

THE SEVEN DEADLY ARTS

by Maxwell Grant

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THE SEVEN DEADLY ARTS

by Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

He was broke, or the next thing to it. His last two weeks at twenty bucks per were coming up. Twenty bucks a week. There weren't too many places he could have been as comfortable on that as he was here. He looked around him.

The hot sun beat down on him. Just a few paces away at the end of the wharf, the muddy, dark yellow, completely uninspiring expanse of the Mississippi spread out at the foot of New Orleans. He yawned and turned over to bake his back. Sprawled on a bale of cotton, in the bright southern sunshine it would have been hard to picture him on the beach at Salerno. He looked as if it would take a superhuman effort just to make him get to his feet. But it hadn't been that way on the beach.

He turned his thoughts away from war and all it connoted. He yawned again and incuriously looked at the paper that was riffling a trifle in the barest suggestion of a breeze. It was open at the "Help Wanted" page, or he might never have seen the ad.

Above him, around him, there came the steady beat of the stevedores as they paced their strange walk down to the end of the wharf. Their voices would occasionally boom out in a steady refrain that was almost not singing. It was a chant, heavy, slow, a work song. The kind of song they'd been singing for a hundred years. It was theirs, all theirs. It made their burdens a little less heavy. Made the endless time pass by a little quicker.

It made an obligatio to his restless thoughts as he ran a lazy eye down the columns of ads. He thought to himself, 'Wanted, One veteran in pretty good condition... Wanted, an artist who isn't much of an artist... Wanted...'

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Suddenly his mind went into gear. There was an ad for an artist. It read: "Calling All Artists! Five o'clock at 233 Dauphin Street. Five Positions Open. Good Pay."

It didn't seem very hopeful on the surface. If they wanted real artists, he was strictly out. But... he looked at his watch. Four-thirty. If he hurried a bit, he could make it all right.

He cast a last look over his shoulder at the wharf. At the yellow vast muck of the Mississippi. If he did get this job, good-bye to loafing in the sun and getting some fat on his nerve endings. Not that he'd had battle fatigue. He had just wanted long periods of doing nothing, a chance to re-evaluate himself and what he wanted out of life. It wasn't much. Gone were the pre-war dreams of one-man shows and a great career. He could see himself more clearly now. He was a never-was. Not even a has-been like his old art teacher. He just didn't have that one little extra bit of genius. Ability anyway.

He waved a good-bye to a handsome, sweating Negro who smiled back at him. It was a real good-bye. He was never to return there...

Dauphin Street was in the Vieux Carre. He looked around at the old world houses, at lace-like iron grill work that went up the outside of the lovely old houses. He looked particularly at a girl who went into a house across the street from the address in the paper. He thought he'd never seen a girl like that before.

She carried her head proudly as though it were a beacon. Her black hair, giving off a thousand reflections was alive in the warm sun. Her back was straight, not stiff but straight, the way a queen's back would be made, he thought.

Her skin was like—he groped for a word—old ivory? No that wasn't flattering. A camellia? It had that quality of whiteness, but there was a glow under the skin. Her body was as lovely as she.

He stood on the street, gawking like a child at a candy display. He pulled himself together long after the door of 230 Dauphin Street had closed on her.

It seemed to be a little darker. But no, that couldn't be. Perhaps it was just that everything had seemed brighter while she was there. He grinned at himself, shrugged, and walked up the steps to number 233. He yanked at a bell pull. Far off, inside the old house, a tinkle told him that it had announced his presence.

The door opened and a man stood there. He smiled and said, "Good afternoon, have you come in response to my advertisement?"

"Yes. I don't quite know what you want, but for general boiler-room art work, I'm not bad."

The man in the doorway matched the house. He was tall, lean, almost saturnine looking. His face seemed to cry out for a dashing mustache, for clothes of an older day. But even in the conventional clothes of this era, he managed to look as though he were wearing a costume. He was dressed almost too well. He made the saying about the bandbox seem possible.

There was even, and the ex-soldier smothered a smile at this, a handkerchief tucked in his cuff. He spoke. "My name is Charlus. Pierre Charlus." He paused and the answer came.

"Tommy Rondo. At your service." Tommy smothered a desire to bow as he said it. The man, the house, even the street seemed to have woven a spell around him. He felt as though he were in another day, a slower moving, more courtly day.

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“Follow me, if you please. The others are waiting. I don't think I shall need to examine any more.”

Down a long hall, through an anteroom and into a room that was completely out of character. It brought Tommy back to to-day with a start. The room was empty but for some chairs, some easels, and a variety of daylight bulbs that flared down from the ceiling with blue-white brilliance.

There were the others. They sat stiffly at their easels obviously as curious as was Tommy. Paints, all the necessary equipment lay before each easel. There were even studio palettes ready. At the end of the room facing the group, a large section of canvas covered part of the wall.

Charlus slowly paced his way till he was next to the canvas. He said, “All of you are curious, I have no doubt. Let me say that you will all be paid for the time you spend here whether I can use you or not. Let us say fifty dollars. That should, I hope, remunerate you properly.”

They looked at each other. If he was willing to pay that for finding out if they would fit the job, how much would he pay if he hired them?

Tommy sat down in front of the one vacant easel and hoped against hope that he'd come up to par. This looked like a good job. There were one, two, three... ten men, all told. And the ad had said that five were necessary. Pretty good odds.

Mr. Charlus pulled the canvas from the wall and revealed a not too good painting in a baroque style. He said, “I'd like you all to see how fast and accurately you can copy this.”

Copy? Tommy wondered even while he was opening the tubes of paint what Charlus thought this would prove. Lots of people can copy. He, himself, for instance. You didn't have to be an artist for that!

The hour went by almost too quickly. Tommy looked up from the cartoon he had made of the painting. He had just had time to lay out the cartoon and begin to paint in one detail when Charlus called time.

Just as well get ready for the disappointment he thought, looking at the other nine easels in front of him. Two of the men were really cracker jacks. They had caught a feeling in their roughs that showed they were artists and no two ways about it. Those two were going to be hired ahead of him he thought.

Charlus bent over one of the men's easels. He looked for just a moment and said, “I am sorry.”

The man looked surprised, but Charlus opened his wallet and gave him some money. “I hope this will make up for your lost time.”

Tommy scowled. 'Curiouser and curiouser.' There, Charlus was letting the other real artist go. Now, he was in front of Tommy looking at one of the other men's work. He nodded. “Good. Would you mind waiting. I can use you.”

Now he was standing behind Tommy looking at his work. He nodded. “Fine. You can work for me.”

There were four of them when he had finished. Four badly puzzled men. The others had gone.

“There still remains a fifth. Well, another advertisement on the morrow should take care of that. Thank you, gentlemen.”

What now, Tommy wondered. Charlus had left the room. He was gone but a moment. He returned with a

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carefully wrapped package about fourteen inches long. He looked at them and for the first time seemed to realize that they might be curious about their work. He smiled and said, "Gentlemen, please relax. You all look so stiff, so unconvinced. Let me say that you will start work right now. You will be paid two hundred dollars a week for your work. Advancement will be rapid and up to you."

The four of them drew in their breaths. Two hundred a week!

"I deal in reproductions. Art reproductions. It is a fairly lucrative business. I see no reason why my employees should not share in the profits. You will find me very easy to work for. That first test that all of you passed, was just that, the first test. The next one will be the way you reproduce this painting. I can tell you that if I am satisfied with the way you do your work on this, that you will go on my staff for good. Now then gentlemen, to work!"

He opened the package. It held a painting. A painting in sombre colors and of a sombre subject. Tommy stared at it. The surrealist of four hundred years ago. The Dali of his day. Hieronymous Bosch.

He was a strange creature, Bosch. Full of god and the devil. This painting like most of his, was of hell and a most unpleasant corner of it at that.

Charlus left them as they got to work. Tommy sat at his easel and let his hands work for him. He was confused. Factory line production of art masterpieces? But Bosch was no Rembrandt. An original of his would bring a couple of thousand. What would reproductions of it bring? Well, no time for that. He got to work.

Against his will the subject matter of the painting began to intrigue him. Sombre reds and dark purples wove a pattern of fiends; demons that wriggled in and out and around the painting. In the center, mercifully blurred by some ascending smoke, the figure of a woman, bound to a crude stone table, was being tormented. Helter skelter, thrown madly as though by some insane hand, were objects that had no relevance to the subject. Vegetables, animals, which when observed closely were just that. But, if you looked at the picture as was Tommy, through narrowed eyes, the animals and vegetables became fiends, imps, figures of hate and evil!

He worked on, his mind becoming entangled in the mad painting. He was grateful that things like those he stared at were no longer believed in, no longer given credence. What a period that must have been when people who believed in Satan and all his cohorts, worshipped and made obeisance to the horned one.

The room was quiet. The painting seemed to have an effect on the other men, too. For there was no small talk, all worked perseveringly and rapidly.

Running in and out of Tommy's mind like a cat after a mouse, were thoughts of the pay he was to receive. They became part of the work he was doing. Two hundred a week. He smiled at the conceit. Was that his due for selling his soul to the devil?

If so, he was pretty well content with the bargain. One slightly soiled soul in return for comfort and comparative luxury. It wasn't too bad a bargain at that. It was precisely ten times what he had been getting. He shrugged off the thoughts that followed this. There was a funny feeling about the whole set-up that he didn't like. But this was no time to get fussy.

Back to the inferno he thought, as he delicately copied a face that grinned in inhuman delight at the torture of a bound man. No devils, no Satan, no Faust, no one was in the business of buying shop-worn souls... not in this atomic age!

CHAPTER II

OUT past Lake Pontchartrain, in a parish that was contiguous to New Orleans, out in the dark dank depths of a swamp, there was one who at that moment would have questioned Tommy's thought!

It was dark. It was darker still where a shadow, unsubstantial as the mist that hazed sight—a figure, stock still in the sudden silence, watched with unbelieving eyes. The drums, soft and in the background for a period, had come to a crescendo and stopped with a suddenness that was more shocking than the sound had been.

Fronds hung down from depressed looking trees. They made a frame for the scene. In the silence there was the clatter of insect's wings rubbing on each other. Outside of that, the silence was as complete as though eternal night had fallen.

The tableau was frozen. The figure of the woman, arms upraised, soft skin glowing in the dark, was poised, her eyes, almost all of them hidden by a half mask, glinted in the light from the fire. Her hand held a curious looking knife.

Tied to a stake was a bleating lamb.

When the tableau broke it broke, with the sudden violence of a tropical storm. The knife flashed down. There was a muffled sound from the animal and then...

The watching figure looked away.

The final scene in the ceremony that had been going on for an hour was over. The vagrant light from the fire, low and on the ground, cast strange high-lights upwards. The harsh lights coming from below as they did, showed the bizarre masks as even more bizarre than they were.

Cheap, ten cent papier mache masks, there was nothing of the horrible in them. They were just carnival masks. Halloween masks. Toys. But the use they had been put to: hiding the faces of the skulking participants in a ritual that went back into the dreadful past, made the masks things of horror.

The shiny black of the cheap paint on the top of one of the masks caught a high light. It was worn by a burly figure, a man who had had a leading role in the events just so dreadfully ended. He made his way around collecting the little bags that the various figures held in their hands. He took the bags from them. They were small, perhaps three inches over all.

He took the bags and laid them on the ground in front of the now bedraggled and old looking woman who had used the knife. She made motions with her hands over the bags. Her voice, shrill and cracked intoned over the bags; intoned words so old that they had long since lost their meaning. Only one word came clearly from her throat; that was "Damballah!"

The chant ended, the bags were returned to their owners. The masks somehow deprived them of all humanity. They looked like badly made marionettes as they greedily took the bags back. They put them under their clothes, secretively, slyly. Then, as the woman walked off into the frond enclosed distance, there seemed to be a lifting of restraint. They spoke.

The meeting was breaking up. The big burly man watched as they banded together. A skinny bent, female figure, next to him snarled to him, "Gumbo ya ya!"

He laughed. "You're right, gran'mere, everybody talks at once!"

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They walked off after the retreating backs of the others. There was something noticeably unusual about the man's back. Something in the way he carried himself. A loose sure-footed shuffle, graceful and lithe, unusual for so big a man.

They were all gone. The insects repossessed the area that was theirs by ancestral right. Then, and only then, the shadowy figure walked with swift pace off in the opposite direction from the way the others had gone.

It was a man. A man who, in his way, was as bizarrely dressed as had been the actors in the ugly drama he had just watched. A man dressed in black. Black slouch hat, black cape, a more than black quality that made his form blend and shift with every vagrant flickering spot of darkness.

It was The Shadow. And, if his walk meant anything, he was furious.

Witchcraft! Not the silly childish business of women riding on broomsticks, but the out and out trafficking with evil that brought out the worst elements of man's nature. The belief in a superstition so ingrained in these parts that nothing had ever uprooted it.

The sale of charms, or love potions, fortune telling, none of these things would have upset The Shadow. But he was positive that the gibberish and unclean rites he had just watched were but the cover up for some more devilish machinations.

Burbank had been right, as usual. There was work for The Shadow in New Orleans. He made his way to the edge of the swamps where he had parked a car. Before he came out into the open, he removed his briefcase from under his cape. Rapidly, he doffed the black hat and cape. They went into a secret zippered compartment in Lamont Cranston's case.

It was as Cranston that he had driven out here and as Cranston that he would return to his host's roof. He smiled as he thought of old Charles Bouton. A wonderful old man, seamed face, bent back and all, there was an inextinguishable fire in him that shone from his faded blue eyes like a beacon.

Back in Vieux Carre, Cranston slowed down in front of a house. He saw two figures silhouetted against a curtained window. The figures were much too close for speech. Old Charles's niece and her fiance. He wondered where Tante was. In this old Creole society it was no easy task to duck a chaperone.

Far off he could hear a blaring trumpet sounding in the night. There were not many of the old jazz players left in town, but the ones that were, were all old faithfuls who could work all day on the docks and then blow their lungs out all night.

He pulled the bell and waited. Padded feet approached the door. It opened and a figure out of Dumas's day was there. It was Charles Bouton and he winked at Cranston. "Shh... we can't have the servants knowing what a night owl we have? Eh?"

Cranston grinned in reply and followed the bent figure of Bouton down the hall. In the big, old, out-dated living room, he found how Veronica had outwitted her chaperone. Tante was sound asleep in a straight-backed chair, in front of a chess board.

Bouton nodded at the scene. "It is that I play alone when I play with her, n'est ce pas?"

"Feel like a real game?" asked Cranston knowing that as is the case with the very old, his host required very little sleep.

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“By all means... We will have to wake the aged one and send her to her downy rest.”

He wakened Tante who took one look at the clock and then pierced her brother with an eagle eye. “Mon vieux, it is that you wish for your daughter to have a reputation?”

He shrugged and said, “Tcha, chase him home now.”

She was furious and scuttled out of the room.

Bouton nodded at some brandy and said, “Will you join me?”

“Of course,” Cranston nodded.

They sat at the chess board. Cranston made a queen's bishop's pawn lead and waited.

“Bah! It is no use. We will have no peace till Tante has made herself unpleasant!”

There were sounds of voices in the hall. The door opened and a man of thirty–five came in. Out in the hall female voices joined in some kind of harangue. He winked at Bouton.

“Don't make yourself strange—enter. You know my old friend, Lamont Cranston, do you not?”

Cranston nodded to the question and said, “Good evening, M'sieu Charlus.”

“Come, let us have none of this patronymic address. Pierre, to you, sir.” Charlus nodded and smiled at Cranston.

Cranston was as fascinated as ever by the brunette loveliness of Bouton's niece as she entered the room leaving old Tante out in the hall still mumbling to herself.

“And of course, my niece, Veronica, is known to you,” said Bouton.

“She is indeed.” Cranston returned the smile which Veronica bestowed on him. She was more than lovely, she was not of this age, somehow. Modern women with their glow of robust health don't have the kind of beauty that was Veronica's. Cranston watched as Charlus eyed his fiancée greedily.

“M. Cranston,” said Veronica and her voice was low, throaty, and vastly disturbing, “can you somehow explain to Tante that this is the year of our Lord, 1946 and not 1826?”

“I am afraid that nothing will ever make that penetrate through that so thick skull,” said Bouton. “She is as she was made and nought will change her.”

“I heard what you said!” Tante's voice, high pitched and irritated came clearly through the door. “I am not one to stay where I am not wanted.”

There was a pause. “I'll go away. I will not stay here.”

Veronica said, “Oh dear, now I shall have to go and straighten out her ruffled feathers.” She left and as she did the room seemed to change. It was no longer a backdrop for beauty, but just an old room with three men in it.

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“This is an affair that has been repeated again and again,” said Charlus. “It will no doubt continue till I am able to get my beloved away from her dragon.”

Bouton and Cranston sat down again and prepared to resume their interrupted game.

“I will leave you to your game,” said Charlus. “I have much to do on the morrow.”

“Oh yes, did you get the artists whom you needed?” asked Bouton.

“I did indeed. At least four of them. I may not need a fifth. These four seem like good conscientious workers.”

Cranston looked his question.

“You know of course that I am an art dealer of a rather peculiar sort?”

“No, I had no idea what sort of business you were in.”

“It is too bad that he should have to engage in trade at all. But since he does, it is good that his business is a nice one,” Bouton said.

Cranston well knew how horrid was commerce or any mention of it to these old families. But it was a step that most of them had been forced to take. The old fortunes were being dissipated, if not by the heirs, by taxes on unearned increment that had spelled the end of the type of life for which the families were prepared.

“It is a field that I have made pretty much my own. There is always a market for good reproductions of old masterpieces. They are used in a variety of ways. My best market is in Hollywood, of all places. The nouveau riche,” he made the words sound like a malediction, “find some sort of solace for their lack of background by surrounding themselves with things that belong to the past.”

“It is better than selling bonds, or shoes, as have some of our people,” said Bouton. “Much better.”

“Yes, I have little to complain about.” Charlus bowed and left them.

To Cranston the silence and the intellectual relaxation of the chess game was like an oasis in the middle of a desert of crime and its perpetrators. For the nonce, he was able to put into the back of his mind the worrying thoughts that had been responsible for his expedition into the bayous.

There was some sort of connection between the horrid doings out in the swamp and the fabled streets of the Vieux Carre. That he knew, and he was dreading that which was to come. For, all he could see ahead for the people he liked was heartbreak and sorrow, anger and violence, death and destruction.

CHAPTER III

TOMMY RONDO, ex-G.I., almost ex-artist, went home that night in a dream, with swirling thoughts of fame of a sort, and success of a monetary kind for which he had hardly dared to hope.

His shoulders were back and he carried his head high. A girl in a cab, seeing him walk by, thought—“What a glamour job. Tall, broad-shouldered, curly-haired...” She sighed as she turned from the window and looked at her companion who was meticulously polishing his glasses with his handkerchief.

He probably never knew why she was so short-tempered with him that night.

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Tommy strode on. His mind was so occupied that he didn't hear footsteps that echoed his. Just ahead was the rooming house that was his home. As soon as he received his first week's salary that was going to be changed. He visioned the kind of place that he'd get. A studio apartment with ceilings high enough so as not to give him that trapped feeling that he had in his furnished room.

The cobble-stoned street faced onto an old, centuries old, cemetery. In New Orleans most old streets lead at one time or another to a cemetery. During that plague that had wreaked such havoc as late as sixty years ago, it was necessary to bury the dead, and that, quickly, before their bodies perpetuated the plague. The plague borne from the swamps and marshes that New Orleans is built upon, both caused the deaths and then received the bodies of those whom it had killed. A coffin buried in the marshy land went down, down, forever down. Two months after burial in those unclean places the dead were forever lost to sight.

The rich, the ones who could afford to escape the grasp of the quicksand-like marshes, were buried in crypts that dotted the old cemeteries like lighthouses of death. The ones not so rich could hire a crypt for varying times. Sometimes they were able to afford to hire a crypt for six months or a year... but at the end of that time, the coffins were removed from the crypts and given to the un-tender mercies of the all-embracing swamps.

Tommy barely glanced at the cemetery. At first, he had woven strange fancies around the flickering lights that he sometimes saw out in the middle of the burial ground. He'd thought that they might be some form of marsh light, or the moving forms of the long-dead. Tonight there was nothing to relieve the unending pall of blackness that hung over the old place like a curtain.

He had his foot on the first step of his house when he finally heard the sounds of the man who had been following him. He wondered about it for a second and then put it out of his mind. None of his business who came in here.

He stepped up onto the second step. It was then that the hoarse voice stopped him in mid-step.

“Eh, come with me, little one.”

He spun to see who could possibly call him “little one”. The man he saw was a nightmare figure out of the dawn of time. Taller by far than he, the man had the jaw and crude facial construction of a cave creature. His huge underlip protruded Ubangi-wise. His sallow, pimpled skin was like a topographical map. Huge pores glistened sweat in the feeble light that seeped out from one window of the house.

He made no threatening gestures. He was too sure of himself, of his strength, for that. He needed no gun to reinforce his commands. An arm like a hawser encircled Tommy's waist. He pulled Tommy off the step and said, “Not one tiny peep, mon brave, or...”

He didn't finish the threat. Was this some form of primitive hold up, a mugging? Tommy could not decide. For instead of going through his pockets, Big Lip gestured with a huge thumb back in the direction of the cemetery. “En avant.”

There was nothing to do but obey. Tommy didn't like it one bit. No man would. But sense forbade any kind of a show-down. One clenching of that giant fist could end the breath of life in Tommy. He followed orders and waited for a more propitious time in which to find out if the giant were as strong as he looked.

Side by side, like old comrades, they walked away from the house, away from safety and sanctuary, away from the ordered ways of life, into the menace of the old cemetery.

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Their feet made squishing sounds as they stepped off the grass into a bypath that wove its way past a crypt.

“What goes on?” Tommy asked in exasperation.

“Tcha! I said that you were not to make with your mouth, did I not?”

Tommy found himself being shaken as one would shake a bad puppy. He gasped as he was dropped by the giant. It was an insult to his dignity as a man. Most people in their adulthood have forgotten the torments that a child goes through when he is subjected to force. There was nothing in the giant of a man fighting another man. It was a stern father chastising an errant son. It was more than Tommy could stand. He lashed out with the side of his hand as he'd been taught. If the side of his hand had connected with the giant's throat, it would have stopped right there, for nothing can withstand the deadliness of that blow.

But casually, almost slowly, Big Lip snapped a hand up into position. The side of Tommy's hand connected with the giant's arm with numbing force. The giant laughed and that was worse than the chastisement had been.

“Eh, my little mosquito! Hah!” He roared with inward mirth. He pushed a hand into the small of Tommy's back that sent him sprawling forward along the path. “No more of that, my cabbage, or you will annoy me. Now proceed. Rapidly.”

It was no use. Nothing but a sub-machine gun would make any impression on this creature. Tommy walked forward. The swamp was more gluey now. The houses behind them were long gone. There was nothing to be seen but a miasma that came up from the swamp like a physical thing.

It had the nightmare dream quality of deep narcosis. There was no point in even thinking. This could not be happening and yet it was.

On through the night, through the swamp, the ill-matched pair made their way. It seemed to have been going on forever, but it was little more than twenty minutes between the time that Big Lip approached him and the time they stumbled around a dilapidated crypt that seemed to have been forgotten for a century, and saw before them the figure of a man. This was another big man, that is, a trifle bigger than Tommy but not in the same epoch as Big Lip.

The man, relaxed and somehow giving the air of a giant cat, sat on a slanting tombstone and looked at three other men. The men, and Tommy blinked his eyes at this, were the artists—the other artists who had been chosen by Pierre Charlus that afternoon. They looked as out of place as they felt. They showed signs of having put up resistance. Their clothes were torn as though by brambles or hands.

Behind them, almost unseen in the dark, were the hovering figures that had brought them to this eerie place. The man, the cat-like man, face hidden behind what Tommy realized was a papier mache mask, spoke.

And in that out of the way place, with fear as real a thing as the breath of life, the man said, “Welcome.”

He stood up and his walk was loose-limbed and graceful. From the rear he looked like a dancer making his way through some intricate figure. He balanced his weight on the balls of his feet. Tommy, enough of an artist to know that a man is recognizable by his bearing as much as by his face, filed it away in his mind. He'd know that walk again, anywhere.

“I must beg a thousand pardons. I have no doubt that Bratser and Le Cochon and Big Lip, as well as little Rene, must have frightened you. But there was no other way to get you here. However, that is over and we

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will forget it.” It was a command.

Tommy's eyes, a little more accustomed to the darkness now, saw what must have been, could only have been, little Rene. He was small and compact and evil. Tommy thought he had never seen so much evil in a human face before. It was like a mask that separated the little man from the rest of humanity. He was grinning now as he flipped a coin in the air and caught it over and over again.

There was silence.

“Look, this is all very jolly and I am sure there is some delightful explanation for it, but what goes on here?” This was from one of the artists and although the words were light, his tone was not. He was frightened, badly frightened, and it is not good to see naked fear on a man's face.

Rene continued to flip his coin. The tiny sound of his nail ringing on the silver was the only sound at first. But then, the chorus of the night made a background to it. Crickets, some kind of almost tropical insects, made a chorus behind them. There were little sounds all around them. Frogs, birds, life rustled and went on as they stood and tried to prepare themselves for death.

“You have been selected,” said the man in the mask, “as workers. You still do not know all of what your work will be. I tell you that when you do find out, there be some of you who will not be happy.

“You may even want to go to the police. You may want to leave our organization. But I tell you...” His voice was deep and it boomed out like a baritone bullfrog, “that if you do anything as indiscreet as that, I will not like it. Neither, for that matter, will your guardians.”

From his voice, he must have been grinning behind the false front of the mask: “Your guardians, and they will be in constant attendance on you, are of course, my pets. Big Lip and his confreres.”

“Is that all you're going to tell us?” Tommy's voice, despite himself, was querulous with nervousness. The whole scene, the men, the menacing silences, were too much. They were really getting on his nerves. He knew now that he had not taken enough time to repair the damage of the war to his nervous system.

“Mmmmmmm, I will put myself in your power.” Definitely now the man was smirking behind the papier mache mask. “I will tell you that my superior, my 'boss', does not know of what I have done. The boss doesn't like what is called melodrama. The boss thinks that you can be made to do that which you will do by cleverness. But I know better. I know that the way to control men is through fear!

“And you will live much longer if you fear me and your guardians! Listen to the boss, follow his lead. But remember, no matter what you do, no matter where you go, you will be followed. You will be under observation.

“The Fascists made a great discovery. They discovered that although fear is a good control, fear of one's life, that sometimes there are people so imbued with democratic nonsensical ideas, that they will give up their lives. But, and this was a great discovery—the Fascists discovered that not even 'heroes' will jeopardize the lives of others. So I tell you... You, Tommy Rondo, if you decide to indulge in heroics, there is one in Massachusetts who will die.”

In Massachusetts... his mother. Tommy gulped. They had found out about him in a hurry. The voice came through the mask and it was velvety with menace as it went on and told the others just who would die if they should try to escape.

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“So, gentlemen, in conclusion, let me urge you to try and restrain any 'heroic' impulses you may feel.”

And it was over. Just like that. The man in the mask walked around the tombstone and for all they knew, vanished. He was gone.

But it was not anti-climactic. Unreal and bizarre as it had all been, Tommy could still hear that voice, still feel the menace. He heard it ringing in his inner ear as, mud-stained and weary, he made his way up the stairs to his house.

Behind him, on the street, Big Lip flicked a match into flame as he lit a handmade, brown cigarette. He seemed ready to stay there forever. Like some monolithic statue, he had in him no impatience. He had been ordered to watch Tommy and he would, till death—till the death of one of them or the other.

CHAPTER IV

IN his bedroom, Lamont Cranston, awakened by an inner prompting, arose. He smiled as he saw the old pitcher in the old basin. He poured the water into the basin and washed up. In this house modern plumbing might just as well never have been invented.

He never needed an alarm clock. He told himself that he would like to wake at eight, and awake he did. He smiled again to himself as he remembered the way he had had to maneuver in order to allow old M'sieu Bouton to win the last game. The old man was determined not to go to bed till he had won one game. But he was too shrewd to throw the game too obviously. It had been an intriguing and interesting problem, like chess solitaire, in order to allow him at last to win.

The smile vanished as Cranston thought of that which had brought him to this lovely old place. There were evil forces at work and it was high time that something was done about them.

There was a choice of alternatives facing Cranston, and his thoughts were concerned with precisely how he would attack the next step.

Certainly no one at the breakfast table could have told that there was anything on Cranston's mind but complete enjoyment of the heavy chocolate that took the place of coffee and the tasty brioches that completed a French idea of what to break the day with.

Tante, evidently all over her anger of the night before, was perturbed about Veronica's wardrobe. She said, “For your wedding, we must have some more attention to the details!”

Veronica smiled sweetly and said, “Tante, what makes you so sure that there will be a wedding?”

There was a complete and utter silence. Bouton strangled on a sip of chocolate. Cranston had to pat his back before the old man could sputter, “No wedding? But...”

“As I have tried to make clear for I don't know how long,” Veronica's voice, even when she was annoyed, was something to poetize over, “this is today. It is not necessary that girls of this generation marry the man whom her parents choose for her. I like Pierre. Perhaps if you all wouldn't throw him at me so much I might even learn to love him... But I must confess you are not helping your cause any!”

“Love?” Tante's old voice was cynical. “Who mentions love in connection with marriage? It is enough that you make a good match. After marriage, then...”

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“Tante!” Bouton's voice expressed his ire. “I won't have you saying things like that. Veronica is right. We have interfered too much already. Enough. When she is ready she will tell us of her choice.”

“This generation! Bah!” Tante swept from the room, every limb expressing indignation.

Cranston accompanied Veronica as she left the dining room. “Do you think I am being impossible?” she asked.

“Of course not. But remember the old people lived according to a different set of rules. You mustn't be too harsh with them.”

“I know, but they seem to think women belong in a harem, that men have all the rights. I find it dreadfully boring.”

She was looking out the window that faced on the street. She stopped speaking, her mind evidently on something else. Cranston wondered what it was till he followed the direction of her eyes. Across the street, going into number 233, there was a young man. A good-looking, well-set youngster, who carried himself with military precision.

Cranston smiled as he observed the way Veronica looked at the young man. Perhaps Pierre Charlus would have a struggle on his hands to keep her for his own.

Across the street, Tommy Rondo, still frightened, but with annoyance becoming stronger all the while, was reporting for work. He was going to find out what connection there was between the work he had been hired to do and that ghastly affair out in the cemetery the night before. Behind him, almost out of sight, the lurking figure of Big Lip dogged his every step.

At the top step he stopped and looked across the street at the house where he had seen that girl the afternoon before. He caught a flicker of motion at a window and his heart jumped. He wondered if it could be she. A moment later he was cursing himself for being a fool. In all probability it was an upstairs maid cleaning the windows. He was behaving like an adolescent schoolboy and he knew it.

Inside the house he was put to work on the Hieronymous Bosch copy by Pierre Charlus. He worked on it to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

Cranston patted Veronica on the shoulder and said, “Come, come, he's gone now.”

She blushed and said, “What are your plans for today? May I help in any way?”

Cranston thought a moment before he said slowly, “I wonder, perhaps you can at that.”

“I'd be glad to guide you around and show you some of the points of historical interest.”

“Another time, for today, I have a desire to see the private museum of Jean Roueau. Do you think that would be possible?”

From behind them old Bouton's voice said, “Of course, it is that he is one of my oldest and dearest friends. I will call and check on the matter.”

It was arranged without further delay. The museum, one of the show places of New Orleans, was not open to the general public. Roueau, a scion of an old family, was immensely wealthy. The museum was his hobby

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and he rode it to the exclusion of all other matters. His curator, who was so old that he was almost a museum piece himself, greeted them at the door.

“Entrez, come.”

They followed the old man's feeble steps down a hall whose walls were hung with the old masters. They were in such profusion that they almost lost their beauty. It was too much of a good thing. This seemed to be true of the whole museum, Cranston thought a bit later. There was an acquisitive quality about the place, as though the beautiful things had been collected purely for personal aggrandizement rather than for their intrinsic beauty.

The paintings were arranged in no known order, just big painting next to big painting, small next to small. Similarly with the sculpture. Different periods literally rubbed elbows with no thought of anything but matching them in size.

Cranston's face must have shown what he was thinking, for Veronica said, too low for the aged ears of the curator, “Horrible, isn't it? He hasn't a bit of taste. It seems terrible that he should have the wherewithal to collect when he is so lacking in any shred of esthetic.”

Museum feet, that was all he was going to get here, thought Cranston wryly. It had been a shot in the dark, not wasted, but not too fruitful either. It was a reconnaissance really, for Cranston knew that night would bring a darker figure to go through the museum, alone and unattended... In the meanwhile, Cranston filed the floor plan away in his photographic memory and nodded pleasantly as the curator gave them a dissertation on the worth of the Goya.

“Enough for today?” asked Veronica.

He nodded.

The curator waved good-bye to them as they left.

Cranston looked back at the high iron railing that surrounded the museum. That would present no difficulties. Veronica was saying, “That museum seems to me to show all the faults of collecting for the sake of collecting instead of for the...”

“I know what you mean. If one of those rooms had been laid out properly, if just one painting had been shown off to proper advantage, but as it was...”

Cranston made a face which Veronica aped. He laughed.

“Now where?” she asked.

“Hungry yet?”

“I'll say. Walking through that museum is enough to raise an appetite. Where would you like to go?”

“I know New Orleans is famous for its cooking, but right at this moment some oysters would suit me fine.”

“Oysters...” She smiled. “Come, this is no time for fancy restaurants.”

And it was to no fancy restaurant that she guided him. Instead, it was a little rundown-looking barroom down

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near the bay.

Workmen sat at the bar, and it was a curious bar. Part of it was devoted to drinking and the other to eating. The top of the eating bar was covered with slate. Behind it stood a man in a white apron with an oyster knife in his hand.

He looked up as they seated themselves. “How many?”

“Just start opening them, Jacques,” said Veronica, “we’ll tell you when to stop.”

He opened the shells with a flick of the wrist. He didn't seem to keep count of how many they ate, although it was a great many. Instead he left the shells in a pile in front of them.

“I must say I'm making a pig of myself,” said Cranston, “I don't know when I've eaten this many bivalves. They have a different taste from the ones you get up north.”

“Of course, naturally.” This interruption was from the oyster opener. “Up north, they wash the oysters—of all the silly things! They wash all the briny sea water off them. How can they have any taste?”

It was true the oysters had a salty sea taste unlike any that Cranston had ever eaten. When they were at long last finished, the oyster man counted the shells that were piled mountainously in front of them. It was a primitive checking system, but an efficient one. Cranston paid the surprisingly small check and they left.

“That was wonderful,” he said.

“I am glad you liked them. It will repay you for the boredom of the museum.”

The rest of the afternoon passed quietly by. Veronica showed him all the things which she thought a visitor should see. Some were interesting and some weren't.

As dusk fell they got out of a cab in front of the Bouton house. “This is almost too coincidental,” said Cranston, pointing to the house across the street where the young, good-looking man who had caught her eye that morning was descending the stairs.

He stopped, foot poised in midair, as he saw her. It was almost laughable. He seemed frozen like a child playing the ancient game of “statues.”

She smiled at his confusion and he almost fell off the step.

Cranston, looking at him closely for the first time, said, “Good heavens, I know that boy. Wait a moment.”

He walked across the street and said, “Aren't you Tommy Rondo?”

“Why... yes... why... you're Lamont Cranston!”

They shook hands.

“Long time no see,” said Tommy. “Gee, it must be five years.”

It had been all of that. Cranston had been on a case in Tommy's small town one time. It was there they had met.

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Cranston, still holding Tommy's hand, led him across the street. "You may like to be introduced to a friend of mine."

"Like it? I'd love it!" said Tommy, looking at Veronica. "Gee! What a break!"

Cranston did the honors. "Miss Darrieux, this is a friend of mine, Mr. Rondo."

Tommy felt all thumbs as he shook hands.

"It is nice to meet you," said Veronica, and her voice was caressing.

That made it worse. Tommy took a deep breath and swore at himself. He was behaving like an imbecile, but he couldn't help it.

They were standing that way, Tommy embarrassed and hesitant, Veronica smiling, Cranston feeling like Cupid's assistant, when Pierre Charlus leaving his house joined them. He took in the scene with a jaundiced eye.

"Mr. Rondo, one of my workers," he said parenthetically. "I see you have met Miss Darrieux, my fiancee."

That did it. Tommy felt curiously deflated. He looked from Charlus' strong face to Veronica's lovely one and wondered. She didn't seem too happy about the interruption.

"We can't stand here forever; won't you come in for a drink?" Veronica's voice was light, but there was a warning to Charlus in it, for he started to say something and then thought better of it. He shrugged his shoulders in a truly Gallic gesture and followed them into the house. He didn't like it, but there was nothing to be done about it at the moment.

They all made an attempt to keep the conversation light and general. Tante flirted with Tommy like a woman a quarter her years. She did it well, too. It was one of the accomplishments of women of her generation and they never lost it, no matter how old they got.

She was tating as she spoke. The rest of them were relaxed, at least on the surface, and were sipping their vermouth cassis.

"I insist," said Bouton, "that the only civilized aperitif is this." He held his drink aloft.

"Those barbaric 'cocktails'... phew!" He made a face.

It was then, at that precise moment and in the midst of these civilized people, that the jungle opened. It was as if a tiger had suddenly walked across the room.

For Tante, reaching down into her sewing bag for another piece of material, found something foreign there. She held it up and looked at it in wonderment for a split second. Then she screamed and fainted.

The object rolled from her hand as she fell back against the seat.

It was tiny to have aroused so much fear. Three inches, perhaps a little more, in height, it was a tiny wax replica of old M'sieu Bouton.

A slovenly kind of modeling had made it resemble him just enough for recognition. Through the head of the

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small figure there was stuck a glass headed bead. It looked like a sword in miniature. Through the heart was another pin.

It rolled on the floor for a moment before it came to rest. They stared down at it in horror. There was no doubt that all of them but Tommy knew what the dummy represented. He looked at it and then up at the circle of white faces that stared down at the figure.

“What goes on? What kind of tomfoolery is this?”

“There's no fooling here,” said Cranston, and his voice was heavy. This was what he had feared. A connection between the happenings out in the swamp and this family.

“Fooling? A bas, of course it is foolishness.” This was from Bouton whose old voice was brave. But he did not mean what he said. He was frightened. Frightened unto death for he knew what the dummy meant.

Cranston picked up the model carefully and held it up to the light. He was hoping for fingerprints but except for the prints that were obviously those of Tante, the wax was virginal.

“Death,” he said. “Death by witchcraft.”

“Huh?” Tommy couldn't get the score at all.

“It's one of the oldest ideas in black magic,” said Cranston. “Sympathetic magic. What is done to the model will by witchcraft happen to the person whom the dummy represents!”

Mouton looking at those dreadful needles shoved through the head and heart of the dummy, suddenly whitened and slumped forward. His hands were clenched in the fabric of his suit in front of his heart. He fell forward on the floor.

CHAPTER V

THE doctor came and left. It was a heart attack, one of many. It was obvious from the way the doctor acted that to his mind any of these attacks might be the last.

He left directions that Bouton was not on any account to be disturbed. He was not to be excited. He was to stay in bed for a week. The doctor left medication behind him as well as an air of finality. He had done his best but age was the deciding factor.

Cranston knew that time was even more of a factor than he had realized. There was not a minute to be wasted if his old friend were to escape being frightened to death. For, of course, there was nothing in the evils of magic that could kill him but his own fear. In order for this kind of witchcraft to function, in order for the person whose body was made in miniature to sicken and die, the person had to know that he had been modeled. Had to realize that someone desired his death. Then and only then with fear gnawing at his vitals, did the dread powers of evil magic function. It was a primitive kind of psychology, but it worked as Cranston knew only too well.

Tommy had left, a considerably upset young man. He couldn't figure any of it out. He knew that there were dreadful happenings in the wind, but how and why they functioned he did not, could not, know. He knew that Veronica was in the middle of some kind of dangerous plot and he was anxious to help in any possible way. But what could he do?

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When the house had quieted down and all that could be done for the old gentleman had been done, Cranston went to his room. It was Lamont Cranston who entered, but a different being who left the room.

Down the old stairs as quietly as a fluff of cotton landing on a pillow, stepped a bizarre figure of the night. Blacker than the shadows which he was part of, The Shadow made his way.

Out on the street, he paused a moment in the penumbra that came from a street lamp. He looked back at the house; at the place where evil forces had for the first-time shown their hand openly. He looked from the house to Charlus' across the street. There would come a time when The Shadow would have to investigate the secrets of Charlus' house, but this was not it. Tonight he made his way to the museum which he had been to under such different circumstances that morning.

This time no invitation made his way easy. There was no one to open doors for this figure of darkness, but open they did. He made his way through eldritch shadows cast by statuary. The only lights were the faraway shreds and tatters of light that eked their way through from the street lights.

He sensed that one wall to his right was too far in the room. It was a subtle difference and one that took his super keen powers of observation to have noticed, but the room was not as wide as it should have been.

Softly, he made his way to the wall that projected out further than it should have. He tapped it. It was solid, but it reverberated unnaturally. He was sure he was right. Stepping back a bit, he took out his flashlight and allowed its tiny choked beam to play over the wall. The paintings on the wall looked strange in the tiny pencil of light. Harsh reds and yellows glowed in the dark.

Taking a stab in the dark, he touched the rim of a painting that was on the far end of the wall. It seemed to be nailed in place. A tiny smile played over his grim face.

He stood under the picture and with all the strength in his broad shoulders and iron back, he lifted. The picture moved, slid in grooves. As it did so, a panel in the wall slid silently open.

It was like Ali Baba saying, "Open Sesame."

And the results were the same, for showing clearly in the flashlight's beam was a small room. The room was packed helter-skelter, with paintings, statues, tiny objets d'art. Gems, crowns—it was like a pirate's den.

He looked behind him and then stepped into the treasure room. That statue—what right did it have to be here? The last time he had seen it, it had been in a museum in Venice. And that painting?

It was a Van Gogh... and it was as out of place in that setting as the statue. Surely it belonged in Paris.

The riotous colors of Van Gogh's mad palette swirled and moved in the light. It was of Ardennes, the wild color shoveled onto the canvas in that profligate profusion that was Van Gogh's own.

The Shadow did not stay long. Just long enough to be sure that his suspicions had been correct. All the things, the priceless things in that cave of loot, were stolen.

He left as quietly as he had come. It had taken less time than he had figured. It had been luck pure and simple that he had so easily found the hiding place.

Out on the street in the lambent light from a gibbous moon, The Shadow, under the protection of long dark splotches cast by the wall, paused and considered. Surely this was the time to pay a visit to the home of Pierre

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Charlus?

Back on Dauphin Street, The Shadow glanced at the darkened windows in the house. All seemed quiet and still. Then, and it was unexpected, the door opened and a man whose face and figure were but a silhouette because of the light behind him, stepped out. The lights in the hall went out as the door closed.

The Shadow paused. There was something about the back of the man as he walked off down the street that struck a responsive chord in the back of The Shadow's mind.

That cat-like pace. The grace unusual in so big a man. Surely it was the man who had been out in the swamps at that hellish ceremony!

The house would wait!

Through darkened streets walked the man with the easy stride. And following him was a figure that might well have struck fear to any heart. Darker than the night, more quiet than a jungle animal, was The Shadow.

The way was strange to The Shadow but it was one that Tommy Rondo would have recognized. It led up to the cemetery. It led out past the old crypt. The gripping fingers of the swampy mud made so much noise reaching and pulling at the man's feet that the sound covered the noise which The Shadow made. The way was long, but so dark that there was little chance the man would see him even if he looked directly towards him.

Reaching down and pulling at both their clothes were the fronds of the old, old trees. Off in the distance flickering lights appeared and disappeared.

The Shadow was sure that the ghostly lights were the result of marsh gas. But the people who lived near the cemetery, as their forebears had before them, would have had another story to tell. They were sure they knew what the will-o'-the-wisp lights were. They were angry ghosts, the souls of people who had died before their time, trying desperately to get back to the life they had so regretfully relinquished.

New Orleans is old and even older are its superstitions, most of which go back across the ocean to equatorial Africa. Some of the moods and taboos of that other older culture had survived the voyage and the years and went on growing, gaining strength as they aged.

The two men walked on. The Shadow was closer to the man he was trailing now. There was a change of pace. Their objective must be near. The man paused and looked all around. He was thinking that the rumors of haunts and ghosts really made this spot ideal for his purpose.

There, just ahead, was the meeting place. He bent his head and did something which The Shadow could not analyze at the moment. His head ducked down and then came up again. He strode forward towards the spot. Behind him The Shadow matched his pace to the other man's.

The man whom The Shadow had been trailing seated himself on the same tumbled grave stone that had served him as a chair the night before.

He said, and it was seemingly to the night air, "Reports?"

Then and only then did the keen eyes of The Shadow see the four figures that were hidden by the night. They stepped forward and could be seen by moonlight.

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Big Lip, Bratser and the one who was called Le Cochon, nightmare figures all, stood revealed.

“We can waste no time,” said Bratser, “I do not feel easy about leaving our little sheep unattended.”

The man on the tombstone nodded and The Shadow saw that at some time, in the dark, the man had put a papier mache mask over his features.

“Of course,” he said, and the moonlight glinted on the shiny blackness of the paper mask.

Each of them said that their charges were safe in bed and had made no overt moves. Each, that is, up until it was time for Little Rene to report. He did not speak.

Instead his hands flashed in the universal language of the deaf mute. His fingers wove a pattern that the leader evidently understood. For he nodded and then his fingers, only a trifle less nimble than Rene's, move an answering pattern.

“Everything is going smoothly. Almost too smoothly. I get suspicious when there is no trouble at all. I want all of you to be on your toes ready for anything!” As he spoke aloud, his fingers were echoing his voice.

Rene nodded to show he understood.

“Perhaps I am the superstitious fool that I have been called.” His voice was bitter. He had not liked the insinuation. “Have all of you been careful? Have you seen anything amiss? Speak up!”

The others stood still racking their brains. Big Lip pondered the question. His slow brain tried to look back over the preceding days. It was all he could do to recall anything that had happened more than a week in the past. Finally, at long last, he shook his head no. “Non, me, I theenk evert'ing is hunksy dory.”

“You, Bratser?”

“Nope. Everything looks good.”

The leader shook his head. As far as he was concerned these reassurances but added to his fear that things were going too well. He had a desire to knock on wood, but didn't want to in front of the men. He crossed his fingers in the dark and asked, “Le Cochon?”

The shake of the head, the shrug of the shoulders was enough. To Le Cochon this was all nonsense. Why go through all this gaga business?

The leader's fingers flashed as he asked his question of Rene. There was a pause and Rene's answer came clearly and rapidly. At least it was clear to one of the men and to the leader. Rene too was positive that all was well.

Directing the question at Rene he asked again, “I want you all to be trebly sure. Don't forget to tell me of anything, no matter how small, that comes up. Anything to say?”

Rene shrugged, thought and then his fingers raced in what might have been an answer.

Instead, but this The Shadow did not know, his fingers were saying, “Behind you... there is a shadow... it is darker than a shadow and it moves...”

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Totally unexpected, the leader swiveled on his seat and barked, "Won't you join us? We are hospitable. We do not like to have people lurking in the dark."

It was directed right at the patch of darkness that shrouded the darkness that was The Shadow. He could have faded off into the blackness. Instead he stood up and moved forward till the moon, etched into a pattern by the leaves and fronds of foliage, showed him standing before them.

It was a shock, there was no gainsaying that. They had expected perhaps, that one of the men they were guarding had followed them back. They had not suspected the presence of The Shadow.

Tall, enfolded in his black cape, his slouch hat making a mask of darkness for his face, The Shadow stood before them.

The leader recognized him first. He said, "The Shadow!"

Although it had shocked him to the core he recovered fast. In a light voice he said, "This is indeed an honor. Gentlemen, we are the chosen. After all, it is not every crook who has The Shadow at his feet..."

Big Lip moved forward threateningly, but a gesture from the leader stopped him. The moon, playful for a moment, cast a light on his mask that made it look as if it were grinning. He lowered his head and the mask seemed to change expression again.

"Tut tut. We mustn't be hasty. This is The Shadow. He deserves a royal welcome from our brotherhood and he will get it."

It was a tight spot, tighter than The Shadow had been in for a long time. His arms were held high in front of his chest, in instant readiness for that cross draw of his which put the fabled speed of gunmen like Billy the Kid to shame.

But he never had a chance to use that instantaneous draw. Before his hands could flicker, Big Lip grabbed him from the rear. His hands encircled The Shadow's biceps.

It was awful in the real meaning of the word: full of awe. The Shadow had never known such strength. It paralyzed his arms. He could not move. He gritted his teeth to keep a cry of pain from escaping him. Sweat stood out on his forehead as the steel hands gripped tighter into his biceps.

He was as helpless as a child in the grasp of the monstrous man.

Standing there, knowing that any instant might bring death, The Shadow's mind raced at incredible speed. There was no one who could help him, nothing with which to aid him.

The leader spoke. "Hold him that way, Big Lip. I want to think a moment."

The Shadow suddenly threw himself forward the way a wrestler does to break a hold. But it was futile, he didn't even jar the huge man. Big Lip said, "Tcha... don't do that again."

"This gives one furiously to think," said the leader. "How did The Shadow hear of our so humble doings?"

Bratser said, "What does that matter? Maybe from Havana, maybe right here in New Orleans or from that old 'gaga' one that collects the..."

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“Be still.” The leader's voice was sharp. “This is almost too good to be true. To think The Shadow was even considerate enough to walk out here to the cemetery. Right to the proper place.

“Once buried in this muck, it will be as though The Shadow had never been... no one will know, no one will even investigate.”

“It may be too good to be true. After all, he may have told someone where he was going.” This was from Bratser who chewed on his lip as he thought.

“Bah, what matter makes it?” asked Le Cochon. “We keel him, we bury him. That is that. These other things we will face when we come to them!”

“Right as usual, Cochon,” said the leader. “Very well, Big Lip, kill him and bury him here. I will get in to town and arrange for an alibi in the far-fetched eventuality that there should ever be any trouble about this. Come... let us leave Big Lip to his pleasures.”

They walked away and The Shadow was alone with an executioner.

CHAPTER VI

AROUND them were nought but the long dead. Gravestones, emblems of man's mortality. The others had vanished into the mist that came up from the slop of the ground.

Big Lip let go of The Shadow's arms and excruciating pain lanced through them as the blood pounded down to his lower arms. So tightly had he been held that Big Lip's hands had acted like a tourniquet.

The Shadow looked up at the primitive face of his attacker. In the moonlight it seemed to have risen from some long dead cave. It was the face of a Neanderthal man. But the glint in the eyes was modern, for it takes modernity for a man to get pleasure from pain. A sadistic light showed that Big Lip was in seventh heaven. These were the moments for which he lived. To feel living flesh crumple under his ape-like hands. To hear the crunch of breaking bones—that was his delight.

Lazily he reached out for The Shadow's throat. The fingers were curving like an animal's talons. One wrench and death would follow, this The Shadow knew.

Arms hanging limply at his sides, The Shadow suddenly lashed out with his foot. The toe of his shoe sunk into Big Lip's middle. He grunted.

“Ah, le savatte! This is fine. I was afraid you would not put up a fight!”

Big Lip lumbered forward, air whistling in and out of his mouth. His arms were out in front of him in a circle of living flesh that had the power of a machine.

Once in the center of those arms The Shadow knew that it would not be long before his breath left him as surely as though he were in the grasp of an anaconda.

He could only play for time, hoping that the returning circulation would give him back the use of his arms. Nimble, he stepped out of the range of Big Lip's arms.

This annoyed Big Lip. He growled, “Come, let us fight. This is not a dance!”

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Another lightning-like step carried The Shadow around behind him. He shot his foot out to the base of the giant's spine. The blow would have crippled an ordinary man. Big Lip grunted and said, "Hah! Again the feet. I will break each leetle bone in both your feet. That will prevent this from happening again!"

Big Lip, suddenly agile, leaped for The Shadow. If The Shadow had had the use of his arms, he might have been able to avoid it, but without them he was off balance, could not do that which he wanted his body to do. He jumped and almost escaped the reaching hands.

Almost, but not quite, for Big Lip grabbed his feet. He fell. He fell on top of Big Lip, who was tightening his hold on the feet that had fallen to him as prey.

He bent each foot back. It was the ultimate toe hold and it was more painful than anything The Shadow had ever felt. He bit his lip as surging, raging pain wracked him.

If he could have, he would have pounded his fists into the mud, anything to ease that pain.

The fingers tightened. Another minute of this and even if The Shadow escaped death, he would be a hopeless cripple. The tiny bones that make up the architecture of a foot were crumpling, grinding, one on the other.

Big Lip grunted, and it was like the sound of some primeval animal wallowing in slime. It had nought in it of humanity. This, to him, was but the appetizer, but the beginning of his pleasure, for as he crushed the bones in The Shadow's feet, he pictured what he would do to the rest of him...

In town, Tommy, restless and uneasy, lit one cigarette from the stub of the last. He had met her; she was, if anything, even lovelier than he had thought, but she was engaged to a man of her own kind, a man who was cultured, who was established.

But that business about the witchcraft or black magic or whatever kind of devilry it had been: what was that all about?

Finally the room got too small for him. He left, and despite the fact that he expected to find Big Lip trailing him, he set off at a rapid pace in order to try and tire himself out enough to go to sleep.

He had walked for blocks before he suddenly realized that he was alone. Really alone. There were no following footsteps. He looked behind him. Nowhere in sight was his guardian, Big Lip. He wondered what that meant, if anything.

Finally he shrugged. After all, even Big Lip had to sleep some time. He walked on alone. The words of a poem he'd read somewhere went through his mind. How had it gone? Something about "no street but knew his midnight street, no sight by sun he saw." That certainly applied to him, or would if this nightmare continued.

Alone in his house, Pierre Charlus, dressed in a brocaded dressing gown that looked like a medieval costume, sat in front of a fire and looked into the lambent flames.

It was obvious, he thought, that Veronica's fancy had been caught by that young upstart. Well, he knew how to handle her.

But there were other problems. He applied himself to them.

Veronica, in bed, wide-eyed, looked at the ceiling and thought, this has gone on far enough. Pierre is too

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bold, he thinks that he holds all the reins... He must be taught a lesson.

The man who amused himself by wearing a mask when he was dealing with the unsavory characters with whom the nature of his business brought him into contact, smiled a real smile of delight as he pushed a stack of blue chips out onto the green baize of the roulette table. He looked around, there were plenty of people there who would remember him, remember his lucky winning streak. He had an alibi. A perfect one.

And out in the lonely cemetery?

Two figures, covered from head to toe with gluey mud, rolled over and over in the slime. Big Lip, on The Shadow's back, had bent The Shadow's legs up at an acute angle, adding to the pain in his wracked feet, there was now the added torment of the muscles and ligaments in his thigh.

Just ahead of him was the tombstone that the leader had perched on. It was still at an angle. The Shadow stretched his arms which were just recovering from the paralysis, and reached for the stone.

If it were too firmly embedded in the muck, then he was a goner. He wrenched at it. For a moment it did not move. Then, as desperation gave him added strength, he heaved at it with all his mighty power.

The Shadow buried his face in the mud and pulled. There was a squishing sound as the mud let go of the headstone. Big Lip, completely engrossed in what he was doing, did not even look up to see what the sound meant.

So it was that he did not even know when the top of the headstone crashing over, pulled out of place by The Shadow and with its own weight now over balancing it, hit him.

It had fallen slowly at first but had gained momentum as it fell. The indescribable sound of a head meeting concrete, the dull muffled, sick-making thud, sounded as loud as a cannon shot to The Shadow, despite the fact that his face was in the mud and the dead weight of the gigantic man was thrown forward on top of him.

Added to that was the weight of the tombstone. It all conspired to force The Shadow's face still further into the mud. His straining lungs told him that unless he got a breath of air soon, that Big Lip would be the conqueror even though he was unconscious.

The Shadow, straining his neck at an impossible angle, forced his nostrils clear of the mud for a moment. The foul swampy air was like revivifying ozone to his tired lungs. He gasped huge lungfuls down and then allowed the double weight to force his face down again.

Lying there for a moment, he marshaled his thoughts. Perhaps the mud which had been so close to claiming him as a victim might be the means of his release. His clothes were as slick as a greased pig, he thought, that should help.

Eeling his way, he moved his entire body snakewise. There, he had eased a bit to one side. Now it was possible to breathe almost normally. The sheer dead weight was now over his middle body and legs. Relaxing for a moment he gathered his strength again and pulled himself out from under the double weight.

Pulling himself to his feet he stood there looking down at the prostrate length of the man who had come so close to ending the career of The Shadow.

Realizing now the gigantic proportions of the man, he found it remarkable that, tombstone or not, he had been able to escape death. He brushed some of the heavy mud from his cloak. On the ground Big Lip stirred. The

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Shadow had an idea and smiled to himself, putting it into execution.

Leaning down, he heaved and pushed the old stone back up till it was again at the absurd angle that it had been before. He brushed some mud off the stone. There was no sign left to show how The Shadow had escaped from Big Lip's grasp. The Shadow thought that it might be amusing to picture what kind of an alibi Big Lip would cook up. Or would he? Would he admit that a man had been able to get away from him? Or would he pretend that he had been successful and report the death of The Shadow?

That was in the laps of the gods and The Shadow was willing to allow it to remain there. He walked away and left the man who had done his best to kill him, safe but for a huge bruise on the top of his head.

Seconds later, Big Lip stirred again and moved groggily. He shook his head. He was alone. That was his first thought. Then, before he could gather his addled wits, low and menacing, clear and some place near, he heard a laugh. There was nought of humor in that laugh, instead it made the hackles on the back of Big Lip's head move.

It made him afraid; he had never feared anything before. Then, as the sound of The Shadow's laugh vanished, his thoughts coalesced. He looked around him.

His opponent was gone. Vanished as though he had never been there. Big Lip got to his feet and looked around for footprints. He was positive that some one had come to the aid of The Shadow. But in the now clear light of the moon he saw only his prints and those of his antagonist. Over to one side were the muddled prints where his leader and his confreres had stood. But in the tiny arena where he had fought, there were only two sets of footprints.

He had been bested in a fight. It was not possible; how could any human being have escaped from the foothold? How had The Shadow hit him that stunning blow on the head?

He had no solution. Sorely puzzled, he walked towards town. What was he to say? How could he explain that The Shadow got away?

What manner of man could The Shadow be? Involuntarily, he shuddered. He was afraid. Deathly afraid.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER a brief stop at a swampy pool where he rinsed off his cape and brushed and wiped as much of the mud from his clothes as he could. The Shadow made his way back to town.

Once again he stood before the house where Charlus lived. This time he did not hesitate. He made his way up the steps. A tiny tool was in his hand. Anyone passing by could only have seen some dark shadows in the vestibule. There was not enough light to reveal that The Shadow was wielding a pick on the lock. He inserted the tool, lifted and turned simultaneously, and the door opened to him.

Ahead stretched a hall. At the far end of it a segment of light showed under a door. He made his way to the door. No sounds came out. Slowly, inch by inch, he opened the door.

Inside the room, Charlus had evidently come to some kind of a decision. He threw off his dressing gown and going to a closet that was set in the wall, he put his coat on. A small smile flickered at the corners of his mouth as he dandyishly set a handkerchief in place in his left cuff.

He adjusted his hat carefully at a rakish, devil-may-care angle, and walked toward the door behind which

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The Shadow was in wait. The Shadow, warned in time by his footsteps, backed away a bit.

Charlus tucked the handkerchief in his cuff up a little further as he took that last reassuring look at himself in a hall mirror that most men indulge in. There, he was perfectly accoutred.

The Shadow followed him down the street. He was silent. The trail was not long. It led to another old house. This house was dark, or at least it seemed dark on the outside. Inside, as The Shadow found out after Charlus had gone in, lights were blazing, but soft, heavy draperies hid the illumination.

The Shadow was perched on an iron railing that spanned a balcony outside the second floor window. Peering through a tiny space in the draperies The Shadow was not too surprised to see that the house was a gambling place. Roulette tables, dice tables, chuck-a-luck, all were in action. As always, the dice, chemin-de-fer and roulette tables were getting the biggest play.

Pierre Charlus, tall and erect, stood at one of the roulette tables with a stack of chips in front of him. He played red, odd, and the number twenty-seven. The wheel spun and black, even, and thirty-four came up. Charlus smiled at his bad luck and made the same bet again.

A woman next to him said, "Ah, M. Charlus, you missed it. That man over there, I think his name is Esperanza, what a run! He came as close to breaking the table bank as anyone ever has! He won and won. It was a magnificent sight!"

Charlus looked incuriously over at Esperanza who was now at the chemin-de-fer table. The Shadow followed the direction of Charlus' gaze.

Seen in the myriad lights of the crystal chandeliers, Esperanza was a dark, strong-looking man with a certain animal-like charm. He carried himself...

The Shadow realized that he was looking at the man whom he had last seen in the papier mache mask. The man who had ordered his death.

Esperanza flipped a card out of the chemmy shoe. His eyes were everywhere. He barely glanced of the card he had dealt. His eyes flickered to the roulette table and if The Shadow was right, his eyes were concerned with the bet that Charlus had just repeated.

Charlus lost again, and remade the same bet. This time The Shadow was sure that Esperanza had looked at the bet. Esperanza continued with the bank for a while and then offered it for sale. It was bought eagerly, for Esperanza had won a lot on it. Esperanza left the chemin-de-fer table and made his way to the dice table.

He made side bets, betting the way the smart money always does, that is, betting that the shooter is wrong. He won at the dice table too. He said to a man near him, "This is my night to howl."

The man nodded and said, "You have these nights once in a while. It is wise to play them to the limit for chance is a changeable goddess. Who knows when next your luck will be in?"

Charlus had changed his bets and was now having ordinary luck, he won a few times, lost a few more times, and finally shrugged and left the table.

It was smartly done, The Shadow thought, as he watched Charlus make his way to the dice table. Not one of the people there had noticed that a message had been given and received.

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The men and women at the various tables did not wear that frantic look that Hollywood has decreed all gamblers wear. Instead they looked, if anything, bored as they won and lost. Most of them were in evening clothes which was the tip-off as to the scale of betting. The Shadow imagined it was high.

Esperanza and Charlus were together at the table now. Charlus had the dice. He was saying the things that all dice shooters say as they plead with the dice to behave. His point was eight, and it sounded funny to hear the very precise Charlus saying, "An eighter from Decatur..." Then he turned away from the table in disgust and made his way to a bar where liquor was being dispensed on the house. The Shadow was in luck again he realized as Esperanza followed Charlus a moment later. The bar was right to one side of the window in front of The Shadow.

There was almost no sound in that huge old room but that of the dice clicking, the wheels spinning, the croupiers intoning, "Faites vos jeux, 'dames et 'sieurs..."

The people were too interested in the game to indulge in light chit chat. Because of this comparative silence the two men in front of The Shadow lowered their voices almost to a whisper. But a whisper carries better than a low monotone, and so the eager ears of The Shadow heard Esperanza say in annoyance, "Why did you call me away from the table? I was winning."

"Because," said Charlus, and he was furious despite the fact that his face wore a smile, "I watched the artists at work today! You fool! Did you think you could deceive me? It was obvious from the fear on their faces," he paused then went on. "You will flout my will once too often, Esperanza!"

"Stop, you're scaring me to death. Mon Dieu, do you think I am afraid of such as you!" His look said that he considered Charlus an overdressed pipsqueak.

Some of the color went out of Charlus' face. He took his handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped his mouth with it. His hands were trembling a trifle as he tucked it back. Esperanza misread the shaking of his boss's hand. He thought it was fear. Instead, it was anger, anger so intense that it was taking all of Charlus' control to keep from striking as only he could strike.

Baiting him as though he were teasing an animal in the zoo, Esperanza said, "Pah, you even fear to carry a gun or a knife." To him that was a sign of cowardice, for he lived a dangerous life and enjoyed the insecurity the challenge of keeping a real rough bunch of hoods in line. There was only one way he could do it, and that was by fear.

He was tougher than the tough guys.

"You have chosen," said Charlus in a careful voice, so that he would not give away his feelings, "to let the artists know that there is something big in the wind. I do not like it and I shan't allow it to continue!"

"Tch, tch, look out or people will think you are not fond of me. We couldn't have any such idea get around could we, mon chou?" Esperanza's voice was pitched just right to infuriate Charlus all the more. Charlus took a deep breath and feeling how foolish this was, got control of his rampaging temper.

The Shadow watching this play, realized just because of that control how much more dangerous a character Charlus was than the stupid bully he faced. It was something to remember.

Esperanza shrugged.

"If I have said so once, I have said it a thousand times, I will not have you interfering with your gangster

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tactics! They are not necessary, they are not called for. I could have managed the men with money, just as well as you have with fear. Now they know that something illegal is in the wind!”

“Ah but your way is so slow. My way they know where they stand at once and there is no nonsense.” Esperanza was insolently sure of himself.

“You know very well that there are few men who will turn down the salaries I am ready to pay in return for making illicit copies of art work.”

“Few men... but there is always a chance that one of these few will go to the police. You may be willing to chance that! I am not. I cannot, as you well know! After all, I am wanted in a few places. Wanted pretty badly by the police. You have no record and therefore do not have as much to fear!”

Charlus stared at Esperanza for a moment. “Then you are again going contrary to the wishes of myself and the other?”

For the first time, an expression other than of insolence flickered across Esperanza's swarthy face. He had not liked the reference to “the other”...

“I can see no reason why 'the other' should even know of this...”

“I do,” said Charlus, and it was like the throwing down of a gauntlet.

If The Shadow knew men, and he did, Charlus had just signed what might be his death warrant, for from the expression on Esperanza's face, he had no intention of allowing Charlus to report to the mysterious “other.”

Charlus turned on his heel and, not forgetting to keep up appearances, smiled and waved a good-bye to the man he had been speaking to.

Esperanza flipped an airy good-bye with his hand and set down the glass from which he had been drinking. His face gave away nothing now. His eyes followed Charlus as he made his way gracefully past the throngs at the various tables. When he was almost to the door, Esperanza began to follow him.

Out on the street, The Shadow made his way down from his point of vantage and was invisible in the darkness as Charlus, head bent forward in thought, walked away from the gambling house. Esperanza gave him a block's head start and then followed him. The Shadow followed the two men. Death was in the air...

When thieves fall out, let all beware. The Shadow now had a rough idea of the whole pattern of the racket. There were still some odds and ends to be cleared up, but they would come. Words, dropped here and there, an idle hint, were enough for The Shadow. Somehow, art was being brought into the country, smuggled in from Havana. Art that had been stolen abroad. New Orleans made a perfect dumping place from Cuba, that was obvious.

As The Shadow followed the two men he thought this well might be a scene out of New Orleans' history. It wasn't too long ago that men went out into the night to kill or be killed in duels, protecting their very touchy honor. But this of course could not even be dignified by the name of a duel. It was to be an outright killing unless Charlus roused himself from his brown study and realized that he was being trailed.

To think, for The Shadow, was to act. He kicked a small stone out into the street. It skittered along and in the silence of the night made quite a clatter.

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The sound made Charlus turn around. He turned just in time to see Esperanza duck into the cover of a little hallway. Charlus must have known instantly what was up, for he placed his back to a blank bricked wall and waited, his hands at his sides.

Esperanza, after a moment, saw that he had been seen. Putting on as bold a face as he could, he walked towards Charlus.

“You know that I am unarmed, of course.” Charlus' voice was conversational.

The Shadow paused just within earshot. Now that Charlus had been warned, he was content to be a spectator. He stood, swathed in darkness, unseen by either of the men, and watched.

Esperanza nodded and laughed. “Of course, I was depending on that. You see, I do not have your foolish reluctance to carry firearms.”

The light from a lamp post flickered on the steel blue gun barrel which he drew from his pocket. They were very close together. A bystander might have thought they were talking as friends do.

The Shadow wondered why Charlus stood so casually, so completely without fear, as the gun barrel raised till it was almost pointing at his heart. Then, as Charlus raised his hands as though in prayer, The Shadow knew, for he remembered that little smile that Charlus had had on his face as he tucked the handkerchief in his sleeve. So it was that Esperanza was startled although The Shadow was not.

Esperanza, sure of victory, paused, cat and mouse fashion, with the gun ready to fire and said, “I would not raise my hands any more than that if I were you. After all, you have all of thirty seconds of life left, why jeopardize them?”

Charlus said nothing but stared bleakly at his enemy.

Esperanza said, “You should have known it would not be wise to carry tales. Me, I do not like tale carriers.”

Then, and only then, because there was a reason for it, Charlus spoke. “It will be a little awkward managing without you, Esperanza, but I will...”

It was so unexpected coming from a man who was completely unarmed that Esperanza was thrown a little off balance. Then, at that precise moment, Charlus attacked. His fingers moved, a flash of white streamed out and flickered.

He had flicked his handkerchief directly in Esperanza's eye. It caught him directly in the center of the pupil and he howled in agony.

He bent forward, all thought of the gun gone, as his hands went up to his now blinded eye. Casually, as though doing something which he had rehearsed endlessly in private, Charlus whipped down with the edge of his hand, on the back of Esperanza's neck which was now before him.

It crashed down like a club and Esperanza fell as though pole-axed. He did not move after he fell.

Charlus stood there, the handkerchief dangling from his hand like a flag in a light breeze. Then, staring down at Esperanza's body, he replaced the handkerchief in his sleeve and touched the body in front of him with the tip of his toe.

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There was no response.

Charlus bent over and placed his hand on Esperanza's heart. He smiled when he felt no response. Standing up, he cocked his hat jauntily on one side of his head and walked off.

He was as cool and unaffected as though he had just tied his shoe lace, as he walked away from the body of the man he had just killed. He walked jauntily for perhaps fifty paces and then stopped suddenly.

Resounding through the narrow dark street came the blood curdling, nerve tingling sound of The Shadow's laugh.

Made more frightening by its unexpectedness, the laugh was like a call to arms, a clarion call for the forces of good to attack the powers of evil.

Look as he might, Charlus could see no sign of where the laugh emanated. He gave up and with all assurance gone, scurried down the street like a frightened woman on a dark and lonely avenue.

He had had his warning and he was afraid.

CHAPTER VIII

DESPITE the fact that dawn had been breaking before he went to bed, Cranston was up and in fine form for breakfast.

Tante, Veronica and he were at the table. He asked, "Did M'sieu Bouton have a restless night?"

"Fine. More than fine. He says that he'll be up and around long before that docteur says he will." Tante beamed.

"It is so horrible that it had to happen. That fright might well have killed him. But it will not happen again. I am sure it will not." Veronica's jaw was set when she said this.

"I hope you are right, ma p'tite," Tante sighed, "but me, I have my doubts.

"Although M'sieu is so quiet and respectable now, it was not always so. He had connections out in the bayous in the old days that he has no right to be proud of now. Not that he wouldn't pretend not to know what you were talking about if you mentioned it!"

"Peculiar," said Veronica, "what a code they had in those days. It was perfectly all right for the men to go out to the swamps to indulge their fancy in witchcraft if that was their pleasure, but the women! How different! In the house, under parasols, protecting their skins from the freckling effects of the sun, intent on dress. What a bore!"

"You find that something to cause ennui?" Tante was scandalized. "That is the only way of life for a woman... how else protect one's beauty? One's fragility?"

"I think it was all a plot," said Veronica, "on the men's part in order to keep their women in subjection and prove what great powerful he-men they were. The men of today take it in their stride when they are bested in tennis by the girl they love! They don't go off in a corner and sulk because their male vanity has been wounded!"

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“Ma p'tite, please, I beg of you, do not let your fiance hear you saying things like these! What will he think? He will think I have raised an amazon, not a lady!”

“He knows very well what I am and how I feel about these things. He doesn't like them because he is of the old school. But he knows them! I have told him over and over again that if I do marry him, which I find increasingly doubtful, it will not be on the terms which he expects!”

That was too much for Tante. She drew herself up and swept from the table in high dudgeon.

Alone, Cranston grinned at Veronica who was still a little angry. “You do lay down the law, don't you?”

She smiled but it was a serious one. “I know it must be hard for you to see my point, but sometimes I feel as though I were in swaddling clothes like some new-born babe. Do they really think they can keep from the revolution in manners and in customs that has swept over the world? It is not necessary to read about them, a step out into the street, seeing the way young people all behave, all are in contradiction to that which they would have me believe. I will not be a harem beauty!”

“No, my dear, not with your spirit. I doubt if any man could truly cow you.” Cranston enjoyed seeing her with her color high, and her features animated. She was, if it was possible, even lovelier this way than in her calmer moods.

“It must be quite a struggle, thinking the way you do, for you to get along with Pierre Charlus,” Cranston said.

“Struggle? More like a pitched battle. I sometimes think that even though it may break the old one's heart, I shall have to break the engagement. He can be very difficult when he wants to be, that fiance of mine. It seems to me too,” she said thoughtfully, “that he wants to be difficult more and more often as the date for our wedding comes closer and closer.”

She sighed and then putting away her problems said, “Come, enough of this. Do you love our old town as much as we do?”

“More than I can tell you. It grows on one. I have been here often before, but each time it gets further and further under my skin. Becomes harder and harder to call quits to my visit and go back north!” She smiled and they sat chatting for a while. She had all the graces that had made the women of her area the legend that they were.

Across the street, Tommy was hard at work. He had not been followed to work that morning. As a matter of fact, it had not been till he was near this house that he had seen Big Lip.

Big Lip had his hat on awkwardly, pushed way on the back of his head. It made him look laughable instead of horrifying and Tommy felt much better about the whole thing. After all, Big Lip was just a man.

The three other men with whom Tommy had become more friendly were busily painting. They all looked up when the door opened and Pierre Charlus entered. He stood still framed in the doorway and smiled. “Good morning. I am glad to find you such an ambitious crew.” He lowered his voice and looked at each of them one after the other. Then he said, “About that little annoyance you had the other night. It will not be repeated. Nor will you be under constant surveillance any more.” On that he turned and left them.

One of the artists leaned over and said to Tommy, “Guess we passed the test whatever it was...”

Tommy couldn't help wondering if it were as simple as that. He shrugged. In any event, he still could not get

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around that threat to his mother, so it did not make much difference whether or not Big Lip trailed him or not. He worked on.

About an hour later he got thirsty and rising said, "Any of you guys want some H2O?"

Two of them did and he walked out of the room, down the hall to the wash room. He drank his fill, filled two glasses and turned to leave. As he did so, the door was ajar, he saw a moving light of some kind just outside the door. Puzzled, he paused. He tried to remember what faced the door and remembered that there was a full-length mirror there.

Although he did not know it at the time, the mirror across the hall reflected what was in Charlus' living room which was next to the wash room.

He could see Charlus. He seemed angry, upset about something. At first Tommy thought he was alone expressing some kind of anger all by himself. But finally, Charlus gestured and Tommy realized that he was speaking to someone. Unfortunately, although Tommy could see fairly well, he could not hear a thing.

Whoever Charlus was haranguing was seated in a deep chair whose back was to the mirror. Charlus was not now the suave-looking debonair creature that Tommy was used to seeing. He was upset and he showed it. He was waving his arms around and his clothes were rumpled. Suddenly he stopped and evidently he was shocked, for he drew back a step.

He whipped the handkerchief out of his sleeve and mopped his brow with it. Then still backing water, he stepped away from the chair and its occupant and threw up his arms in what could only be a gesture of resignation. It was as though he had been given an ultimatum and had realized he had no alternative but to accept.

What Tommy found disturbing was the fear that showed on Charlus' face. Tommy wondered if perhaps the chair might not hold Big Lip, perhaps Big Lip was getting out of hand! Tommy could understand why even the cool Charlus might be a little nervous where that man-mountain was concerned.

Charlus raised his eyes and Tommy realized through this that the person in the chair had risen. The high back of the chair still concealed the outlines of the person. Tommy, momentarily nervous for fear that he might be found spying, stepped back a little. He stopped in mid-motion when the person stepped out from behind the chair.

Here was no man-mountain, Tommy thought. The size of the figure in the room made Charlus' evident fear seem peculiar. Here was someone that Tommy could have bent in half with one hand. Slight, not very tall, the back was peculiar Tommy realized.

Still watching, his thoughts in a turmoil, Tommy wondered what the score was. There, the slight figure turned around. Terribly white was the little bit of skin that Tommy could see. A black half-mask of some kind cut across the face making it completely unrecognizable. A slouch hat drawn down covered the forehead.

A double breasted suit coat hung open and as Tommy watched he was barely conscious of the fact that the person whom he thought of as Slim, was buttoning up the bottom coat button on the right side. It was one of those Duke of Windsor roll-to-the bottom button jackets.

Even the broad padded shoulder couldn't hide the horrible thinness of Slim. Some of Charlus' fear communicated itself to Tommy. He shivered. There was something dreadfully wrong about 'Slim'... If he could only put his finger on it...

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Slim turned away from Charlus walked down the hall and was gone. Tommy wished he could get to some window so he could see out and find out what the rest of Slim's face looked like, for of course the mask would have to come off in the broad daylight...

But it was impossible. Tommy couldn't even leave the room until Charlus left or closed his door. He waited what he thought was a discreet length of time and then when there was no sound from Charlus' room, he slammed the door of the wash room open and walked heavily down the hall to the work room.

He figured that with all that noise Charlus would not even pay any attention to him. If he had tried to sneak out, then it would certainly have attracted Charlus' attention.

It worked. No one paid any attention to him. One of the artists said, "Did you have a lot of trouble whipping this up?"

Tommy realized he'd been gone a long time. He grinned and said, "I'm a wash room reader."

Then there was nothing but work. Tommy worked on. It would have been a swell job if only... Suddenly he thought of Lamont Cranston. Of course, what a dope he'd been! Cranston was the perfect person to tell about what had happened. He could trust him to keep still and not endanger Tommy's mother. And maybe, if Cranston were lucky, he could find out about the whole set-up, about who Big Lip was and that man out in the swamp... the one in the mask... To say nothing of—Tommy shivered involuntarily—that too-white-faced, skinny, fearsome Slim. What was the deal there? Why was a guy like Charlus under the control of some punk?

Having made up his mind to see Cranston was like having a load taken off his back. It was something concrete at last. The making of the decision left his mind clear for his work. It was fun doing it under these conditions.

Not long after Veronica left the house across the street, Lamont Cranston, chipper as though he had slept for twenty-four hours and not two, left on an errand of his own. He had a list of addresses in his pocket and the role he was going to play was outlined very cleanly in his mind.

He had made arrangements to meet Veronica for lunch again. She had some business to attend to because of her uncle being ill. Cranston looked at his watch. He had two hours free time. It should suffice.

He, who was always a conservative dresser, had by a few subtle touches made himself seem overdressed. His tie for instance, was not gaudy in design, but he had a huge, bulky knot in it. His color scheme was too precise, socks, shirt, display handkerchief, were much too obviously painfully matched. He was a walking picture of what the well-dressed man would not be found dead in. He looked at his reflection in a store window and smiled. The effect was precisely that which he desired.

His carriage was a trifle unlike his regular one. His hat was tilted up on one side and down on the other, Jimmy Walker style. Some cotton plugs, small and not uncomfortable had made a change in the shape of his face. This was true disguise, not the application of a ton or so of make-up.

Add to his present disguise, his voice, the timbre of it as he walked into an art gallery and said, "Hey, who's the big guy around this joint?"

He would have sounded loud up north. Down here it was almost shocking in comparison with the soft drawling slur of the salesman. "Just a moment, please."

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As the salesman went through a door to one side of the gallery, Cranston took a cigar out of his pocket. Putting it in his mouth with the tip pointed at the ceiling, he lit it and sneered at the pictures on the wall. He had spewed a cloud of smoke around him by the time a little man came out of the doorway followed by the salesman.

The salesman said, "This is Mr. Proudhon..." He waited for Cranston to supply his name, but he waited in vain. Cranston jerked the cigar at Proudhon and said, "Hi... Look, it's like this. I got loads of moo and I don't know from nothing about this here racket of yours, see? I'm not one of your four-flushers. All I know about art is what I like. Get it?" He said it as though it were a discovery of which he was proud.

Proudhon gulped. He had never met anyone quite like this. "Ah... in what way can I be of assistance, sir?"

Cranston said as though anxious to show his bona fides, "Now, I'm not a tinhorn. What I like I get. If it means some of that green stuff under the table, why you'll get it. I make mine that way, so it's okay by me if you do." He leered.

Proudhon scowled. He had an idea that this creature was talking English, but the vocabulary? He thought a while. This... person, obviously was some kind of black marketeer. He was taking up culture the way some people take up stamp collecting. That being the case, Proudhon smiled wryly, why not take care of him?

He beamed with all the friendliness in the world. "Very well, we will see what can be done about the things you like. Will you follow me, please?"

Grudgingly, as though rather hankering to have the art brought to him, Cranston followed. He was pointing to a conversation piece, English, of about the late eighties. It was a horror with all the faults of bad art exaggerated. Whoever had painted it had abused the privilege of being a bad artist.

"That's what I go for." Cranston grinned proudly. "I don't like that there stuff where you can't dig what the artist is trying to do. Me, I like a picture that you can see what's going on."

He wondered if he weren't overdoing the characterization, but after seeing a quickly smothered grimace from Proudhon, he decided he was doing all right.

"What's the tab on that?" He gestured at the horror with the cigar.

Doubling the price instantly, Proudhon said, "A modest sum when you realize what you are getting—one thousand five hundred dollars for a genuine Arnold Pierce. Pierce each year gets more popular with a small and select group of collectors."

"That's for me." Cranston pretended to fall for the snob appeal in Proudhon's spiel.

Proudhon turned away and said, "How about some other forms... some objets d'art?"

"Huh?"

Proudhon pointed to some exquisite little miniatures of the eighteenth century.

"Nope. Too little. When I buy something I want everybody to see it."

"Are you interested in three dimensional representation?"

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“Don't dig you.”

“Don't dig...? Oh, I mean sculpture.”

“Sure, let's take a gander. I always went for cigar store Indians.”

Noticing a door ajar at the end of the room, Cranston filed it away in his mind while he allowed the little man to guide him to some atrocious statues.

“Say, that's a killer!” Cranston waggled his cigar at a statue that was further down the room. It was nearer the door which had caught Cranston's interest.

“That?” Proudhon gulped. This was almost unbelievable. Never, literally never, had he thought anyone would ever show any interest in the statue of “Mississippi Mud.” It had been sculpted by a relative and Proudhon kept it in here so as not to offend the eyes of any customers. To sell that, what a feather in his cap. Maybe his wife would stop nagging about his not helping her relatives enough. Eagerly, he led the way to the statue.

“Observe,” he said in the tone of a class room lecturer, “the beautiful lines of the statue. Can't you just feel the spirit of the Mississippi in the object?”

“Feel the river? It ain't wet. What's with you, bud, ya got rocks in your head?”

That puzzled Proudhon. He waited while Cranston went on, “Nah, I don't feel the river. I like what it looks like. Mud! Ain't many statues I bet, about mud!”

Proudhon breathed a gentle prayer that there wouldn't be another anywhere. “You like it? You will take it?”

“Sure, set it aside. Like I keep tellin' ya, money don't mean that,” he snapped his fingers, “to me!”

A few more steps led even closer to the partly open door. Cranston pretended to squint his eyes when he looked at some of the nicer statues. “What junk you got.”

Proudhon kept up a constant running stream of chatter. He knew that probably never again would his Gallery hold a fool like this one. A fool and his money. Proudhon hoped to be the one to part the fool and the money. He pointed to something that more closely represented an automobile radiator cap than any thing else and said, “Does this appeal to you, sir?”

It did because it was another step towards the door. Cranston was getting real enjoyment out of the farce he was enacting. He could see the greedy thoughts going through the dealer's mind. He pretended interest in the radiator cap.

“Not bad, nice and shiny. I kinda like that. That's the tariff? How much?”

“A mere bagatelle.”

“Foreign money? I don't have that. I'm strictly a U.S.A. boy.” Cranston pretended to be thinking deeply while he came closer to the door. “How many bagatelles make a dollar?”

The little man gasped. Such ignorance. It was, in a word, incredible. However, he said, “Roughly, four thousand dollars.”

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“Mmmmm... if that's rough, how much smooth?”

“Let's say, thirty–eight hundred?”

“Fine. Put it with the other junk. What's this down here?” The game was at an end. But Proudhon grasped his arm. Quickly looking up at a picture on the wall, Cranston said, “What's the tab on that?”

Before the little man could answer, Cranston peeked in through the door. In the center of the room was a real abomination. So bad that it made the other stuff look good.

“Hey! Open the door. There's a statue in there I go for!”

“Please, those things are not for sale.”

“Well, forget about that picture I was gonna buy.” Cranston set his jaw stubbornly.

“What was it that has taken your fancy?”

“The only pretty statue you got. No wonder you don't want to sell it. But look, don't forget, what I like I pay for.”

Proudhon almost but not quite scratched his head in bewilderment. “But what statue was it?”

Cranston elbowed his way by him and walked into the store room. He pointed excitedly to the thing he had seen. It was brutal. Almost life size, it was somewhat like the statue of David by Michelangelo.

The difference was that this statue was a shiny, hideous chromium thing with a huge, ugly clock set in its belly.

Cranston pointed to it. “That's a real beauty. With a hunk of stuff like that, my friends'll eat their hearts out! Come on, cut it out. What do you want for it? I'll pay whatever you want.”

Proudhon looked miserable. You could see that he was dying to sell it, but something was stopping him.

He wiped his forehead in agony of mixed feelings.

“Well?”

“I'm sorry... I can't sell it to you. We have so many better things. This is just a novelty made on the other side. As a matter of fact, I think it was a prop in some satirical movie about America.”

Cranston seemed not to hear a word. “Gee, and it keeps time too!”

“Don't you hear me? It's a modern thing. It is not the product of any master.”

“All the more reason to sell it to me. Come on, five grand?”

“Five grand?” Proudhon remembered from some movie that this meant five thousand dollars. “No, I would not be able to sleep nights if I sold you this. It is not art.”

“Ten grand? That oughta let you sleep. Money's great for that.” Cranston was playing it for all it was worth.

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He knew very well that the gallery owner would not, could not sell the statue. He knew why too. He was amused at the greed that was showing in Proudhon's face.

Before Proudhon could speak he said, "Fifteen gees. That's a lot of mool for something you don't even like."

"Please, I am so sorry..." He was too. He was suffering.

"Last call before you lose a customer. Twenty thousand of the best. All clean too. No chance of a kickback. Tell you what. Give me a receipt for ten grand and keep the other without losing any tax on it. I'll take the loss."

Proudhon was too upset to speak. He just shook his head and scurried away. Cranston followed him. He left the store. Not till he was a block away did he smile. It was a nice break.

He looked at a list of names of galleries. There were five more on his list. But now there was no need to go to them. This gallery was one of the outlets for the ring.

Obviously, the shrewd eyes of the custom's men had been taken in by the glitter and the misdirection of the clock set in the midriff of the chromium statue. But Cranston had been more perceptive. Disguised or not, he saw and recognized the lovely creation of long dead Cellini.

It was clever. There was a shrewd and canny brain behind all this. What brass—to send a stolen statue right through the customs office. Cranston was smiling widely. Luckily this plus the pads in his cheeks distorted his face completely, for Charlus, impeccably dressed, passed him by. Charlus did not even look at him.

Cranston stopped in front of a store window and lit a cigarette. Sure enough, Charlus was going into the art gallery.

He could admire the brand of cleverness that had rigged the statue deal. But the tie-up with the swamp, with the dead Esperanza, with Big Lip and that deaf mute, the wax model, deadly in intent.

This was no matter for humorous laughter... nor was it night... when The Shadow, Master of Men was to gather up the tangled threads of a skein of death and crime...

There was more for Lamont Cranston to do. He walked off down the street with decision manifest in his every movement.

CHAPTER IX

TOMMY put his brush down and got ready to go out and eat lunch. He asked the other men if they felt ready to tie on the feed bag. The others were not yet hungry.

He left Charlus' and meandered aimlessly down the street. Aware that he was minus the following feet of Big Lip but of nothing else, he walked till he was brought back to reality by his stomach. He looked up and down the street and spied the Oyster Bar where Veronica and Cranston had eaten the day before. He made his way to it.

Lamont Cranston too, was hungry. He wondered if eating oysters two days in a row would be overdoing it. He pondered a moment and knowing that he was soon to leave New Orleans he too made his way to the bar.

Tommy had a huge pile of oyster shells in front of him when he saw the welcome figure of Cranston enter,

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spot him and make his way to the empty seat next to Tommy.

They exchanged generalities for a bit, while Cranston made an impressive twin pile of shells.

Cranston was perceptive enough to realize that the boy was trying to make some kind of decision. It was a hard one to make, for Tommy was balancing his trust in Cranston against the menace to his mother. At last he said all in a burst, practically in one breath, "I have to trust in your discretion. There's something going on that I am helpless to combat. Will you help me?"

Looking around the place first, Cranston saw that there was no one within ear shot. The bartender was away at the other end of the bar, passing the time of day with some customers.

"Go ahead."

Eyes unfocussed, Tommy stared at some lettering on the window. It read, not very understandably, "raB retsyO". He paid no attention to it, as a matter of fact, he didn't really see it at all. He got his thoughts in order and then told Cranston everything he could remember, starting on the wharf where he had seen the advertisement and carrying right up to that strange and somehow terrible figure with the too-white face.

It all added up with Cranston's prior knowledge. The business about Big Lip and Esperanza came into clearer focus. Then, and it quite killed all his remaining appetite, he thought of the person whom Tommy had dubbed Slim. A figure of nightmare horror to the boy, it was worse for Cranston. For he thought he knew who that ominous 'other' was. He was almost sorry that he did.

Paying the bill, Cranston watched Tommy. The lad was now looking at the reversed lettering on the window. It set up some kind of thought pattern. He shook his head in annoyance. It was nagging. He could not pull the thought out of the maze of his mind.

He knew that somewhere, sometime, there was a clue... and he was missing it. What could be the connection between 'raB retsyO', Oyster Bar and whatever it was that was tickling at his memory?

He shrugged, giving it up for a while, and followed Cranston out. His mind a little clearer, he was amused at Cranston's clothes. "What goes? Trying to look like the Zoot Suit's delight?"

Cranston smiled and said, "Let's just call these my working clothes." He had, of course, taken the pads out of his mouth at the first opportunity. He carried the clothes now, in such a way that they merely seemed a little strange for him. Only one who knew him as Tommy did would see the incongruity.

Cranston was curious about the Havana to New Orleans set-up. Time spent down town at the docks would not be wasted.

"Phew... look at the time. Charlus may be annoyed. I'll have to run," said Tommy.

Cranston waved good-bye to Tommy and hailing a cab went down to the waterfront. He set his brief-case which he always carried, in his lap and leaning back against the cushions watched the changing streets, the periods of history that they represented, go by. He wondered about Bowie, the man who invented the knife which had become one of the lethal weapons of the Old West. Wondered about the misconceptions that had arisen about him. Bowie had cut his finger while whittling. As a result he had invented a guard near the handle so that he might not have another such accident.

Calm and easy going he had certainly never used his invention on anyone. But legend had turned Bowie into

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the knife fighter of all time.

Idly he wondered what had set him off in this direction and then remembered the cab had passed Lafitte Street. Bowie had done business with that notorious pirate. He had bought slaves from the infamous man and then, with no risk to himself, had turned the black men over to the authorities and claimed fifty per cent of the selling price as his just due for turning in runaways. He had made quite a bit that way.

Bringing himself up to the present suddenly was the fact that the cab had reached the waterfront. All around him were the descendants of the men who had been wrested away from their homes and sold on the block like cattle.

They worked with a calm and precision that was pleasant to watch. Graceful, strong, their bodies gleamed in the sun. Baling hooks glinted in the light. Huge bundles of goods were heaved around as though controlled by a lighter gravity than other people wrestled against.

He descended from the cab and with his pads worked back into his cheeks, he walked across the wharf and looked out as everyone does at the muddiness of the Father of Waters.

He pulled himself away from the scene and began to meander around seemingly aimlessly. In reality he had a fairly clear idea of where he was going.

There had really been no necessity for Tommy to hurry back. Charlus was somewhere in the house moving around nervously. They could hear the pad pad of his feet but that was all. He didn't make an appearance till late in the afternoon. The sun was low in the west; all of the artists were busily engaged in their work.

“You can all take a rest. I would like to speak to you for a moment.” Charlus fussed with an already perfectly set tie for a moment before he said, “It is unfortunate that you have learned more about my business than I had intended. However, that is water over the dam. Therefore, there is no longer any reason for the pretense that I have sustained till now.”

He left the room and returned with a painting which he held with the back towards them, while he continued, “I shall not insult your intelligence. It is quite obvious that those Bosch reproductions you are making will not support this establishment. You can forget about that which you have been doing. It was but a trial to determine the kind of work you could do. Here, however, is your first real job.”

He turned the painting around. The men gawped. Tommy gasped. “But that's the...”

Charlus nodded. “It is indeed. Madonna and Child—Botticelli. I think myself that it is the best he ever did on this subject.”

He turned his back to them and hung the painting on the wall under a strong light so that they could see properly.

“Pardon, Mr. Charlus.” It was one of the men, a rather mousy character Tommy had thought up till this moment. “But I was overseas up to a few months ago and I heard that it was safely stored away... How did it...”

The cynicism of Charlus' smile was a thing to behold. “Ah, yes, the war. As much of a nuisance as it was in its way, still there were benefits. The confusion, the bombings, the lack of real protection, all conspired for me.

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“Ordinarily, during the peaceful years, or should I say, in the period between wars, when the smart men are preparing the munitions for the next killing,” he smiled, “all art is kept under lock and key— inviolate... But during the hubbub of war which I have mentioned, things were made almost too simple for my agents.

“A grenade thrown at an armored car carrying a million dollars worth of art... Of course, the grenade merely stops the car. Then, there is the unpleasantness of killing the driver and the guards. But when the necessary things have been done, the art transferred to my vehicles, then, a couple of handmade bombs, and what is left?”

He sneered at them, at their evident horror. “I ask again what was left? A bomb crater. Of course, my men were careful to time their depredations to the roar of attacking bombers.”

This, thought Tommy, added to all the other horrors of war. He looked at the dapper Charlus and realized the Big Lip was but a bumbler against the villainy of this man.

“But then, it was the war which had allowed us free access to objects that ordinarily are behind steel doors surrounded by a thousand and one safety devices, the war I say, that interfered with me and my plans.”

Tommy saw what had happened. Charlus' agents had piled up a stock pile of treasure, huge, but unwieldy. Transportation... how could they get it over to America?

The cynical voice went on. “You can see my difficulty. How could we transport the loot? We couldn't. There was nothing to do but wait for the cessation of hostilities. It was only a few months ago that we were able to get our first shipment across. The sleepless nights I spent trying to figure out ways and means... But...” He gestured at the Botticelli, “You see that I have been successful.”

The artists to a man had their eyes glued to the loveliness incarnate that was made everlasting on canvas.

“But I can see that the esthete in you all has captured your attention. I leave you to your devoirs.”

He was gone for quite a while before Tommy realized that all that speech of the arch thief and smuggler de luxe had not explained the need for the copies they were making. Tommy remembered something that one of the gang had said. This room full of artists were not the only ones who had been engaged in this work of deception. What had happened to the first crew?

And would the same thing happen to him and the other men?

He began to prepare the under-painting for the picture. It was beginning to get dark. They would not be able to work much longer.

Down on the docks, the disappearance of the sun had left long shadows, strangely shaped ones, cast by the tops of the piles on the wharves, thrown by the superstructures of some of the ships moored there. A watchman's shanty sent out an elongated two dimensional silhouette of itself. The shadows there, if there had been any eye observing them, moved in an unnatural manner.

It was just the tiniest flicker of movement and the shanty's other self was its usual long slender self. That flicker was cast by that creature of the night, the terror of evil doers, The Shadow. The Shadow was about to make Cranston's long afternoon's work pay dividends.

He made his way across the dock silently as was his wont. The old boards underfoot let out not the tiniest warning of the presence that made its way out towards the very end of the wharf.

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He knew that right under the end of the dock there was an old dilapidated rowboat tied fast. He cast a searching glance around before he bent over and vaulted down into the boat. No one saw the figure that moved like a ghost and was in truth as difficult to see as a real ghost at a seance.

Slipping the old watersoaked oars into the oar locks he lowered the ends into the water. There was a warning creak from the oar locks. That would never do.

Removing a handkerchief from his pocket, he tore it in half and then tied the cloth around the oar locks. A bath of heavy oil would have been better, for there still were tiny sounds from the ancient oars and locks. But there was no time for anything else.

The rowboat floated out like a runaway carried by the undulations of the water. Perhaps a thousand yards away, the ship that was The Shadow's destination was but a blob in the light of the lambent moon. The argent light cast by the sun's cousins, made the muddy water look like an enchanted land. Liquid silver, restless as mercury, shimmered before the eyes of the figure of darkness. It was like an allegory out of a medieval play. The blackness that was The Shadow ate up the light of the moon. Any eye on shore would have thought that an untenanted boat was drifting out to sea.

Closer and closer still, the boat made its way. But for an occasional flick of the oars, the water was doing The Shadow's work for him. He was carried closer and closer.

Soon, he was under the bow of the ship. He was directly beneath the overhang of deck that made him invisible to anyone on board.

He made the boat carry him around the ship till a dangling anchor chain made his route easy. He made the boat fast to the chain and feeling his guns to be sure they were loose enough in their holsters, he went hand over hand up the big links of the chain.

It was childishly simple. He made his way up till his head was just out of sight below the deck. He paused to get his bearings. While he looked about him, he heard angry voices raised in wrath.

Making sure that the shadows were dark enough to give him the necessary cover, he poked his head above the deck. He might as well have not been there for all the attention in his direction.

He smiled to himself as he saw, across the deck from him, a man who must once have been of imposing dimensions. But his muscles had degenerated into fat. From his clothes he could have been anyone from the second salad chef to an oiler. He was staring at some men whom The Shadow knew well.

Big Lip, face vacant of all thought was watching the men's faces. Bratser and Le Cochon were grinning at little Rene. The deaf mute's face was harsh with hate.

Le Cochon laughed and said, "Guess I should not have acted as ze interpreter of your opinion of Rene to him." His eyes merry, he continued, "I must say, that even I have become annoyed at your... how do you say?... insolence, Donnigan."

"Shut your lousy mouth or I'll do the same thing to you that I'm going to do to the dummy."

Le Cochon started to move his hands to translate Donnigan's boast, but Rene waved him aside, He had interpreted for himself.

Donnigan's baritone voice was as ugly as the expression on his meaty face, "What'll it be—hooks, or...?"

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Rene kicked the baling hook that was on deck to one side and pulled a clasp knife from his pocket. There was complete silence. The sound of the snap as the spring blade came out was all that could be heard. Le Cochon, grinning more diabolically, pulled a dirty handkerchief from his pocket.

The Shadow thought of the frequency of handkerchiefs in this case; at every turn they popped into view. But there was not time for any thought.

Rene tied the ends of the handkerchief into two knots. He held one knot in his left hand. The six-inch shimmer of steel blade shone in the other hand.

Donnigan pulled his own knife out of his pocket. He grabbed the knot at the other end of the handkerchief. They were ready for the most brutal kind of duel that sadistic man had ever invented.

Le Cochon, Big Lip and Bratser, as well as some other men dressed as seamen, made a circle around the two angry men. The Shadow knew only too well what would be the fate of the man who let go of his end of the cloth. Death, instant and brutal under the flailing feet of the bystanders. That was the rule and the contestants knew it.

The Shadow, seeing the mountainous form of Donnigan and the little one of Rene, circling around like roosters at a cock fight with their spurs in their hands, wondered what would happen if he announced his presence by laughing that mocking, eerie laugh that was his trade mark. But he was well satisfied to have the members of this ring remove each other. It just made The Shadow's job that much easier. His lips curled in a smile that had no humor in it as Donnigan, hand knife fanged, lunged out for Rene's throat.

Tied together by the bond that neither dared to drop, Rene had trouble in evading the lunge. Donnigan drew his hand back for another try. Rene was completely off balance. The knife came down.

CHAPTER X

ON the shore, Tommy, restless again, was parading back and forth in front of Veronica's house, hoping against hope, like a child he realized, that he would get a look at her. If she'd only look out the window. Laughing at his folly, he wondered if he should do a handstand to impress her as he had his first girl when he was ten.

He did not see Veronica nor did she see him. But in one of the upstairs' rooms, Charlus, impatiently waiting for Veronica to get ready to go out with him, saw Tommy down on the street. He realized anew that the young man was responsible for the change in Veronica. He didn't like it very much.

She was abrupt with him. His vanity was so overwhelming that what might well have been annoyance in another more normal man, was being translated into hate very rapidly. Thomas Rondo did not figure very largely in Charlus' future plans. It would be no great loss if... After all there were so many hungry artists in the world.

Charlus, still gazing down at Tommy, hidden from Tommy's view by a heavy drape, came to a decision. Veronica had never behaved that way before. If Tommy, a footloose young artist, were to leave New Orleans it would not be very surprising.

He went to the phone in one corner of the room. Just as he prepared to get his number, he stopped. Big Lip and the others were on the Batavia which had, hidden in her hold, the last installment of loot from Europe.

He put his hand in his pocket and took out an address book. He ran his finger down a list of numbers. Almost

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any pair of plug uglies would do to take Rondo out to Big Lip on the ship.

His call was terse and to the point. He told the man on the other end of the line that it was worth five hundred dollars if a man was taken from the street and carried out to the Batavia.

It was as simple as that.

Six minutes later, Tommy was aroused from his reverie by the sound of a car slowing down at the curb. A rough voice said, "Hey, Mac, you got a light? We're fresh out of matches."

Obligingly, Tommy stepped to the car and put his hand out. He proffered the matches. His hand was grabbed, an arm came out of the rear of the car with a menacing blur. A blackjack crashed down on his head. It was a complete blackout. He had no chance to roll with the blow. It landed behind his ear. He sprawled forward against the car like a drunk. He slipped slowly down. Before he had landed on his knees the back door opened and he was yanked in.

Charlus grinned as he watched the scene. The door opened behind him. Veronica said, "Since you insist on our going tonight, I am ready." Her voice was angry.

He took her arm and enfolding it in his, lead her downstairs to the street. A taxi waited with the meter ticking.

"If it's not too bold and unfeminine of me, where are we going?" Her voice was as stiff as her face.

"It is time we had some fun. It has been too long. Come."

He put her in the cab as though she were so fragile, a jar might crush her. In the cab, he took her hand in his and looked at it. "With all the paintings I have and that I have seen, with all the statues there are in the world, it is strange that no artist has ever managed to make as dainty a pair of hands as yours."

She shrugged impatiently. The driver, taking a peek in his mirror, grinned. "That's a guy in the dog house, if I ever saw one," he thought.

Charlus was a trifle annoyed at the reception he got. Then, too, he got a glimmer of a smile on the cabbie's face. That irked him even more. He snapped, "Driver, the Club Rendezvous, and take it easy!"

Veronica looked out the window of the cab with boredom manifest in every feature and in every move. He asked, "Is there anything wrong, ma chere?"

"Nothing more than usual. Can't you ever learn that there are more things to talk about in the world than my beauty, such as it is? Must you keep on pretending that that is all a woman wants to hear? Can't you talk to me the way you would to a man, to someone whose brain you respect?"

The cabbie thought... "whew... that's a tough order with a tomato that pretty."

That ended that. There were no more words spoken till they were in a tiny smoke-filled night club where the music blared without being jazz, without being anything but blaring.

As a matter of course, Charlus ordered some port for Veronica. When it came to the table the waiter prepared to place the ruby glass in front of her. She motioned it away and said, "You can take that back. I haven't given my order yet."

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“But M'sieu did. I am sure he did.”

“Nevertheless, please take that slop away. I'd like some scotch and soda with a piece of lemon peel in it.”

Charlus could hardly hold his tongue till the waiter had left. “Veronica! A lady does not drink hard liquor!”

“No? Then obviously, I am not a lady.”

Then the waiter was back and since Charlus would not make a scene in front of him, they sat in frozen-faced silence till he had gone again.

Veronica dawdled with her drink deliberately, being as exasperating as she could. Finally, when the ice had started to melt, she lifted the glass to her lips and drained it at one gulp.

That started another lecture about how a lady drinks.

Veronica listened and when Charlus was in the middle of his lecture, she yawned. A very delicate, very lady-like yawn, but a yawn nevertheless.

He stopped in the middle of a word. “Veronica, you are not listening to me.”

“Hmmm? No, I'm afraid not. Are all the clubs you know as boring as this one?”

Without a word he paid the check and lead the way out.

It would not have mattered if all the night clubs in town had been showing the finest talent on Broadway, Veronica would not have cared for them. She had set out to discipline her fiance and she was succeeding.

It was the fifth club they had visited inside of an hour. Charlus drained off his drink at a gulp and glaring at her said, “Surely this farce has gone on long enough. Shall we go home? It is getting late.”

Veronica was having as foul a time as Charlus, but the intimation that it was too late for her to be out, decided her. “Late? Why it's just the shank of the evening. Surely there must be one club where the entertainment is not deadly. Come along, let's look.”

Another cab, another night club. They had begun to run out of the swanky places and as a result Veronica was beginning to enjoy herself more. She hid it from Charlus though and pretended to be even more bored than ever.

Every few minutes Charlus would look at his watch and start to fidget. “Had enough?”

“If this is the best you can do, yes! But I'm sure that if you were out with your male friends you could dig up more excitement than this.”

Charlus was humoring her because he was determined to discipline her later. He wracked his brain and tried to think of someplace she might like. There was one chance. He signaled for the waiter and paid him as he had all the others.

They left and Charlus hoped with all his heart that this would end the evening. His revenge would come. It was that Rondo person that had caused this fiasco of an evening. Of that he was sure.

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Hanging from the chain, his foot projecting through one of the links, The Shadow almost grunted at what he saw. Donnigan's first blow had slid by Rene's neck. The men's hands, crossed in front of them by their hold on the handkerchief, were a little off balance. The force of Donnigan's strike forced Rene back.

Instantly Donnigan pulled his hand back for his next strike. Like all good knife fighters, they held their knives flat against their palms, which were turned up. Their thrusts were straight forward, not coming down from above in a hook the way amateurs fight.

Rene's hand was in front of him and low. He was clever, all off balance and seemingly doomed to defeat, he yanked on the handkerchief. If Donnigan had been in balance, the maneuver would have failed, but he had his weight too far forward.

Using the bigger man's own weight against him, Rene's pull shoved him forward into Donnigan. The knife straight armed out into the big man's solar plexus.

The fight, one of the most vicious that The Shadow had ever seen, was over almost before it began. All told, it had taken about four seconds. Rene looked down at the body of his opponent. He was writhing in agony. Rene gestured with his small hands at the rail. The gesture was perfect pantomime.

No one disagreed. Wordlessly, some of the men picked up Donnigan's body and, as though getting rid of garbage, tossed the still squirming body of the man off the ship.

The Shadow barely had time to pull himself in against the ship and renew his grasp on the chain when the hurtling body fell almost directly down.

It was a matter of split inches. A few more inches closer and The Shadow's hold would have been wrested loose by the force of over two hundred pounds hitting the top of his head. As it was, Donnigan's arms scraped against The Shadow.

The dying man's eyes took in the sight of the masked and black cloaked figure clinging like a limpet to the chain. He had passed and was almost in the water while The Shadow wondered if the man would reveal his presence by a scream.

Just before Donnigan's head went below the water, and it only went under once, The Shadow staring straight down, saw a sort of smile wipe the agony off the man's face. It was a spiteful and revengeful smile. It was also a terrible way to die. With hate incarnate in his face, Donnigan went down. That was all.

On deck, the other men sat around and chatted equably as though what they had just done and witnessed was so banal an affair as to barely warrant a fleeting reference.

This was the reason why The Shadow had made his dangerous pilgrimage. Cranston had overheard little whispers and had been conscious of something in the air around the men of the *Batavia*, when on shore. They were not relaxed like any other seamen. They were keyed up. The Shadow had come in answer to that tension.

He hoped that now that the men were relaxed and confident, alone and unobserved, they would not be as careful as they had been on shore.

They weren't. The Shadow, all ears, waited for some relevant piece of data. It came.

One of the seamen asked, "When does your master mind figure on unloading his stuff?"

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It was Le Cochon who answered, "Tomorrow wizout fail, he say."

The seaman opened his mouth to ask something else and then, exasperatingly, a sound which The Shadow had heard and subconsciously analyzed as a motorboat on the off side of the ship, roared closer. The sound drowned out the question.

It was useless. Till the motorboat went on, The Shadow might as well have been little Rene. He shrugged and waited patiently.

But the sound did not diminish, nor did it move. Obviously the motor boat was bringing someone aboard. The muffled sound was that of a small motorboat shoving against the side of the ship.

Then there were new voices coming closer. There were two men talking. They carried a third, unconscious, between them. When they had stopped, they faced Big Lip. One of the men said, "Here's a job for you."

Big Lip grinned and gestured for them to drop the man. He landed in a sprawling heap. His head rolled limply and The Shadow saw that it was Tommy Rondo. So Charlus' ego had not allowed the slightest danger of competition for Veronica.

Big Lip, clenching his huge, sausage-like fingers, stepped back, while one man said, "Hey, hold it; all we were hired for was to dump him here. We don't want no part of this—Hold it till we leave."

Big Lip nodded. He had no objection to prolonging the agony.

His lips curled back over his canines as he gloated, "Ha, I keel him like I keel that Shadow, by Gar!"

The Shadow had analyzed the man's thinking properly. He had not been able to tell the truth. He had not been able to admit his failure. A stupid man like this had upset so many well laid criminal plans.

Le Cochon, lowering his voice, said to Bratser, "Dat Big Lip, he is becomin' impossible since he knocked off this Shadow."

"Umm..." Bratser lowered his voice. He whispered, "Why we not give the beeg blowhard a leetle trouble. Make heem fight this man like Rene did!"

"Good idea that. We do it."

The Shadow had not been able to hear the whispered colloquy, but he saw the end result, for as the motor boat sped away with the kidnapers, Bratser let his spring knife flip open. He handed it to Tommy whose head was groggy with pain.

There was a roar from Big Lip. "Hey, what do you do?"

Rene, seeing what was in the wind, laughed as he threw the knotted handkerchief to Big Lip. Tommy staggered to his feet barely aware that he held the knife open in his hand.

The men tightened around Big Lip and Tommy, just as they had such a short time before. Big Lip evidently was one of those men who find the thought of bare steel distasteful. He looked at his knife, at the handkerchief, and then at Tommy. Tommy was so groggy, still so weak that the monster of a man was able to overcome his dislike for this method of fighting. He laid the knife in his palm which dwarfed it. It looked about the size of a hatpin in his giant hands.

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One of the men near Tommy gave him hurried explanations of the technique of the duel. Tommy said dazedly, "Then, if I drop the knife, the handkerchief, I get killed anyway..."

They all nodded. One of the men who wasn't too fond of the bullying antics of Big Lip, picked up a bucket of water off the deck and poured it on Tommy. The shock of the cold water washed some of the cobwebs from Tommy's mind. He was not even trying to make sense out of what had happened. One thing at a time. His problem right now was to kill or be killed. He tightened his grasp on the knife holding it in imitation of the grip that Big Lip used.

They were now holding the ends of the cloth. Big Lip's gigantic arm length gave him all the edge. They were both as far away from each other as they could get. They circled warily around each, waiting for the other to strike first.

Hanging on the edge of the ship, one hand holding the chain, The Shadow loosed his gun and laid the muzzle over the edge of the deck. He kept his gun circling, following Big Lip. He didn't want to interfere at this point for it might spoil a plan he had in mind. But the first time Big Lip swung, he would have to shoot.

Tommy's mind geared to top speed, tried to analyze what would be the best way to circumvent Big Lip's physical superiority.

And then there was no time for further thought. Big Lip got tired of waiting and looping his hawser-like arm in a stomach ripping gesture he made his first try. Tommy managed to let the knife slide under his arm. It scraped along the skin on his side. Before he could move, Big Lip had stepped back out of jeopardy.

Tommy, with his Commando training, could see but one thing to do. If it failed, he was a dead duck, but if it didn't... He let the knife reverse in his fingers. Holding the tip of the blade between thumb and forefinger, with the handle in the crotch of his thumb, his arm flashed up.

Big Lip, grimly confident now that he had seen that amateur gesture of striking from above down, instead of from under up, grinned. His arm went up in a guard. And that was all.

For instead of striking, Tommy heaved the knife with all his force with the added strength of desperation; he let go of the knife. It whined through the air like a bullet and landed in the side of the giant. Big Lip grunted and paled. Steel, cold steel. He wavered and slid forward slowly like a dinosaur, so stupid that it is not even sure it is hurt.

Almost before Big Lip landed crashingly on the deck, Tommy stepped forward and grabbed the huge man's knife from his relaxing fingers.

He straightened up and holding the knife as he had just before throwing it, he said, "Next?"

Just before the fall of the colossus, The Shadow had taken advantage of what he was sure would be a little period of inactivity. He went hand over hand as fast as he could down the slippery chain. There, right ahead, was a porthole, open! He looked into it and saw that there were some rumpled bed clothes on a bunk just below the porthole. He reached into his pocket.

On deck, the men stepped back a bit. The action had been so fast, the end so unlikely, that they were not prepared. No one had a gun out. Big Lip had seemed such a sure winner.

Holding his one pitiful weapon raised, Tommy backed toward the edge of the deck. Rene was the first to start to function. His hand started up toward the back of the nape of his neck. But that was a stunt that Tommy

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knew about. He changed his aim and moved his hand threateningly at Rene. Rene's hand dropped a few inches.

“Hold it right there. I know you can't hear me but I know you have a knife scabbard down your back!” It was a standard procedure with knife fighters. The scabbard there could be reached in a gesture that left you all set to throw in one motion.

Tommy stepped back off the deck. One foot was over the rail. He knew that the minute he dropped over, a hail of shots would follow him. Then, too, there was the problem of the long swim to shore. Was he up to it?

The men were getting restless. They knew his weapon was only good for one man... They were ready to risk it. It was Bratser that broke the menacing silence. “Do not risk it. Once he goes over we pick him off like a clay duck!”

That was the nub of it. Now, what could he do? He stepped over the rail with his foot preparatory to leaping off into the water. Rene broke first. His hand went up to the back of his collar. The flash of steel sent Tommy off into his leap for life.

How could even The Shadow save Tommy from the fate that waited in the water? Save him and at the same time keep up the pretense that he had been killed by Big Lip?

The last sight Tommy saw just as the knife speeded him into action was the form of Big Lip rolling over and his hand clasping the knife in his side. He pulled it out.

CHAPTER XI

TOMMY stayed under the muddy water till his lungs felt like beaten lumps of meat. His heart hammered with strain. Bullets or not, he had to have a breath of air. He timorously put just the tiniest part of his face above water and sucked in a huge draft of air.

On deck the men waited with smiles of anticipation on their faces. They could all use some target practice as one of them pointed out. A minute passed and then another. Their clay pigeon would be up any second now. One of them had turned a flash light on the water. Bubbles showed where Tommy had gone under. No matter how far he swam under water, he still would not escape.

By this time, Big Lip had groped his way back up on his feet. He, too, made his way to the edge of the deck. He was more anxious than any of the others to put a period to the sentence of death that Charlus had uttered.

Suddenly, right under their feet it seemed, a man yelled at the top of his lungs. It was almost a scream. “FIRE! Fire below-decks!”

Fire at sea is an ever-present menace. But now, all of them knew of the treasure that was hidden down there. It could not be allowed to go up in flames. All of them were entitled to a share in the proceeds. As one man they turned away from the scene and ran.

All but one, Big Lip. To him there was only one thing that had to be done. He had been bested twice, once by The Shadow and now by this. He swore to himself, and with one hand clenched around his wound, steadied his pistol on the rail.

There... that disturbed area in the water. He fired. The bullet, traveling almost parallel with Tommy, followed him for a distance as he hurriedly resubmerged. Then the resistance of the water sent the bullet off at a

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tangent.

So far so good, for Tommy could not know that he was not the target of ten guns, but of one and that in the hand of a wounded man.

The Shadow, having thrown a lit cigarette lighter down onto the bedclothes in the cabin, held tightly to the anchor chain waiting for developments. When he heard the stir above him, for it was he that had sent out the cry of "Fire," he made his way down to the waiting rowboat and with the oars ready prepared to scoop up Tommy. Big Lip's staying on watch left him undecided.

He let the row boat drift a little out from the protecting underhang which had concealed the boat. Then, snapping a shot up in the general direction of Big Lip, he rowed out in pursuit of Tommy.

On deck, Big Lip staggered back from the edge of the deck. That shot? Where had it come from? Was someone taking this opportunity to get rid of him? If it was, he had better get under cover.

With all attention finally off him. The Shadow lost no time in following the path he thought that the submerged man was taking.

Just under the surface of the water, Tommy had again reached the point when air was more essential than life. He was vaguely aware of a patch of darkness above him that seemed to be darker than the surrounding water.

He came up under it and was gasping in breath before he realized that it was a boat. Had they unshipped a boat that fast in order to pursue him?

Before he could decide, a welcome voice said, "Tommy, hurry on. I have no idea when they'll realize that it is as important to get you as to take care of the fire!"

Taking advantage of time that Tommy had been under, The Shadow had doffed his cloak and hat, and it was Lamont Cranston whom Tommy saw as he rubbed the water from his eyes after climbing over the edge of the rowboat.

"Cranston," he gasped and then fell back, spent and exhausted. The danger had been more tiring than he had realized. He thought as he lay back gasping, that he'd never have been able to make the swim to shore, not with the ever-present thought that any minute might bring a bullet crashing into him.

As he gradually revived, he followed the direction of Cranston's gaze. He saw fire bursting from some of the portholes on the ship. A heavy cloud of smoke seemed to hang over the deck. Figures dwarfed by the distance scurried around. A water brigade had been formed and was doing its best to combat the flames.

"Two birds with one stone." This was from Cranston in a brooding voice. And it had been. The first consideration was to frighten the men into bringing the treasure from its hiding place. Saving Tommy had worked in neatly with his plan.

The treasure dragged from its security would now have to be brought ashore somehow. They would not be able to use whatever plan they had had for the morrow. Any impromptu plan could not fail to be less efficient than the well-thought out one they had prepared.

By the time they had reached the shore, Tommy was almost over his harrowing experience. He grinned as he thought of the tight squeezes he had been through during the war. The war had been different. There you somehow readjusted to the conditions. You knew that every breath you drew might be your last. But here,

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home, that habit of facing death and laughing at it, had slipped away. It took a different kind of conditioning than he had been used to.

With the rowboat back in place, there was no sign that it had ever left its mooring. The two men scrambled up onto the creaking boards. Cranston, pointed out the way back—bright lights and the city.

He gave no explanation as he waved good-bye and walked off into the darkness with his briefcase under his arm. Tommy saw him go, wondered what was in the wind and, following directions, made his way home.

His last sight of the man who had saved his life showed Cranston vanishing into some shadows. They swallowed him and he was gone.

In those shadows, Cranston changed back into that person whose very name meant retribution to evildoers. It was the black swathed figure of The Shadow that paced a silent way along the waterfront. The darkness here was a kindly blanket that made him invisible.

The turmoil which the hooded figure had set in motion should also bring the whole rotten case bubbling to a climax. He had a long wait till finally, when all signs of activity on the ship had come to a halt, he saw some boats being lowered from the side of the ship. They looked like small children of a huge mother, as almost smothered in darkness they made their slow way towards shore.

Once The Shadow could deduce their probable path, he moved along the water front till he was hidden in readiness. The oared boats came alongside the wharf in which he was hidden. The men kept their voices down to a minimum. One of them made his way up to the wharf and walking rapidly headed in towards the shore. It was Le Cochon and he seemed worried, as well he might. The Shadow was positive that the decision involved here was too important for an underling to make. Le Cochon must be going to get further directions from his superiors...

Under the wharf, as time went on, the men got a little restless, and stirring sounds crept up to the waiting ears. More time dragged by and at last, Le Cochon returned accompanied by Charlus. The dandy was in a fury. He made no secret of his feelings. Long before they passed where the figure of darkness crouched in concealment, The Shadow could hear him saying, "I don't care what the circumstances are, I have told you, that you must never come to my house! There must be no slightest breath of scandal ever! Do you hear?"

"But what were we to do? We couldn't tell whether the fire boats would spot the fire. Suppose they had come on board and found... I had to get to you!... do you think I like this business?"

There was a whine in Le Cochon's voice, but it was a whine of desperation. This whole affair was too big for him. Give him a knife, a dark alley and he could manage all right, but there was nothing in him of the leader.

It was the same setup which The Shadow had seen repeated a hundred times over. No matter how intelligent the warped brain of a crook was, it was impossible for him not to surround himself by men of inferior calibre. Wolfish as their breed always is, the leader could not stand competition. This was the result!

Still mumbling and snarling, Charlus, a handkerchief drawn around his face, followed Le Cochon down under the wharf. All the sounds from under the wooden structure stopped as Charlus made his appearance. The Shadow could barely hear Charlus' voice as he gave instructions as to where to transport the treasure that loaded down the three rowboats.

Long before Charlus or any of his criminal cohorts had come up on the creaking boards, the figure of night was gone. He had all the information for which he had wished. There was nothing to be gained by watching

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the ensuing operations.

Lamont Cranston, weary and stretching his arms, picked up his brief case when he had finished yawning and stepped down the street towards the house that in some way was the focal point for the operations of as shrewd a gang of cutthroats as Cranston had ever seen.

Veronica came to the door. She was still dressed as she had been for her evening with Charlus. At a night club the evening had come to an end, to her relief. A waiter at the table had placed Charlus' and her drinks in a curious pattern, the muddlers, the glass swizzle sticks had made an 'X.' She had been amused by it, till Charlus, suddenly uncomfortable, put his hand to his forehead and complained of a headache. He had driven her home and she had watched from the steps as he made his way across the street and into his house. If she had waited a bit longer she might have seen the figure of Le Cochon go up those steps.

In the living room with the lights low, Cranston and Veronica spoke for a while of uneventful, unimportant things, the lovely old city that was her home, the old-fashioned way of life that somehow lingered on. All the while Veronica seemed to relax her taut nerves by running her hands over an ancient Chinese piece of jade. It was that curious bit of Oriental subtlety that made that art attractive to one more sense than does Western art. It was a fingering piece, so called because there is an esthetic response to the cool, almost soapy feel of jade.

Cranston, whose jangled nerves were in need of a bit of relaxation, was grateful for what he knew was but an oasis in the violence that surrounded him. Veronica said that her uncle was spending a quiet night. He seemed in good spirits and swore that the following day would see him up and around.

"Sometimes I think that living here, in a sort of cotton wool batting, is unfair. In today's restless and fateful events it seems wrong to cut oneself off from the tide of humanity," Veronica said.

"In only one way do I think that is true. In the far-fetched event that you should some day have to throw yourself in the outside world, I fear that you may be unequipped for life." Cranston spoke lazily, only half his mind on what he was saying.

A wracking feeble cry made more horrid by the very feebleness, came down the old stairwell to them. It immobilized Veronica. Not so Cranston. Before the brief cry had stopped for all time, Cranston was halfway up the stairs. He knew intuitively that the cry had come from old M'sieu Bouton.

He raced through the old man's door and into the bedroom. The gloomy old drapes, the antique furniture, all made the scene more terrible. Violence had no place in this room which had the quiet of a cloister. Bouton's body, coiled in an agony of fear, was half off the old bed. The canopy over the bed cut off the sight of his whole body. It was somehow like a perverted Punch and Judy show, for at first all that could be seen in the semi-dark was the old man's agonized face, and then as Cranston's eyes re-adjusted to the light, he could see Tante's head slumped over on her shoulder. She was a pathetic heap on the floor facing the head, the dead head of the remains of M'sieu Bouton.

Veronica, coming in, flicked on the ceiling light. That made it even worse. The harsh light glared down like an indecent spotlight. It was so harsh that Tante's arms moved as returning consciousness came to her painfully, and slowly.

With the light Cranston saw clenched so tightly in the old man's hand that the pins were sticking in his flesh, another of those diabolical deadly dolls. The wax messenger, the murderous midget that had caused this death as surely as would have a bullet in his old heart.

There was a muffled cry and a thud behind him. Veronica had seen and realized the significance of the doll

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with the pins shoved at random through the wax that symbolized flesh. The symbolism was now complete, the doll was dead as was its bigger prototype.

Here in a sense, Cranston thought, was the perfect crime. No bullet, no dagger, no poison but that of an evil, fetid brain had done this. How prove that murder has been done by fright? For that was what it was. Death by fear.

Alone in that he was the only conscious person there, Cranston's mouth was as grim and fearful as the terror laden laugh that, low and menacing, now rolled through the room.

Waiting but a second, making sure that Veronica and her Tante were nearly over their faints, he made his way from the room. His footsteps were as heavy and menacing as those of some medieval executioner stepping towards the block with an axe in his hands.

Down the stairs and out into the night again went the black figure that meant execution for evil-doers as surely as had that ancient axe.

CHAPTER XII

TOMMY was asleep and not getting much good out of it. Woven through a nightmare pattern that frightened him more because of its vagueness than by any specific thing, he rolled and turned. His covers had long since landed on the floor.

He was in a labyrinth. It had no end. He was riding on what he subconsciously realized was a thing of humor. He was astride a velocipede and peddling frantically in order to stay in one place. The rocky floor of his labyrinth speeded by so fast that it was all he could do to stay still. He knew that it was impossible to go ahead, but he also knew, as you do in nightmares, that if he went backwards, all was lost.

Ahead a blaring neon sign flickered and glowed like a luminous worm. The incredibly queasy sign spelled out... raB retsyO. It was a part of the pattern. The dream seemed to have been going on forever, but always, and no matter how the background shifted, those letters, those writhing letters stayed in the foreground of his mind.

With a start of fear he realized that he was being pulled backwards. He did not dare look behind for he knew, knew without any clue, that clutching at him with iron fingers was that waking nightmare figure, that creature of obscene significance, that too thin, malformed figure of Slim, tearing at him, dragging him back towards something that was too terrible.

He repeated over and over again, his lips moving but with no sound emanating from them, the word that had assumed a kind of magic to him. It was like an amulet to guard him from harm... rab retsyo... rab retsyo... over and over.

He woke sweating and with a heart full of gratitude for his awakening, when a car backfired somewhere in the night. He lay there, his hands clenched in the fabric of his pillow. As his waking mind took over, most of the dream vanished as is the habit of nightmares.

All that remained in his conscious mind was a confused memory of Slim and a muddle of letters that seemed to make no sense. He lay there thinking and he gradually dredged the letters up... rab retsyo. What kind of double talk was that? He grinned at his foolish fears as he lit a cigarette.

The grin vanished with the first puff of smoke. It had cleared the cobwebs from his mind and he remembered

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those letters. Oyster Bar spelled backwards? What significance did that have? Was there, could there be any connection with those banal commonplace words and the figure, that too-thin figure of Slim?

Suddenly the subconscious memory clicked and he knew what had been so dreadfully wrong in that scene he had observed in Charlus' room.

He sat upright. This was something Cranston had to know!

Hurriedly dressing, he left his house. It was not till he stood in the center of the dark and deserted street, looking up at Veronica's house that he realized the hour. It was impossible. He could not go dashing into the house of an invalid at this hour in the morning. Even if he had known of the death of Bouton, it is probable that he would have even more decisively turned away and gone for a walk.

In his brain was the one tiny clue that might have cleaned up the whole case for Cranston... Alone, feeling more uncomfortable than he had in his nightmare, he walked along trying to throw off the feelings that enmeshed him...

The one annoying thing, thought The Shadow, about cliches, truisms, and the like, was that they were true. Woven through this whole case had been a proverb. It was the beginning and end of all the motivations... 'you can't eat your cake and have it too...'

And because the people involved had tried to flout that maxim, their almost fool-proof, detection-proof racket was about to come crashing down around their ears.

He was out at the scene of that earlier coven of evil. The place where witchcraft still ruled with an iron and clawed hand. The Shadow had known that willy-nilly there would have to be a conference that night. Events were moving too fast for the criminals. Puzzling things were happening. They would have to get together and find the rationale.

It had not been a tedious wait. Minutes after The Shadow had hidden himself in the shadows that hugged the base of a clump of trees, the first of the celebrants of the worship of evil appeared. It was the small figure of Rene and his eyes were shifty in the uncertain light.

Soon there was a circle, masked faces facing each other. This time there were no theatrical trappings. As The Shadow had realized the first time, the real evil of this group of worshippers of the devil was that it was all a fake.

Certainly there were members of the group that had partaken of the holy rites, believing in them. But in reality, the whole thing was but a cover up, an ideal place for the members of the gang to meet in safety. Protected by the rites they pretended to believe in, they could come, faces masked and go through the pretense. Then, with the ceremonies out of the way and the sheep gone home to clutch their talismanic objects close, hoping that the charm would kill their neighbors' chickens... or that an erring loved one would return to the fold because of the jumbee they had gone through, the real business of the meetings would be attended to. The circumstances were perfect for deciding about enlisting new members... for out there, with ancient fears made manifest, even the strongest nerved crook would be hesitant about getting out of line.

Yes, the real terror of the coven was not in the coven but in the use to which the devil worship was put.

Raking the assemblage with his eyes, The Shadow saw new members on whose path he had not yet impinged. There were... fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, all told. Surely this must be the whole crew... all present and accounted for but for the skinny figure that Tommy Rondo had dubbed Slim in his description of the

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“other.”

Curious that, thought The Shadow. Unless the “other” were so careful as to avoid even a meeting of this kind. Charlus then was the only leader of whom the others knew. That other sinister secret was the most carefully kept of all.

Big Lip, wound evidently bandaged, sat on the ground with his big hand pressed to his side. This had been important enough to drag him out. Any other man would have been in a hospital. But the animal vitality of the throwback rose superior to the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...” A grim smile flickered over the harsh features of the eavesdropper who held the fate of the assemblage in his hands. Those hands that none but Big Lip had any idea were still in existence.

Charlus, face covered by one of the idiotic seeming but very sensible in reality, masks, was holding hands up for silence. He spoke. “As all of you must know, my plan from the beginning has been to keep all of you separate. At least half of you have never even met before. I wish that I could have abided by the plan for the sake of mutual security.”

The Shadow realized with a start that a little precise figure with a gigantic horned mask covering his features could only be that of Proudhon, the so proper art dealer whom Cranston, in his disguise of a black marketeer, had shocked. He certainly must be unhappy about being dragged away from the security of his home.

Charlus continued, “As you realize, only a very stern necessity would cause me to have taken this drastic step. Some one, somehow, has become privy to some of our secrets. This meeting has been called so that we can analyze certain things and try to reach a decision about whether it is the police or some rival who has become a thorn in our side.

“I want each of you,” Charlus' gaze by chance fell on Big Lip, who stirred uneasily, “to try and think of anything that may give us a clue as to what is going on. We are so near the end, so near to the pot of gold at the end of our particular rainbow that we must allow nothing to interfere.

“Once we have disposed of the loot that came in tonight in such an unplanned manner, we are in the clear. The money, all of it, will be divided amongst you as we have already said it will.

“We will be safe and you can all spend your wealth in the manner that appeals to you. We must not go down to defeat after these years of uninterrupted success.”

Even as Charlus murmured the lying words about how safe they would be, he knew that there could never really be any security as long as the “other” continued to jeopardize them with the insanity of the contents of the secret warehouse.

He went on, “Now, take your time, go through your memories and if any of you have made any mistakes, kept quiet for fear of punishment about any untoward event, there is a general amnesty declared. Never again will there be any reference to the mistake, if mistake you have made. Speak with assurance that there will not be any punishment.”

There was a long silence. The little art dealer, for at the first words he spoke The Shadow was sure of the man's identity, said, “Ummm... I don't think this was a mistake, an accident perhaps, but not a mistake, but a man, a crude, rude person, came into my gallery. By chance he caught a glimpse of the camouflaged bronze of the statue.”

If Charlus was annoyed, he did not show it in his voice. “Had you taken the false clock and the chromium off

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the figure?"

Proudhon shook his head in the negative. "No, the disguise was as perfect as it was when it came through right under the noses of the customs' agent." He giggled a little at the thought. "That is why I am positive that this oaf, who was completely lacking in any sort of aesthetic appreciation, would not have known what it is even if the disguise had not been there."

"I doubt if that can have caused any suspicion," Charlus said in faulty judgment.

"I hardly thought so either, but in the circumstances I thought you should know of it." With a sigh of relief the little man stepped back out of the limelight of eyes which had been focused on him.

Another silence followed. The Shadow wondered if Big Lip would be able to resist the spirit of confession that was in the air. There, he was speaking, stumblingly, hesitantly, as though expecting dire consequences.

"It's me, beeg fool that I am... I... lied... I did not keel The Shadow... He got away."

That stunned them, most of them had not even been aware of the intervention of that dire figure. Now, they found out at one time that The Shadow was after them and that Big Lip had failed in his deadly assignment.

Charlus hissed, "The Shadow! That explains all. The fire in the ship, the interference of which I have become more and more conscious. This meeting is at an end. We have found out that which I had to know. Knowing, I shall take measures to remove this menace to the safe ending of our plan. Go back to your usual places and continue as though nothing out of the way has happened."

He said in a tone of finality, "The Shadow will be killed!"

It was too perfect a time, The Shadow could not resist the impulse. He laughed and it seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere, the trees, with their dank creepers, seemed to whisper it over and over again, all around them, the air was suddenly charged with the electric quality that The Shadow's mere presence seemed to generate.

All of them turned their masks this way and that, trying to figure the source of the mocking sounds. All of them, that is, but little Rene. He was puzzled. He had no idea of what had happened to so change the tenor of the meeting. Not till Le Cochon relayed the message by fast-moving fingers, did Rene, too, look around him. He had been right when he had sensed something amiss. Unconsciously, his hand went to his clasp knife. He felt it with loving super-sensitive fingers. In a way it was the same kind of gesture that Veronica had made when, she felt the fingering piece. But what a world of difference in the accruing sensation. To her it had been a delicate, an esthetic pleasure. To Rene's fingers it was the feel of death... How he would love to sink the knife in the back of The Shadow... what a figure he would cut among his kind if it were known that he, little Rene, had killed the seemingly invulnerable figure of the night. His lips curled up in pleasure at the thought.

His fearlessness in regard to The Shadow might well have been because he had not heard, could not hear, that spine-shattering, fear-creating sound that had emanated from the dark and now silent figure who was perfectly invisible in the night. For much braver men than little Rene had become craven at that sound. Take Charlus, he could barely admit it to himself, but a wave of fear had put a clammy hand around his heart. He shook himself the way a cat does and stood erect, trying to escape from the sensation, but it was to no avail. He shrugged. He would have to conquer it. Perhaps a little time might give him a chance to get his balance again.

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The men scattered in the night. They were not feeling very communicative. Each one felt that he had been selected by The Shadow as a target, that it was his path that The Shadow was following.

In a matter of seconds they had all gone but Rene. Rene and one other person. Rene sat and thought. He ran his finger back and forth along the length of his blade. Deaf he might be, but in compensation for that he could feel the tiniest vibration through the soles of his feet. Other, better adjusted deaf mutes, dance gracefully although they can never hear the beauty of that to which they dance. The floor gives them the beat.

Rene had slipped his shoes off and was waiting. If The Shadow had not left when the others had, if his sounds had not been muffled by the others' feet, then Rene could find him more easily than could the so-called normal men who had left in the shadow of fear.

The Shadow had seen Rene take his shoes off and for a split second had wondered what the act connoted. Then the realization came. Rene was waiting for him to move.

He wondered just how acute this sixth sense of the little man was. He tested it. Picking up a stone, he threw it into the darkness behind Rene.

A fraction of time after the stone landed, Rene had twisted and in the same motion thrown the knife. If The Shadow had been there, he would have been dead.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOW had no desire to kill the little man although he deserved it five times over. Too, The Shadow was sure that before dawn broke Charlus would have to make a report to the "other," to Slim! Therefore, he stooped over again as Rene dove into the bushes where his knife had landed quivering in the marsh.

Since Rene could interpret sounds almost as though by radar, there was but one thing to do, jam up his receiving apparatus. As soon as Rene was again on the alert, The Shadow, stepping forward lightly, proceeded to throw stones from both hands, one after the other. Rene stood in indecision. Each of the sounds seemed to come from a different direction. It was an impasse and he shrugged with resignation.

There was nothing he could do. In the interim, The Shadow had put enough distance between him and the deaf mute so that there was no longer any chance of deadly interference from him.

Back in the city, The Shadow still swathed in darkness, made his way into the street where Charlus' home faced that of Veronica—a house of death that was going to be avenged.

He made his silent way up the stairs and for the last time used his pick. The door slid open and darkness was revealed. At the end of the hall a sliver of light directed him. He stood at the door with his ear to it. For a second he wished for a glass, a drinking glass, and then remembering Tommy's description of the time he had seen that weird "other" he walked to the wash room. A glass was there on a stand. Taking it he again went back to the thick door. He used the most primitive hearing device in the world.

Unable to hear through the thick oak paneling with his unaided ear, he now placed the mouth of the glass against the door and pressed his ear deep into the curve of the bottom. The device, simple as it was, enabled him to hear the veriest whisper of sound. The voices were unrecognizable because of the door and the distance, but clearly, eerily, he could hear, "This is preposterous. No, never! You know me better than to think I will either forgive or forget!"

The answer came, "But it is the only path to follow! Everything has been handled so carefully that nothing,

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not even this insane passion of yours is going to stand in the way of complete success and security.” A high pitched, strange laugh was the only answer.

Dully, as though from a great distance, The Shadow heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Just as the door began to open he stepped back till he was hidden in the darkness under the staircase on one side of the hall.

The other figure, which had dogged the nightmare of Tommy, which had wakened him in a sweat of fear, stepped out in the hallway. Instantly, Charlus slammed the door behind Slim.

So it was that The Shadow had but the slightest, quickest sight of the oddly misformed figure. The door was closed so fast, the light was behind Slim, the dark was in front so that there was just a silhouette for The Shadow's anxious eye to see.

But in the tiny bit of time and with but the silhouette that was subtly wrong as his only clue, The Shadow knew what it had taken Tommy's nightmare to reveal. The Shadow knew more than Tommy, for all Tommy had was a clue which he could not translate. To The Shadow, recognition was instantaneous.

By this time the front door had slammed behind Slim.

Shortly after this, Charlus opened his door timidly and peeked out. He wanted to be sure that the door had slammed behind Slim, that there was no one lurking in the hallway. Stare as he could, he did not see the form of The Shadow, which, perhaps, he might have found even more disturbing than that of Slim...

Then, as the old house was quiet, Charlus with heavy step made his way upstairs, and to bed although he was not to sleep.

The Shadow waited a discreet length of time and then entered the room which the others had quitted. Flashlight in hand, taped lens hiding all but the smallest scalpel of light, he looked for that which he knew must be here. It was a long and arduous search, but just as the dark of night was giving way to the discouraging light of false dawn, he found the records for which he had been looking.

It was an ingenious hiding place and one that had come close to fooling him. For the real hiding place was in the most obvious one. Inside the big wall safe, in back and beautifully hidden, was another much smaller safe. This was the container. The bigger safe was a blind.

The records cleared up something which he had not till this point had the slightest evidence of.

The biggest problem to The Shadow had been the painting of the fakes. What was that for? Why make exquisite copies of the real thing when the real thing was stolen and for sale to the highest bidder?

Obviously, the stolen originals had to be sold under unusual conditions. They demanded a buyer with a long purse, for they were fantastically expensive. Surely, the ones who bought the stolen art could show it to none but their most trusted acquaintances or to no one at all. There were plenty of collectors in whom the acquisitive sense was so overdeveloped that they were content to own a treasure at which only they could look—look and get a glow knowing that he was the owner of something that no one else had.

But, granted all that, why the copies? Did they sell the originals and then switch the fake for the real? That, of course, could be done with men or women who did not know a great deal about art. But surely men who paid the prices that these things would demand, would also be canny enough to bribe some art expert to give an opinion.

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That had been the whole crux of the matter and the part that had given The Shadow the most trouble. Only one explanation had occurred to him that seemed to fit the circumstances, and here, in these records, was the proof that he had been correct in his hypothesis.

Granting himself the rare luxury of a smile of gratification, The Shadow made his way out into the street with the records under his stygian cloak.

He felt almost ill when he visualized what the possible end of the case would be. The Shadow sighed, a tired sigh that seemed to be for all of suffering, striving, scheming humanity.

Given the stock market page of any newspaper, plus the records he now had and the innermost secret of the criminal plan would stand for all to see.

There was one more thing to be done and it had to be done before real daybreak came. He wished at that moment that his faithful band of assistants were on hand to take over this particular job. But there was no one for it so he must do it himself. Off down the lonely street walked the man of destiny—the only man who could have unraveled the subtle secret of a plot that had come within a hair of success, that still might succeed if any one of a hundred possibilities went sour...

It was a curious job that was before him. Having changed back into the personality known to the world as Lamont Cranston, the bone-weary man made his way up to his bedroom in the house where an old man had been foully murdered. That was a part, a minute part, as a matter of fact, a rather unimportant part of the criminal plan. It had not even been necessary. That was what Cranston most resented. After all, Bouton had been possessed of but a tiny share of life. It would have been over so soon in any event. But death had struck him down for the sake of a whim, a passing whim.

Tommy, up at an early hour, waited out on the street for Cranston to make an appearance. He did not think it right for him to butt into the sorry affair at Veronica's house. Gossip had spread the story the length and breadth of New Orleans. The police had been called that preceding night and of course, there was a reporter there. The paper had contained but the bare bones of the tale. Public imagination had taken over, at that point and there was wild talk of the old man having died while celebrating a Black Mass. Other tales there were and these were, if anything, more unsavory.

A ring of cigarette butts, lit and stepped on after a puff or two, surrounded Tommy's feet. He looked up. At last! Cranston was descending the stairs with Veronica on his arm.

“All my sympathy is yours. I don't know how to say it, but...” Tommy blurted.

Veronica favored him with a wan smile of thanks.

Cranston looked from young face to face. He saw that Tommy had something on his mind, so he helped Veronica to a cab and returned. Veronica sent another smile to Tommy. Cranston's face was normally serious. There was nothing to show that in the air was revenge, that a death was to follow the death of old man Bouton. That a plan had been made and was about to be carried to completion.

“Mr. Cranston... Lamont... I mean... oh, I don't know what I mean.”

“Take it easy, son, what's got you all upset?”

“Yesterday, in that oyster bar, I looked from the inside out and saw the reversed lettering on the rear of the window. It reminded me of something... something I suppose I filed away subconsciously in the back of my

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head... That time... when I saw 'Slim', you remember the circumstances?"

Cranston nodded and said, "I know what you have remembered. Slim's jacket was open. When it was closed, it was buttoned on the right side!"

Tommy gulped. All his agonizing, remembering, waiting, all for nothing. Somehow Cranston had been aware of it. He hoped that Cranston could make better sense of his discovery than he had.

"Have you eaten, son?"

"Food? Gee, no. I've been too upset, afraid I wouldn't catch you in time."

"Come on then, let's do something about it."

Cranston hailed a cab and ordered the driver to go back to the water front which had been the pivot all along. In a waterfront cafe, where the food was good, the servings immense, and the prices moderate because the customers were all hardworking folk, the young man relaxed a bit.

Cranston, eating calmly, passing the day, newspaper set beside his arm, looked so like an everyday business man that some of the terror through which Tommy had been living faded.

The food gone, Tommy looking a bit more like himself, Cranston leaning back comfortably; all were good preparation for what was to come. Cranston said, almost as though to himself:

"Who is to determine when love of art, love of sheer esthetics, goes overboard? When does it stop being a sign of civilization and become a disease of its forming? When does the passion for possession overrule all other passions?"

Tommy knew this was but a rhetorical question and waited. Cranston shook his head and opened the paper he carried. Tommy saw nothing unusual in a man of Cranston's known wealth looking at the stock market reports, so he waited till Cranston looked up.

"It's as I thought, a bear market with about five men in the driver's seat. How curious a coincidence it would be, if it were but a coincidence, that five men, all millionaires, were also customers of the estimable M'sieu Charlus."

"You mean there's a connection between a bear market and this filthy art racket?"

Cranston, thinking of an alarm clock and mousetrap contraption that his darker self had planted near here not many hours earlier, looked at his watch. Soon... almost too soon... it would all be over.

"Yes, there is a connection. Charlus, of course, got nothing much from the art reproductions he sold to the nouveau riche in Hollywood. The real graft was the sale of the stolen originals, stolen in Europe by a group that were almost as bad as the gangsters that were trying to conquer Europe, almost as bad, because they used the war and its suffering as a cover up for the thefts.

"Those stolen originals were sold, in the main, to this group of financiers. High prices were demanded and paid without a qualm. Paid because at the time of the purchase, swollen profits from the war gave the men a huge amount of money to draw on.

"Two things must have happened, the one you call Slim and whom Esperanza called the 'other,' could no

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longer resist the stolen treasures. The money received on the sale mattered no longer. The collector's urge, the ultimate artistic craving which demands the original and no other in order to live, conquered the 'other.'

"I imagine that your Slim must have been all set to try and steal back the originals, when, out of the blue, one of the millionaires approached Charlus with an idea.

"These stock marketers, bound together by a community of interest in art, as well as in the market, had over-extended themselves in a bull market. In attempting to bear it down, they spread themselves too thin. A bear tries to drive prices down by selling in order to buy back when the price of the stock is low."

"Let one whisper," Cranston looked at his watch again, it was almost time, "one tiny bit of suspicion get around that they were overextended and the bulls, the people who are trying to force prices up, would descend in force and bankrupt the bear ring.

"All of them, foolishly enough, had at one time or another, allowed some friend a peek at their art... at their stolen masterpieces. It would be simple for them to sell their stolen treasures and then with the money carry their bear plan to the limit.

"But what of the friends? Wouldn't they get suspicious if they asked for another sight of a Van Gogh, or a Modigliani, a Botticelli, and the owner could not show it?"

"That's where the copies came in," Tommy gasped.

"Right. The copies went up on the wall, the real art was sold back to Charlus with the understanding that they would buy it back from him at a handsome profit when their coup was successful."

Another glance at his watch. Tommy could not, even in the midst of this explanation, keep from wondering for what Cranston was waiting.

"But then, a difficulty arose, the 'other', Slim, having again seen the dearly beloved paintings and statues would not, could not allow being again deprived of them. And don't think that Charlus wasn't and isn't aware of the danger of that step. Get a group of truly powerful men like this syndicate angry at them? What would be the result?"

"Disaster, of course." Tommy could see what faced Charlus.

"You see the full scope of the operations of this gang? The gang abroad stealing the art, the infinite care and cleverness." Cranston thought of the lovely statue hidden beneath the chromium coat, disguised with a clock in its stomach, coming in through the customs as trash. Of paintings he had seen where the old beautiful painting had been covered by a modern horrible daub, of all the other chicanery in which the gang had indulged and went on, "they were clever all right. But the very love for art which had allowed them to make the money they had, turned against them, when one of the gang, the leader, Slim, decided to keep the art that had been sold back to them!"

Cranston drank some water, looked again at his watch before saying, "They concealed every angle, the witchcraft ring out in the swamps utilized as a cover up, the tougher elements of the gang led by Esperanza, using terror always, while Charlus who is as bad in his way because it was he who had the previous set of artists killed, trying to make a pretense of respectability..."

Before Cranston could continue his tirade, the sound he had been waiting for came. He leaped from his seat and it was a moment before Tommy followed him. The sound that had brought such instant action was that of

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a fire engine!

Mournful, keening, the sound of a siren cut across the air.

The end of the case was in sight!

A dreadful end, but a just and deserved one. Tommy followed the running figure of Cranston through the narrow winding streets. It was as though he had been following a nemesis in the guise of Lamont Cranston.

CHAPTER XIV

POUNDING down the street in pursuit of Cranston, Tommy found time to wonder about the way Cranston always carried his brief-case. There he was; up ahead, long legs pounding, all his energies devoted to getting to the scene of the fire and the brief-case was still with him as though it were a third arm or something else equally valuable.

The fire was not very impressive when they reached the smoking warehouse. Some black, oily smoke came from the roof. The fire engines, brakes screeching, slid into the curb. The men went through their job with the ease of long practice.

Cranston did not even look around when Tommy came up behind him. He stood and looked at the wall of the warehouse as though trying to pierce the solid bricks with his eyes.

“Keep your eyes open. I have to make a phone call. Be back as soon as I can.” This was from Cranston.

Tommy spluttered, “Keep my eyes open for what?” But it was too late, Cranston had left him and gone around the block. Once out of sight of the gathering crowds, Cranston slid into the concealment of a doorway. Seconds later, in his black hat, cape and with that strange difference in his walk that made it so silent, he opened the door. It might have been left open by a careless workman, but that was not the case. A few hours ago this same black-swathed figure had propped the lock open so that the door could not shut.

Inside the quiet warehouse, The Shadow walked to an elevator. It was as huge as most freight elevators. He flipped the control over and the car began the ascent to the next to the top floor. The Shadow intended to reconnoitre, for he was sure that this new menace would bring at least a few of the gang members out in the open. How could they stand by and see the many millions that were represented by one room go up in flames?

As the car went up, The Shadow thought back over the case. This gang had not missed a single trick. To people of perception they sold the real art masterpieces. These were the ones that had been returned. To old fools like Jean Roueau, whose inner sanctum The Shadow had looked into, back in the beginning of the case, they sold the art objects that were so famous that it was necessary that the buyer be cracked enough to never show them to anyone.

The car passed the fourth floor. One more to go. As the car, passed slowly upwards, The Shadow suddenly leaned forward and looked through the window of the elevator. Silently as he could he caused the car to come to rest.

He had had another piece of luck.

Here in the warehouse, practically at each other's throats were the two main protagonists of the drama. Charlus, leaning nonchalantly against a packing crate, Slim taut and vibrant as a violin string just before it breaks. Slim held a .45 pointed at Charlus and the hand that held it was taut and ready to burst into action.

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They were speaking and The Shadow could hear them. Charlus said, “This is too ridiculous. Of course I never meant for you to know that it was I who sent the little wax dummy to the old man. But what is done is done. Come, no more crying over spilt milk. You know as well as I do that he was becoming suspicious. He was a canny old goat.

“We can't afford to take any chances, do you hear? None.”

Charlus dropped the pretense of ease. He stepped forward towards the muzzle of the gun. The handkerchief stuck out of his cuff. All The Shadow could think of was the last time he had seen such a scene.

Muffled, but still distinctly, the voices came through to him. Charlus was but two feet away from the gun now. Slim said, “Back, before I put a hole in your stomach! I know all about the lead weight in the end of your handkerchief. I don't intend to have my eye slashed out!”

Charlus risked it and his hands moved, the handkerchief started to flip out. The action stopped in mid-motion. The shot went through the hand that now held the handkerchief. His fingers opened and the handkerchief plummeted to the floor. It was dragged down by the weight in its end.

It was an old Mississippi boat gambler's stunt. This was the first time it had failed Charlus, for he snarled, “For that I will kill you...”

He brought his other hand up and started a roundhouse. The gun barked again. Charlus' other hand was bleeding. His arms hung at his sides. He seemed to be above pain. His face was contorted like concrete that is moved before it is set.

He stepped into the muzzle of the gun again. It was too much. The Shadow started to open the door of the elevator. But it wasn't necessary. Slim's face, still bisected by the black slash of the mask, looked around.

“Smoke... fire!”

Charlus tried to butt towards Slim, but a descending gun barrel stopped that. He fell in a heap ungracefully, body contorted. His hands looked crucified—they spread out at right-angles and blood welled from them.

Following the smell of the smoke the thin grotesque figure of Slim worked, sniffing all the way, to a door. Through the door, and The Shadow could see flashing heels running up the stairs.

Setting the control lever again, The Shadow stopped the car at the next floor. Through the window he could see Slim come bursting through the fire-proofed door.

This was the second time that The Shadow had seen this room and it was breathtaking as it had been the first time hours ago. In the middle of the factory district, with all the other floors devoted to business, a loving hand had made this huge barren factory room into a museum that was like the setting for an exquisite gem.

Each painting, each statue, was in an appropriate alcove or screened off from the rest so that your eye was not glutted too soon by all the magnificence. It was so big that your eye was carried off with some kind of trick of perspective and you seemed to be on a plane that was not quite of this earth.

Soundproofed, cut off from all reminders of the outside world, it was almost too easy to lose oneself in the art that the room contained. That was probably the biggest part of the trouble. Slim, who had been the one to arrange the room, had become lost to reality. All life was contained within these walls, all the life for which Slim lived in any event.

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And outside, unheard through the soundproofing, the clanging of fire bells, the routine of fire fighting went on. Extensible ladders shot up the side of the building, gallons on untold gallons of water splashed at the floor above. The smoke had increased its oily quality, seemed intensified now.

Tommy, puzzled by Cranston's long absence, shook his head, and wondering what he was supposed to be waiting for, set his soul to resting itself in patience.

Inside the quiet room, some tiny wisps of smoke crept down the stairs, crawled through the door which Slim had forgotten to close. Slim, head turning wildly, seemed to be trying to decide what to do— if the art were in danger, which to take; what was most precious of all these precious things; how to come to a decision?

The smoke, rolling and gathering in volume and in speed, poured in faster and faster. Driven out by the water from the floor above, it came creeping along like some horrid kind of giant squid, spreading smoke tentacles before it.

Wildly, like a chicken with its head cut off, Slim was grabbing things from here and there. The pile was soon absurd, there was no possibility that the slender form of Slim could manage a tenth of it.

The Shadow turned from the scene with a start. On the ground, almost hidden in the smoke, came a figure out of a nightmare. Calling on some hidden reserve of strength, Charlus had made his way up the stairs. Weak with loss of blood, wounded hands held up like a frightened rabbit's, he half staggered, half rolled into the room, using the wall to lean on.

He laughed and it was a sound out of the lowest sub-basement of Bedlam. He leaned against the wall, half fainting and throwing his head back, laughed in screechy, breathy gales.

He watched the frantic activity of Slim, he laughed when he saw the size of the pile of paintings that were stacked up. He laughed when Slim turned and stared at him. He rocked with laughter.

Weakly, tired by the trip and the laughter, he said, "And you shot my hands... the only one who could help you get this stuff out, and I can't even if I would!"

He laughed again. "Outside, the fire engines are busy, the police have thrown a cordon around the block. From above the menace of fire, and outside, the gendarmes. What now?"

Slim shrank back. In the wild, insane excitement, realization that there was no escape came hard.

On the street, Tommy looked around again and again. Could Cranston have been hurt? Was he in danger? What could Tommy do? The firemen had the fire, if fire it was, under control. Tommy had seen that kind of smoke before and he had an idea that it was the kind that refuted the old adage about "where there's smoke, there's fire..."

A policeman gestured with his club for the crowd to step back. Suddenly there was no need for him to try and control them. With a gasp of horror the crowd, as one man, stepped back and looked up.

On the top floor, smoke still roiled out. On the floor below, a window of some kind had been thrown up. It was a double window and was, as a matter of fact, part of the soundproofing of the art gallery. Smoke emanated from this window too, but in much smaller quantities.

The bystanders had seen some kind of motion at the window as it opened. No one had known the building was occupied at this hour. The firemen redoubled their efforts.

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Then, the window filled. The smoke made it a trifle difficult to see. Tommy strained his eyes and realized that he was looking at someone's back—curious, strangely constructed.

Slim! The smoke hazed figures looked out and down. Then, they could all see Slim turn back for a second. Clearly, over the hubbub, over the sound of the pouring water, over the turmoil of the firemen, a shot rang out.

The masked face looked out and down again. One hand held the still smoking gun, the other was clenched on something, but the distance made it impossible to determine what it was.

A step up on the window sill, then, gracefully, like someone diving into a pool of water, Slim arched out in a swan dive.

For a second, straining his eyes to the utmost, Tommy tried to make out a flurry of motion behind the diving figure. Black swathed arms reaching, just missing. No it couldn't be... that was absurd. He, Tommy, was the only one who noticed this. All other eyes were on the figure plummeting down through space. At the corner some firemen wrestled with a safety net, but it was silly, there was not time to get from where they were.

They realized the absurdity of what they were doing and dropped the net.

The sound of the body crashing into the concrete was so awful that Tommy was grateful for the war... otherwise he might have been sick.

Arms telescoped in on themselves... No, he wouldn't think of it.

By an odd freak of chance, the contents of the now dead hand rolled from it, unbroken... it was a tiny figurine... and it was unhurt. It rolled almost to Tommy's feet. He bent over it and picked it up... Surely it was a Tanagra figure... the workmanship, everything about it. Tommy stood there in the street looking at the lovely work of art. He lost himself in it so much that he was shocked when a voice, a tired voice, said, "It's all over Tommy. Come along."

He looked up from the figurine and saw Cranston, face drawn, mouth grim and stern. He took Tommy by the arm, and as Tommy tried to look back for the last time at the crushed figure, Cranston said, "Don't. Remember what happened to Lot's wife. Don't emblazon this on your mind."

For Cranston had seen a puzzled cop pick the mask off the ruin of a face.

Unthinkingly Tommy obeyed directions. They walked away.

CHAPTER XV

THEY walked along in silence. Behind them the tumult and the shouting died down. A fireman had gone into the room from which all the smoke had come. In that room he found three objects. A clock set for about twenty minutes ago. A mousetrap and a few smoke pots. The arrangements were clear. The clock had set off the trap and the trap in turn had set the smoke pots off. But why? That was a question that the fire and police departments were never to solve.

"You knew that fire was going to happen, didn't you? That was why you were looking at your watch before!" It was not a question. It was a statement.

Cranston nodded. "Yes. A friend of mine arranged it as a way of ending the case. I have sent some records I have to the police. With the heads of the gang gone... Charlus had died from that last shot; the rest of them

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won't have enough brains to escape. Right now, of course, they have no way of knowing that they should try to escape.”

Without knowing where he was going, Tommy followed in the path that Cranston was walking. Tommy said, “Now that it's all over and I am again one of the 52–20 club, there's nothing to keep me here...”

Cranston, his thoughts far away, said, “52–20?”

“Yes, that's what the vets call the government subsidy, twenty bucks for fifty–two weeks.”

“There's a friend of mine an New York who has an advertising agency. Can you do commercial work?”

“Sure! The further I can keep away from fine arts after this mess the better off I'll be. Besides, I want to make some plans. Now that Charlus is dead, maybe I might have a chance with her. You know she's way over my head, but I can't help thinking she likes me, even if it's just a little.”

Cranston looked at Tommy with real pain in his eyes. They walked along in silence for a while. Then Cranston said, “Why don't you get your things together and meet me. I have something to do at the old house on Dauphin Street, but after that I'm heading back to New York.” Perhaps on the train, away from the influence of the town, it wouldn't be as hard to say what had to be said.

Tommy said, “Swell. See you in a jiffy.”

They met at the terminal. Cranston looked, if anything, more tired and harassed than before. That business with Tante had not been pleasant. He sighed, a long sigh. They relaxed in their club car chairs. The locomotive got up steam and pulled out. The scenery slid by like a prop in an animated movie.

Tommy excused himself and took a writing pad out of his valise. “Dear Veronica, if I dare call you that...” Well, what could you say to a girl like that? After all he'd said maybe ten words to her all told. What right did he have? Deep in thought he looked out the window. Then his eyes focused closer. In the window, which acted as mirror because of the light in the car, he saw his writing reversed. That reminded him.

“raB retsyO! I never did tell you about that!”

Looking puzzled, Cranston said the gibberish over to himself, raising quizzical eyebrows. “How's that again?”

“Oyster Bar... that's the way the words looked from inside the place. I knew at the time that it suggested something to me! But I had to have a nightmare before I realized what it meant.”

Cranston had seen the connection and nodded. “You mean that scene when you were in the washroom and looking out saw...”

“Saw Slim buttoning up the bottom button of the coat... It didn't occur to me then, but the fact that it was the right–hand button meant something, because a man buttons his coat on the right side...”

“And you were looking in a mirror; therefore, the person doing the buttoning was in reality buttoning up the left–hand button and that could mean only one thing...”

“Sure, I doped that nut. It's a mistake a man could never make. Therefore...” Tommy stopped. He suddenly realized for the first time the significance, the real significance, of what his mind had refused to bring out in the open.

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“A woman... only a woman would have buttoned the coat that way.”

This was the time, thought Cranston, no use ducking any more.

“That strange sensation of wrongness that you were speaking about when you described Slim, haven't you ever noticed how wrong women look in men's clothes? Their slacks are cut differently, their coats are tailored in a different way from men's. The strangeness which you couldn't put your finger on was the fact that it was a woman's narrow shoulders under the heavy padding...”

Now that it was out in the light, Tommy saw the truth of it. Of course, the very construction of a woman's anatomy would make the suit look odd... would make the whole bearing of the wearer look distorted.

“You know, it may have been that Charlus was too close to see what stared him in the face, but he never knew, not until the last second when the third bullet went into him, that it was a woman of whom he had lived in fear. Never knew that the person who terrorized him was his fiancée whom he tried to terrorize!”

“Huh?” This was going too fast, shock upon shock for Tommy. “What do you mean?”

“Those evidences of witchcraft, of black magic... the little wax manikin. She got a little out of control. Charlus saw that she was attracted to you. The one way he was sure of controlling the high-spirited girl was through threats aimed at her beloved uncle. When she really got fed up with Charlus' domination, he sent that first wax doll. The second time she told him off, death followed. Charlus left the wax doll in the old man's bed and frightened him to death.”

Tommy shuddered. That was a horrible touch. Death for such a reason. What wanton cruelty!

Another silence descended. The wheels unendingly said, Dead, she's dead, she's dead... dead.

To break the train's wheel death song, Tommy asked, “But how, why? When did she become involved in that rotten racket?”

“That I can't know. But it's not too important. That is the when; the why, I think I understand. I imagine that she moved in after Charlus had set the wheels of the original racket in motion.

“Once the art started to come in, Veronica must have seen something suspicious in Charlus' house. Something that set her canny brain wondering. I imagine it must have been quite a shock to the egotist that was Charlus, when, after his plot began moving, someone suddenly cut in. Someone who seemed to know more about what he was doing than he did. Someone with a dark and subtle mind. For I am sure it was she who thought of that disguise for the statue, the chromium, the clock, that smacks of the way her mind worked.”

The second that Cranston's voice stopped, the wheels set up the mournful funeral clacking again. Trying to keep it out Tommy said, “Don't stop. Tell me the rest.”

“There isn't much more to tell. As I've said before... the whole weakness of the plot was that all of them wanted their cake and had a desire to eat it too.

“She, once she had feasted on the loveliness of the stolen things, could not resign herself to never seeing them again. She it was who suggested the copies being made. And, once the stock market deal I told you of came up, she decided to use that as the chance to keep all the things she coveted. I do think she even planned on selling the copies back as the originals. She might well have gotten away with it, but Charlus was afraid to

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even try it.”

There was the song of the wheels again. It was even more funereal now. The train was coming in to a station. They sat and watched the people getting on and off.

The train gained momentum again.

“But, why did she do it? Kill herself, I mean.”

“I’m afraid The Shadow was to blame for that. He thought it might be the cleanest way out. It saved poor Tante the ultimate indignity of a trial, of everything coming out in the open. This way it will always be a puzzle. Insoluble puzzles have a way of disappearing, vanishing. Man doesn’t like to have unsolved things around. He has a tendency to put them out of his mind.”

“But you still haven’t told me...”

“The smoke. She could have gotten away. There were lots of doors through which she could have escaped even after she killed Charlus. But she thought her things were doomed to die by fire. She could not foresee life without the things that for her were the essence of life.”

Tommy took the figurine, which he had kept, out of his pocket. He looked at it, stroked it with his fingers. This then, this was the final choice, the thing which she chose to take with her on the only path that has no turning. This of all the exquisite things she had loved so much more than life.

It seemed to have the essence of her in it.

Cranston watching him, could read what went on in the boy’s mind.

That had been what had made his choice so hard. Sometimes it was difficult to determine which was the path of justice. Surely she who had so adored the things that had been stolen, had had more of a right to them than the old fool Roueau who piled art up like empty cans in a junk yard...

Acting as both judge, jury and executioner was a superhuman task. But the law was the law, he had not made the laws, he just carried them out.

Sitting there in the brightly lighted train with darkness falling all around, Cranston hoped that his next case would not have the emotional entanglements that this one had. He almost longed for some desperate kind of battle with the underworld that would leave the decision standing clear cut with no indecision about.

Even he could not know that his wish was to be answered, that he was soon to be embroiled in as foul a mass of municipal corruption with which he and that darker side of himself had ever tangled.

The Shadow was to prove once again that The Shadow knows...

THE END