE CRYSTAL SKULL

"When out, come in –"

By the term "out" the phrase referred to the tide. Only when the tide was out could anyone enter this hideaway through the channel of Lost River!

When in, stay in – when out, go out – when in, stay out –

Those other expressions also fitted the circumstance. In phrasing them, Glenfield's followers had literally told the story of the crystal cave, headquarters of that master of murder, Artemus Glenfield, whose ways of crime were ended!

An echo stirred the weird stillness of the cave. It was a whisper from the immobile lips of Lamont Cranston, but it came as a token of a cloaked victor who had vanished mysteriously after settling the case of the Crystal Skull.

Only a whisper, that echo of The Shadow's triumphant parting laugh!

THE END