

DEATH ON ICE

Maxwell Grant

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DEATH ON ICE

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CHAPTER I

IT was as close as a human can come to really flying. Body bent forward, the man's figure split through the air like some huge prehistoric bird. His wings were on his feet.

His arms bent behind him were as carefully placed as a tight rope walker's pole. The extensions of his arms trailed him. The eyes that followed his flight were fixed. It didn't seem possible that he could land safely.

It was the last jump of the afternoon and by far the best and longest. Peter Gohan was living up to his international reputation as a ski expert.

The platform from which he had taken off made a backdrop behind him. His black figure jet-like in contrast to the snow, flew forward. He was fifty feet from the ground when it happened.

The clear crisp air magnified the sound till it reverberated like a cannon shot. Almost magically the flying form of a man crumpled in mid-air.

Such a short time before the scene had all been frivolous and gay. Brightly clad spectators, lining the sides of the ski jump, gay with excitement and with joy of the crisp clean air washing out their city bred lungs, had been laughing and exclaiming.

Then, the excitement had mounted as jumper succeeded jumper. Each jump seemed a little longer, a little better. Finally when all the amateurs had had their innings, the pros, the ski instructors, had taken over and then the jumps really became magical. It did not seem possible that a human being could glide through the air defying gravity with nothing but some slats of wood.

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Jim Thompson, one of the instructors at Chez de Silbis, a resort, had made the longest jump of the afternoon. There was only one man who could possibly beat him and that was his best friend, Peter Gohan.

It was Peter who had taken off just now. It was Peter who had looked as if he were setting a new record as he took off from the inclined plane and flew, swifter and swifter and further and further through the air.

But now, all that was ended and like a bird, shot down from the sky by a random hunter, the flight was over. The man was no longer one with the sky. He was now of the earth, earthy!

His forward momentum carried him along although his body was lifeless. His hands relaxed their grasp on the poles. They dangled from the wrist straps.

All grace gone, the broken black thing smashed down onto the concrete hard snow. The white particles flew up around his body as the skis snapped under the impact. The wooden crack served to reanimate the statue-still spectators. It had come like a bolt from the blue and had left them as defenseless as would a lightning flash.

The shot had come from the close packed blue-green firs that made an avenue next to the ski jump. The trees made it impossible to see who had fired. The people exchanged frightened glances. You could see that they were mentally tabulating who was in sight and who not.

Tight-fitting ski suit making it impossible to determine her sex, Patricia Stone made her way to the fallen flyer. She looked down at him. She had been a nurse for too many years to even bother feeling for a pulse. She knew death when she saw it. Who had done this? Why? Peter had been so likable... so unlike that old harridan he worked for, and the husband. What a pair the de Silbis made!

Peter had been so nice to her when he was teaching her the elements of skiing. He almost made her feel young again. Never by a flicker of his mobile face had he made her know that it was an impossible task she was setting him. Her muscles were too old, too tired to ever learn any new tricks. That sort of kindness had been rare in her old maid existence.

Looking down at his tanned good looking young old face, she promised herself that the matter would not end in a coroner's report of death at the hands of some unknown person or persons.

She knew the power that the de Silbis couple held in this small town winter resort. She had seen it in operation. She knew too that they would do their best to keep this quiet just as they had the unexpected "suicide" of that nice girl two weeks earlier.

The people she was thinking about came up to her then. She watched Mrs. de Silbis' face. It was so pleasant, so red, so rosy cheeked. She looked so much the middle-class good woman that it was difficult to think of her in any other way.

Her husband, lean as she was stout, razor thin mouth drawn over protruding, badly-fitted false teeth, was furious. His sallow cheeks were drawn in. He looked from the body of his ski instructor up to the nurse and glared at her as if she had something to do with the death.

Anger tightened in the nurse like a real live thing. She could feel nausea in the pit of her stomach as she tried to restrain her feelings. Aloud she said, "Well?"

"Well?" He glared at her again. "What's well? This is terrible! Terrible I tell you! Think of my hotel... the resort!"

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"If you don't mind, I'd rather think of this poor boy here, dead so far away from home and from all his friends..."

"Tcha! Let the dead bury the dead!" He turned on his heel and ambled off in his deceptive slouch. He seemed to barely move his feet but he made good time over the hard snow.

Mrs. de Silbis said, "Now, now... you shouldn't upset him. He has so many worries, Miss Stone!"

This time the nurse managed to control her anger. She made no answer but instead turned away. She was so grimly trying for control that she almost knocked over the tall thin wisp that was Steven Haight.

"Oh," she gasped, "I'm sorry, Steve."

"It's all right. Think nothing of it." Haight looked worried. "What happened? I was up at the lodge."

With unseeing eyes they looked right through some posters which screamed in many colors, "Monster Ice Carnival! Come One! Come All! Come Dressed as the Historical Character You Would Most Like to Be!" Almost hidden by all the lettering was a very badly drawn scene of what the artist obviously imagined a Roman orgy would look like on ice.

"It is quite obvious, is it not? Peter was shot. Killed by someone who is trying to ruin my poor husband and me!" Mrs. de Silbis ran her hand over her beet red face and muttered under her breath. "Someone is jealous of the little success that we have... jealousy, that's what!"

Haight put his arm around the nurse. "Hey, take it easy kid. You're shaking." He led her away from the scene.

Once in the darkness that was the beauty and the majesty of the towering trees she managed to shake herself back into some semblance of normalcy. "I'm sorry. Didn't mean to carry on like a two year old."

"I'm afraid," said Haight, "that twenty years investigation into Americana and folksay has not equipped me as much as I would like with experience in violence."

She looked up at him and managed a smile. "Wipe your head off. It has snow on it."

With unquestioning obedience he twitched his hand through his hair and was not surprised to see snow descend like a veil around him.

"Hmm... wonder how long I've been going around looking like a snowman."

"Probably for days. You'd better have your wife come back again to take care of you."

"Wish she could. But she has too much to do back in New York."

"Steve," the nurse's voice was serious, "what are we going to do? You know Sheriff Bradley. He's a fat oaf."

"I don't know. He can be unexpectedly shrewd despite his bumbling ways."

"Tut. You know as well as I do that the de Silbis elected him. They run this place."

"What would you suggest?"

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"I'd suggest some investigator who the de Silbis can't bribe to take it easy and just hush the whole thing up."

He thought a moment and then said, "If you were to ask me whom to call on to find out what town the legend of the Fool Killer emanated from, or if you wanted to know how many brothers Jesse James had, I could either find out myself or know precisely whom to call on. But now... with a situation like this..." He held his hands out in a helpless gesture.

She snapped her fingers. "I've got it. When I was in training I had a supervisor who knew a man who specialized in crime detection. What was his name?"

Brow furrowed in thought, she walked beside the little man through the cathedral of trees. "Cranley... no... Cranston! Something Cranston. That's who! Let's see... I'll call her and ask her to call on him!"

Head held straight now, narrow back firm as a queen's, she walked beside the man. Once she had come to a decision there was little that could deter her, or make her turn aside.

So it was that on a day when Lamont Cranston had made a vow to himself that nothing would get him out of the warm comfort of his home into the drab grey misery of the New York streets, the phone rang.

He eyed it for a moment as the bell sent out its clarion call. He sat in front of an open fire with his feet up in the air propped comfortably on some andirons of which he was inordinately proud.

Perhaps if he didn't answer it immediately it would stop its clamor. But no. The bell rang on and on. He sighed and getting to his feet slipped the phone off the base.

It was not Burbank. Burbank, the man who got most of the tips that set Cranston on the trail of crime. Burbank was really his good right arm. But who could also be a nuisance on a day like this?

Perhaps, thought Cranston when he heard a woman's voice say hello, perhaps it's just a social call. The voice said, "Lamont?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Mrs. Harris."

"Good grief... it's been ages. Are you in New York?"

"Nope, unfortunately. Still out on Long Island and still on duty for that matter."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Lamont. You see this isn't a polite call. I'm going to have to ask you for help."

"Oh."

"Now, please, don't sound that way. One of the girls... well it's stretching it a bit to call Patty a girl, but she trained under me and they'll always be girls to me, is in trouble... or thinks she is..."

"Who? Take it easy and let's start from scratch. What's happened?"

"Patty has a job up in Lake Violent. You know the winter resort... It's in the Adirondacks."

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"Umm... yes, I've been there."

"Well, there's been a murder there and Patty's afraid that justice in this little town is not only blindfolded, but her ears are plugged up too."

"I see. What would you like me to do?"

"If you could meander up there and see what's in the wind... Patty is no spring chicken to get all tied up in knots about nothing at all. If she says it's bad, I believe her."

Cranston tried to tell himself that he had been needing some vacation at that, but looking around the comfort of his room he could not lie to himself.

He could not kid himself. He was tired and that was unusual for the inexhaustible man who was known as Lamont Cranston. He picked himself up and not even wondering what was behind this hurried call for help from Lake Violent, he made his way into the bedroom and threw some odds and ends into his suitcases.

Packed, he looked around the comfortable rooms that were his refuge from the world of crime and picked up his inevitable briefcase. In it, as always, were the cape and hat of that sombre color that so well symbolized the other side of Cranston's nature. For these were the accoutrements of The Shadow.

He tucked it under his arm and picked up his suitcases. He cast a last, almost wistful look around the warmth and comfort of his rooms and locked the door behind him.

The elevator boy was surprised to see him. "Going away again, Mr. Cranston?"

"Mmm. Going up to Lake Violent for some winter sports. Figure it'll tone up my system."

Pretty soft, thought the boy, pretty soft, to be rich enough to wander off to the swankiest winter resort in the country just to "tone up his system." The boy watched Cranston's long, lean, fit looking, broad shouldered body make its way out through the door to the grey, grim muck that is New York after a snow fall.

Cranston lingered under the canopy for a moment hoping against hope that a cab would come along. But he wasn't too surprised to find his hope blasted. The doorman was not in sight. Neither was a free cab.

Picking up his burden, he walked across the slushy street. The slush was almost black already.

Ice somehow insinuated itself up over Cranston's shoe tops as he made his way across the dirty black muck that was all that New York had left of a snow storm. Almost coal black in spots it was no blacker than the devious scheme which was coming to slow and evil fruition up in the mountains.

Cranston sighed as he shook his feet and stepped up on the curb. Shrevvie was out of town visiting a sick relative so there was nothing to do but take a chance and try to hail a cab.

Ten minutes later and with train time a matter of minutes away, Cranston thought that this made him really appreciate Shrevvie.

Almost hopelessly he flagged a cab that looked empty. It was. He fell back into the seat and gave the driver directions.

"Wassamatter, ya think I'm a hick or someting?" The driver was irate. "I know where the station is, see!"

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All the way to the railroad Cranston was forced to endure a mumbled soliloquy about the "noive" of some passengers. The cab made it through the congested New York traffic with but seconds to spare. The tall figure of Cranston looked like a broken field runner as he made his way through the people who ambled along seemingly aimlessly.

Once on the train, tired, annoyed and almost regretting having answered the phone, Cranston leaned back and looked out the window. Now, surely he would have a chance to get his thoughts in order. But it was not to be.

The man sitting next to him folded up his paper and leaning forward looked inquisitively into Cranston's face. "Sleepy?"

Cranston sighed. There were days like this. But did they have to come so often?

He grunted sleepily in answer to the man; but it did no good. The man said, "Glad you're not sleepy. I hate to take long trips with no one to talk to."

Cranston gave up. He opened his eyes, took a deep breath and said, "What business you in?"

But he was wrong. The man was not a salesman anxious to talk about his wares and his troubles. As it turned out, the man was named Crispin and he was going to the same winter lodge that Cranston was at Lake Violent.

"So you see, I couldn't let him get away with that, and yet I didn't want to expose him to shame in the printed page..."

Cranston, by a super-human effort managed to decipher what the man was talking about. It seemed he had a twenty-year-long feud on with another Americana expert. A man named Stephen Haight.

"I know Haight's hypothesis is wrong and yet I can't be so small as to rush into print without giving him a chance to retract."

More to be polite than anything else, Cranston asked, "Retract what?"

"Why, you must know about it, his idiotic idea that the origin of the Fool Killer legend goes back to ancient Aramaic times."

Like most specialists, the man assumed that everyone else in the world was interested in what he was. Cranston turned his head a trifle and looked at the man in the reflection in the window. Thin, wispy-bearded, high foreheaded, he might have posed for the standard caricature of the absent-minded professor.

"The Fool Killer? I'm afraid I don't know anything about the gentleman."

The little man said, "Oh, the Fool Killer was no gentleman. In a way he was a sort of primitive representation of fate. A weird and eerie fate. He was invented, I hold, by the same primitive type of mind who invented Pecos Pete and Paul Bunyan.

"He's woven through a lot of early Americana. It was said that when you did a really stupid deed that you could hear the footsteps of the Fool Killer close behind you..."

"And if you repeatedly were stupid, the footsteps came closer, ever closer... and then one day or night... the Fool Killer carried you off and you were never seen again!"

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"Fine thing to frighten children with!" said Cranston.

"Oh no... it was more than a children's tale! Grownups, tough hardy frontiersmen put more than little credence in the existence of the fabulous giant. He was supposed to be as tall as the clouds and as angry as a lightning storm..."

The little man paused and looked out the window at the speeding landscape for a moment.

CHAPTER II

THE train clattered along through the night. The man's voice was fast lulling Cranston to sleep.

He caught odd words as the man talked on endlessly. "And of course, you must have read Stephen Vincent Benet's wonderful fictionalization of the Fool Killer legend."

The porter came through the train and Cranston flickered a finger to him and ordered a drink. He asked, "Will you join me, professor?"

"Ah... I'm afraid not... you see, the good wife does not approve of spirituous refreshments..."

Cranston glanced at the little man and wondered at what resentments might flow through the soul of a man as woman-managed as this. But perhaps he was used to it and it did not bother him at all.

Somehow, with ice tinkling in a tall glass, Cranston was able to pay more attention to the little man. He asked, "Do you think you'll be able to make this Mr. Haight change his mind?"

"I have proof that no fair minded man would fail to see the..." He stopped suddenly, looked at his watch and said, "Oh, my goodness, we'll be there in just a half an hour. Oh my, pardon me, but I must get my things ready."

Cranston watched in amazement as the man managed to waste a full thirty minutes in just taking his traveling bag off the rack and in getting his hat and coat ready.

The conductor called through the train in that peculiar language that they must be trained in, for it bears no relation to English, "Larklent."

If the little man hadn't been so sure of himself, Cranston would never have known that Larklent was Lake Violent. He followed the fussy man down the steps and out into the cold that made the blood race through his veins.

He took a deep breath and felt it go down into the tips of his lungs. "Feels fine, doesn't it?"

"Brrrr... I'm sorry, I'm so cold I can't think. What did you say?"

"Nothing... wait... there's a station wagon over there. It must be for us."

They made themselves comfortable and a burly many-coated native grunted from the wheel. "Ya can relax now. I'll have ya there in jig time."

It was in jig time, but Cranston would have preferred some other way, for the man drove as though possessed by a thousand demons. The wheels spun in the crisp hard snow that was packed deep on the road. It affected

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the little man so much that Cranston had to help him out of the car.

This was a section of the world that Cranston loved; let the snobs rave about the Alps, he'd take America's rocks and rills and lovely snow capped mountains every time.

They had passed through the foothills that made a grand and impressive approach to the Adirondacks. Before them, perched on top of what looked like just a hill but was really a mountain, it was just dwarfed by the size of the mounts around it, was Chez de Silbis.

The resort hotel had been built cunningly so that it seemed to nestle in a little hollow in the very tip of the snow covered tip of the small mountain.

Wide, comfortable looking glass enclosed porches surrounded the house proper. The walls looked solid and equal to the task of supporting the tons and tons of snow that descended on it yearly.

Just behind the house and down the slope there was an ice covered lake that looked like a mirror from where Cranston was. This was the center of attraction that made the place famous.

Aside from the bob sledding and the skiing, the lake with its allure for skaters and ice boaters was a mecca for outdoor people.

Getting out of the car, Cranston looked down at little Mr. Crispin who looked paralyzed by the speed at which they had come. He was shaken and upset. Cranston smiled at himself; if this upset the little man, what would a trip at sixty or seventy miles an hour in an iceboat do to him?

"Don't care for the ride?" Cranston asked.

His lips moved but no words came out at first. Then he managed to tremble, "Fast, wasn't it?"

Nodding, Cranston led him into the warmth of the brightly lighted building ahead of them. A glass encased porch was warm and delightful.

A sign above the door read, "Chez de Silbis." Bustling, Mrs. de Silbis came forward, her red peasant face smiling. She said, "Welcome. I hope you will enjoy your stay with us."

Looking at the little man, Cranston wondered just how happy he'd be, but he said nothing. He just smiled a hello and followed the madam through a broad sprawling living room with a broad fireplace running all along one side of it. Ahead was the desk. Cranston registered and waited while little Mr. Crispin signed the register.

People slouched around in comfortable looking, rough clothes. Here, for once, man was not encompassed in funereal vestments. Instead they seemed to vie with each other to see who could wear the loudest plaids and wildly colored sport shirts.

Cranston felt out of place in plain, dark business suit. Mr. Crispin didn't even seem to notice where he was. All he wanted was a warm bath, he kept insisting.

Once the little man had been led off to his room in the lodge, Cranston made it his business to meander around the room and size up the people there. As a matter of fact it was while he was so doing that a plain, rather horsy-faced woman came up alongside him. She was wearing a ski suit with the zipper half open. "Mr. Cranston?"

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"Why yes. Has my fame or notoriety preceded me?" Cranston smiled.

"I knew you couldn't be that little inoffensive looking man."

Kiddingly Cranston asked, "Then does that mean that I'm a big, offensive looking lout?"

"Oh, really, I'm sorry. Please, could we get away from some of these people? You see, it's because of me that you're here! I'm Patricia Stone."

Casting a last lingering wistful look at the happy looking crowd who sat in front of the roaring fire with what could only be buttered rum in front of them, Cranston followed the thin, tall masculine shape from the living room. She led him down a long, dark, cold corridor.

"This isn't quite conventional, I suppose," she said, "but this is the only place I feel safe."

She opened the door that led into a dispensary. It was quite well stocked. Cranston must have shown his surprise for she said, "Before the war, when doctors were easier to get and much cheaper to keep on the pay roll, the de Silbis used to keep a doctor here all the time. Now they're quite satisfied to have a registered nurse like me."

"I suppose most of what you get are just sprains and bruises?"

"And a few fractures that I'm quite able to care for... but... I don't know how much you've been told or know..."

"Better start at the beginning and when you come to the end stop."

"Right. Four weeks ago, just at the beginning of the season, as a matter of fact when Mr. and Mrs. Haight were the only guests, a girl committed suicide."

Cranston raised his eyebrows. "Do you couple the names of the married pair with the death?"

"Good heavens... do you mean did Steve have anything to do with it?" She laughed. "You know that little man you arrived with?"

Cranston nodded.

"Well, Steve is three times as innocuous. I know in a detective story that would automatically make him the killer but wait till you meet him..."

"Go ahead. I just wondered. Who was the girl?"

"She was a pretty little thing, not very smart. She was a chamber maid. Truthfully, I never thought she had enough brains to get upset enough to do anything concrete about anything."

"How did she die?"

"The usual woman's business, poison. All neatly laid out in her Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes."

"I see. Then..."

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"Then, yesterday, Peter Gohan," her face clouded, "an awfully nice lad, a skiing instructor like Jim Thompson who's the only one we have left now. Well..." She paused.

"Take it easy." It was quite obvious that the woman had felt quite an affection for the murdered boy.

"Right at the peak of a jump he was shot... It was terrible. He fell like a wounded bird."

"And that's all you can tell me? No clues, no ideas as to what's behind this?"

"I thought for a moment that perhaps Peter had been interested in the girl Betty Coffin, the one who killed herself. But that doesn't seem to work out right...unless one of her relatives around here decided to avenge her."

"Was there a P.M. on the girl?"

"No. And that's what first began to worry me. For if the de Silbis could squash all that and have her buried almost overnight, just so that there should be no breath of scandal around here... well..."

"I see what you mean. Then you have no assurance that the girl killed herself rather than be disgraced?"

"None."

"Do you know anything about her relatives? Are they that primitive?"

"Have you any idea how long some of the families up in this neck of the woods have been inbreeding?"

"I see, like the 'Jackson Whites,' eh?"

"Worse. I think because the 'Jackson Whites' have all bred freaks so that you can see their six fingers, or their idiocy or the albinos. But up here it hasn't quite reached that point. They're one stage ahead. They are all sour. They hate the outside. To them the world begins and ends up here in the mountains. Anything from outside is automatically no good."

Sociologists have used the group known as the Jackson Whites as a test group somewhat like the Jukes and Kallikaks, and Cranston had read up on their findings. He knew therefore why Miss Stone would be as upset by a similar group as she was. For centuries of inbreeding even in a new country like America can lead to eerie and tragic results.

Faintly through the walls he could hear some kind of a hubbub in progress. He scowled with concentration trying to determine what it was. Miss Stone noticed his frown and then she listened too.

"Good heavens, don't tell me there's been some more trouble! Oh, I hope not."

She slammed the door open and Cranston was on her heels as she hurried down the hall towards the lights of the living room.

The sound was clearer now. It was a man's voice raised high. They could hear... "I'm a ring tailed squealer! I'm a Salt River Roarer! I'm the very infant that refused his milk before his eyes were open and called for old rye instead! I love the women and I'm chock full of fight. I'm half wild alligator and I can outrun, outjump, outshoot, outbrag, outdrink and outfight any man on both sides of the Mississippi from Pittsburgh to New Orleans!"

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In the hallway, Cranston almost fell over little Mr. Crispin. Crispin said, "Oh dear... it can't be Mike Fink... it just can't!"

"Why?" Even as Cranston asked he continued running. So it was that Crispin's answer came floating to him over his shoulder... "It can't be, because that's Mike's classic brag. But he's been dead for a hundred years!"

CHAPTER III

CRANSTON stopped so suddenly in the doorway between the hall and the living room that Miss Stone and Crispin piled into his back. Through the door, illuminated by the fire, they could see everyone grinning from ear to ear. In the center of the room, roaring drunk, stood a tall thin man who, but for his height, might have been poured out of the same mold as Crispin. His china blue eyes were vague as he stood there, with his head thrown back trying to make his reedy voice sound as masculine as the fabled Mike Fink's.

He was off again. "I'm a ring tailed roarer, a..."

His vague eyes focused on Crispin and he did a delayed double-take that would have made his fortune in Hollywood. He looked straight at Crispin and then looked away for about a minute and a half. Then he swiveled his crane-like neck back and looked at Crispin again. He rubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands and finally said, "Hhhullo... that is you, Crispy, isn't it?"

Crispin walked towards him. "You should be ashamed of yourself! And don't call me Crispy!"

With his head lolling, Haight said, "Good old Crispy-Wispy, those crunchy flavorful..."

"Don't!" Crispin begged. "Please don't! Didn't you do that enough at the seminar?"

Cranston walked over to see if he could help.

"Who're you?" asked Haight with great solemnity and dignity.

"Lamont Cranston."

"Meased to pleatcha... I mean pleased to... Uh... my name's Steven Haight."

"Think we can get him to bed?" Cranston asked the nurse who had joined them.

"I'm sure we can. Come along, Steve." She grabbed him by one arm as Cranston took the other. The net result was that instead of one drunk there now seemed to be three, for as he lurched and swayed from side to side, the two sober people were pulled back and forth.

"Think we ought to all sing Sweet Adeleine?" asked Cranston.

"I'm sure it looks that way. We'd better hurry. He's falling asleep on his feet."

"Am not," said Haight as his eyes closed.

"The elevator's up here."

Cranston was almost carrying Haight now. Ahead was the rotund Mrs. de Silbis. She stood with her hands on her broad hips looking like an avenging fury.

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"Is it that I am running a sanitarium for drunks now?" She was quite indignant.

"Now you know very well what happened to him!" Miss Stone was equally indignant. "Some of the smarty pants natives invited him to have applejack in front of a stove. I can bet on it. I've seen out of towners have this happen before."

"What do you mean?" Cranston was curious.

"Well, you sit there in front of a pot bellied stove and it feels nice and warm and the applejack goes down like apple juice. Everything's fine till you leave the hot room and walk out into the cold! It hits you like a blackjack. I saw one man from New York step out of the store into the snow, seemingly sober. When he hit the snow, he fell flat on his face."

It sounded to Cranston as though Miss Stone for all her dignity, had had this practical joke pulled on her. He grinned.

She said, "You needn't grin like a jackanapes; I know all about it. The first winter I was up here some of them pulled it on me!"

They rolled him into bed. He was sound asleep before they left the room.

"So that's the ring tailed roarer!" Cranston smiled. It was too incongruous.

"Humph... you know where he got that, don't you? He's interested in Americana."

"Crispin said something about it's being Mike Fink's brag. Fink was some kind of a Paul Bunyan of the flat-boatmen on the Mississippi, wasn't he?"

"Yes. Steve's told me all about it at great length. It seems Mike Fink and the Fool Killer are his two specialties."

With Steve Haight safe in bed, Cranston kept his eyes open as they went back downstairs, his photographic memory filed away every nook and cranny of the long and twisting halls. He took in every doorway behind which danger might lurk. He was like a cautious person who, after reading the warning on a theatre program about looking for an exit in case of fire, really does look.

He was not going to be caught short just because of lack of fundamental knowledge. The place was big. It was ten stories high, and had myriads of rooms on each floor.

Cranston realized that when the place was at the height of the season and every room was filled, the de Silbis couple would really have a gold mine on their hands. It was not to be wondered at that they were willing to go to almost any lengths to preserve their place from any likelihood of trouble that might keep people away.

It was pleasant to see any place that was properly run. A good hotel always reminded Cranston of a well greased machine. When things were going right you could never form any idea of all the personnel involved, the bell boys, the pantry boys, the waiters, the invisible workers backstage who were never seen it was quite a job to keep a place like this functioning properly.

The halls were full of people in gaily colored clothes, smiles on faces, happy with that release that escaping from the job brings. They nodded to Cranston and Miss Stone as they made their way back downstairs. There was a pleasant feeling in the air.

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Perhaps, thought Cranston, it had not been too bad an idea coming here. If he could settle this mess up quickly...

In the lobby Cranston stared at a huge sign advertising an Ice Carnival. Miss Stone followed the direction of his eyes and snorted.

"You'll see those everywhere you look till after tomorrow night. The local Chamber of Commerce is trying to build up those carnivals into something as important as the ones down in New Orleans. Fat chance." She snorted.

In the living room introductions were made. There, a bevy of the kind of girls that are only grown here in this country, tall, vital looking, well proportioned, the result of a couple of generations which had never known famine or terror, they seemed to Cranston to be a kind of blue print of the future, given a peaceful future, that is.

Mr. de Silbis put in an appearance for a moment but Cranston was happy to see him go. He was not a nice man. Decidedly not. Cranston watched him ooze from the room and thought that he could be very happy if he never saw de Silbis again.

There was one young couple that looked so much like an illustration out of a slick magazine that they were almost not real. The man, about twenty-five was Jerry Eliot. The girl, and she was straight off a commercial artist's drawing board, was Elaine Charris.

Cranston made light conversation with them while Miss Stone went back to see if there was anything more she could do for Haight.

"Much skiing?" Cranston asked.

Eliot moaned, "Too much. I don't think I'll ever be able to walk again. I've been too busy being the hard living, young reporter to be able to ask my muscles to do ridiculous things any more."

"Get out the wheel chair and take the old man home." Elaine made a face. "He's so decrepit he can't even make a Christiana stem any more."

"I didn't see you showing up the ski instructor any." Eliot looked around. "Where is Thompson anyway?"

"He's been down in the dumps ever since Peter... you know. They were very good friends," she said.

"Oh."

Then they both made a very determined effort to put any unpleasantness out of their minds. "I don't know," said Eliot, "about these other middle aged characters. I think they just come up here to get over a slight touch of marketitis, but me, I make my dough the hard way. When I take a vacation I gotta vacate or else."

"You don't think it's any fun wearing a mink coat in August under those blasted lights do you? Or wearing a bathing suit in a drafty barn of a so-called studio in mid-winter. I had the great grandfather of all colds, that's why I took my little all and pattered up here."

"She's a photographer's model," Eliot said, quite unnecessarily.

"What paper you on?"

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"The N.Y. Ledger and don't scream. I know it's a lousy paper, but I just got my ruptured duck and I wanna find out what makes with a paper before I go out on the limb."

"How's that?"

"Oh like all us hacks, I got an idea I can run some one-horse-town paper and run it the way it should be done. Don't tell me I'll go broke. I know. But I have to get it outa my system."

"Go broke? In some ways I think that's about the only way that anyone will ever be able to run an individualistic paper again. Every paper you pick up these days has the same column, the same gags, the same cartoons. It's about time somebody took the bull by the horns and..." This was one of Cranston's favorite themes and he held forth for quite a while on it.

He was interrupted by Miss Stone who'd had a look at Haight.

"He's sleeping like a lamb the poor dear. He's so lost ever since his wife went back to New York."

"He's probably not going to feel too chipper tomorrow." Eliot looked as if he knew just how Haight was going to feel.

"None of us are going to feel like much if we don't grab some shut eye," said Elaine.

She and Eliot meandered off. Miss Stone watched them with a glow on her plain face.

"Good night," Cranston said.

"Oh, good night... and I can't tell you how grateful I am you were able to get here. We'll be able to go over everything on the morrow. I do so hope you'll be able to see through this whole tragic mess."

"I hope so too." But Cranston was not too optimistic. It was not going to be a cinch. No evidence. No alibis. For no one knew where anyone was while the ski jump was going on. Add to that a venal police force, or one which was willing to close its eyes on occasion. No, it was not going to be easy, not even for that master man hunter, that other side of Cranston's self, that other, darker personality who was known the world over as The Shadow!

Only about six miles away, that is in territory, but about a hundred years off in time, four men sat in a cold and desolate looking room. A jug stood on the center of the table. The table was rickety.

The men were silent. Occasionally one would summon up enough energy to get rid of some tobacco juice. Aside from the occasional splat and their slow unhurried breathing there was no sound.

One of the younger men reached forward and cradled the jug on his arm. There was the gurgle of liquid. He smacked his lips and wiped his mouth on his arm.

The only light in the room came from a flickering, dying fire. It threw their harsh angular, lantern jawed faces into high relief.

The man who had just taken a drink said, "Waal?"

The other three exchanged sly secret glances. The thinnest lipped, oldest said, "Cain't see why not."

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"Tomorrow night?" It was the younger man.

The oldest stared into the fire and his face was the one that cartoonists used in the prohibition period as the epitome of repression. "Tomorrow night." And his voice was that of doom.

CHAPTER IV

CLEAR, cold and harsh, the morning sunlight glinting off the icicles in the tree outside of Cranston's room reflected into the room. The light made a curious mask across Cranston's face. Even in sleep his features were not relaxed. His mouth was tight and his hawklike nose was stern. The nostrils flared. He was dreaming and it was not a pleasant dream.

The light intensified his dream and then woke him. He was momentarily startled as men are when they wake up away from home. Then consciousness brought a message to him of where he was.

He was out of bed and down for breakfast speedily. The sharp crisp air had given him an appetite like a child's. He was in the middle of his second portion of pancakes when Haight, eyes squinted in the sun that bathed the dining room, made his unhappy way to a table next to Cranston's.

"Hangover?"

Haight looked at Cranston for a moment with his eyes unfocussed, then he blinked. "Do I know you?"

"You've met me, I don't know if you remember. I helped you to bed last night."

A moan was the only answer for a second. Then, "You mean I was that bad?"

Cranston smiled commiseratingly.

"I don't quite know what happened to me. There I was swapping yarns with some of the natives in front of a pleasant pot bellied stove... then, I remember leaving. I even remember going out the door... but then... I can't seem to make it come clear." He shook his head and evidently regretted it for he put his hands to his forehead.

"Anything wrong?"

"No, I just thought it was going to explode. Maybe if I hold it right it'll stay in one place. I hope the Fool Killer isn't around," he essayed a weak grin, "for if he is, I'll be hearing his footsteps any moment now..."

"You mean he'll swoop down like the furious bandersnatch and carry you away?" Cranston asked with a smile.

"Uh huh. But it was no joking matter even a hundred years ago, you know. Bad children were put to bed with the fear that the Fool Killer might be along to carry them off to their death. Even grown ups seemed to be a little afraid of that ubiquitous figure."

The waitress put a soft boiled egg in front of Haight. He cracked the shell, looked at the inside of the egg and turned green. His fumbling hands reached for the table and he pushed himself up. "I... I am afraid... I am not as well as I thought I was." He stumbled from the room.

Cranston finished his first cup of coffee and looked out the window. The snow capped trees on the hillside

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seemed to be waving their heavy arms to him.

"Hi... did you see the wages of sin?"

Cranston looked up into the grinning face of Jerry Eliot. "Oh, did you pass him?"

"He passed me, and was he in a hurry. Oh, brother!"

Elaine's voice came from the table behind Cranston. "Fine little pair of gents you two are. I spend hours making myself look like what I ain't with powder and paint and then nobody even gives me the top of the morning."

They swiveled as though on strings. If she had spent hours it was well worth it, but it was youth and something else that made her look the way she did.

Down the room little Mr. Crispin waved a meek hello. Cranston nodded in return. Crispin rose and made his way to the table.

"Good morning."

"How do you feel today?"

"Much better than my esteemed colleague. That's a sure thing." Mr. Crispin was being a mite sarcastic.

"I imagine he'll feel better as the day progresses."

"I certainly hope so. I don't intend to stay up here all winter," said Crispin snappishly.

Mrs. de Silbis came up the center row of tables like an ice cutter breaking the ice for other, swifter vessels. She was being the hostess and it was a little trying. She assumed little girl airs when in this mood. All in all it was enough to drive strong men out into the snow and ice.

"And how are you this morning, dear Mr. Cranston?" She folded her hands together in front of her.

"Fine, just fine. Lovely place you have here."

"I do so hope you'll enjoy your stay. The de Silbis hospitality is a byword, you know."

"At these rates," said Eliot sotto voce, "it is more like buy word."

"Sssh... she'll hear you," Elaine cautioned him.

She left Cranston and continued on her way. In her secret heart of hearts she was sure it was she who was responsible for the success of Chez de Silbis. She never let the winter sports have much to do with it when she was in this mood.

Escaping, Cranston made his way to his room and bundled up. For once he was without his brief case. In the harsh white light that poured down, his cape and hat, representative of The Shadow would be worse than useless.

Eliot saw him as he went through the door. "Where you off to?" he called.

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As a matter of fact, Cranston was going to see the sheriff. But he said, "Just to get a lungful of this air. See you later."

Eliot waved.

"How far is it to town?" Cranston asked the man who had chauffeured that insane ride the night before.

"Town?" he queried. "You mean that widening in the road where these hicks think the town is? 'Bout two miles."

The man's accent showed him not to be a city dweller, so Cranston asked, "Where you from?"

"Up the road a piece. Paradise. County Seat. Population two thousand. Not like this little burg. Ain't even got fifteen hundred come summer."

"I see."

Cranston refused the man's offer of a lift and enjoyed stretching his legs. The snow under foot made the little crunching sound that it makes when it is compressed.

Dressed warmly as he was, Cranston found the walk delightful. Of course, every other tree or so was despoiled by advertisements for the Carnival that was to take place that night. But outside of that, it was the forest primeval that lined the sides of the road.

The town was a little bigger than "a widening of the road." As a matter of fact, with all the winter visitors in brightly colored mackinaws and ski suits, it looked like a thriving little metropolis.

A man, obviously a native, sat in front of a general store with his feet propped up in the air and a general air of contentment.

"Can you tell me where the sheriff is?"

"Yep."

There was a pause which lengthened. Cranston asked, "Well?"

"Purty well, I thank ye."

"Will you tell me where the sheriff is?"

"Yep. Ye asked me afore could I and I can. Now that ye ask me will I, I would."

There was another pause but this time the man was just gathering all his energy for the terrific strain before him. He took a deep breath and made a large gesture. "See that there church down there?"

Cranston nodded.

"Didn't used to be a church, used to be a store. Long time ago that was."

Cranston resigned his soul to patience and waited.

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"Well, behind the church there's a gas station. Pass it right by."

"Yes?"

"Pass it I say and then before you can say Jack Robinson, there'll be the sheriff. Big feller he is. Can't miss him."

That ended the conversation. Cranston said thanks, but the man did not look up from the middle distance where he had his gaze.

Past the church and around the corner, past the gasoline station where? Cranston looked up and down the street. Then, he realized that the man who had given him directions was right. You couldn't miss the sheriff. He was huge. He was sitting on his porch in front of an old house. He was easily five ten, and he was also, not so easily about three hundred and fifty pounds of man.

"Good morning, are you the sheriff?"

"Reckon so."

Cranston breathed a silent prayer that this conversation would not be as painful as his last. "May I speak to you for a moment?"

The huge head, many chinned, nodded slowly. "Don't see why you can't. Talk's cheap."

"It's about the death of Peter Gohan."

"Hiper up on the porch and set. Gohan. Would that be the furriner? The one who taught skiing?"

Cranston wanted to say, my God man, how many murders do you have up here, anyway? But instead he said, "That's the one. Can you tell me anything about it?"

"Ummm... why should I?"

That was a poser. "Well, I am Lamont Cranston. You may have read of me. I have assisted the police many times. Commissioner Weston down in New York is a friend of mine. I am known as a criminologist."

"I see." The mountain nodded again. "Don't hold with all this racin' and runnin' myself. All this lookin' for clues. Like to set and think, myself. Not everyone's geared that way, but that's the way I am."

"Has it gotten you anywhere?"

"Got me 'lected sheriff."

"Good heavens, man, I don't mean that. Has it given you any ideas about the murder?"

"Murder? Nasty word that. Can't say I care for it. Now I was settin' here and thinkin' that for a furriner, that Gohan was purty well liked."

The mountain was motionless. The man's fat jowls quivered as, at long last, some more speech made its difficult way up out of the fat. "Now a feller that's well thought of, he ain't so likely to get murdered," the man's voice used the word cautiously. "Ye see, settin' the way I do, I thought of somethin'."

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Cranston was beginning to see the technique. If you spoke they clammed up. If you waited they spoke. It was a little unusual, but if this was the way to get results...

"Ye see. It's open season. Lots of deer around. Seems to me like as if that shot coulda been some city folk out with a rifle. Mighta been shootin' at a deer, ye know."

Cranston stared at the man unbelievably. "A deer? A flying deer? A deer on skis?"

"Ye don't know how bad the aim of some of these fellers is."

This time there didn't seem to be any words on the way up. Cranston waited and waited. Inside the house, a high thin querulous voice said, "An' iffen one more of them city folks asks me what we do in the summer, when the visitors been't here, I swear, I do declare, I'm going to do somethin' desperate, I am."

The roll of fat that was the sheriff's head rolled back in a gesture. "My wife. Good woman, but she talks too much. Guess they all do."

"But..." Cranston paused. What was the use? Despairingly he said, "Then you are perfectly content that the death of the young man can be checked off as a hunting accident?"

"Seems better than to think the poor lad mighta had somebody as hated him bad enough to kill him, don't it?"

This was a new way of looking at the ancient and horrid art of murder. Cranston shook his head a little as though to blow out the cobwebs. No wonder Miss Stone had sent for him. Either this man was even stupider than he looked, which didn't seem quite possible, or he was being paid off by the de Silbis clan to keep the whole thing quiet. He nodded his head in farewell and turned on his heel.

The sheriff watched the tall spare figure make its hard heeled way down the street. He thought, wonderful the energy those city folks have. Wonder where they get it all.

On the Main Street, such as it was, Cranston walked along in a brown study. This was as close to a perfect murder as there could be. A quick haphazard shot when everyone's attention was on something else. How could you find out anything about it? How attack the problem? And then to have the law playing right into the killer's hands. It was almost too much luck for a murderer to have. All Cranston could do was sit tight and hope that the killer would begin to worry; for it is when a criminal tries to make a more perfect crime that the chances of the people on the side of the law begin to go up.

"Hi!"

Cranston jumped. He'd been so deep in thought that he hadn't even seen Eliot and Elaine in front of him.

"Whatcha doin'? Trying to think of a costume for the carnival tonight?" Eliot asked.

"How's that?"

"You're supposed to dress up as the person in history or in literature that you'd most like to be! I'm going as Captain Kidd."

"And I, if it weren't so cold, would go as Lady Godiva. But... with things the way they are, I guess I'll have to settle for Nell Gwynn!"

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Cranston smiled at Elaine.

"Well, what are you going to go as?"

Glancing in the general store window at a big bowled calabash pipe, Cranston smiled and said, "If I can get one of those pipes, I think I'll be all set."

They smiled back at him and walked off up the street. Looking at them the smile lingered on Cranston's face. It was well it did for it was the last smile that creased his face for quite a while.

CHAPTER V

THE Chamber of Commerce had really shot the works. Busses, chartered for the occasion, brought people from all the surrounding area. Publicity men, photographers, even some newsreel men, were milling around the edge of the ice. The broad, long lake, belying its name, Lake Violent, was stretched out as quiescent as though no summer storm ever ruffled its surface.

In the middle, an archaic looking, and rococo, throne, as out of place as a crap game in a vestry, stood in lonely splendor. There was room for two people to sit in the throne. They were to be the King and Queen of the carnival and were to be selected by applause. Around the edge of the lake like silent spectators, snow men had been built to mark the circumference of the area where most of the festivities were to take place.

One snow man to the left of the throne, by some accident of design, had a sneering sort of sarcastic smile on its face as though it were not at all impressed by the garish doings of some humans.

A band, resplendent in red and gold uniforms, mounted on ice skates as were all the people, was tuning up. The brass made cacophony as they did those bizarre things that all musicians do to make their instruments behave.

Cranston, standing to one side, always the spectator, had given in to the spirit of the occasion by sporting the calabash pipe he had bought in town. On his head, a fur cap, turned sideways so that the ear flaps came down on his forehead and down his neck, was the only concession to the costuming that he deemed necessary.

"Why... I'll be... I never would have thought of it. But you're the spitting image of Sherlock Holmes!" Eliot laughed.

"It's the nose," said Cranston. And it was true. His hawklike nose, the pipe and the hat did make him look like the pictures of Holmes.

Looking a little silly in a pirate costume, Eliot was adjusting his skates. He said, "Wonder how our two professors will rise to the occasion."

Elaine who walked up just then said, "I wouldn't be surprised if they both came dressed as the Fool Killer, whoever he is. For that's all they've been talking about all day."

"Fighting?" Eliot asked.

"Mmmm... they're a little too genteel for that. Arguing with restrained fury, let us say." She was exquisite in a dress that Nell Gwynn might well have worn. There was nothing out of the way in her wearing skates. They gave her a gliding grace that was lovely to behold. She pirouetted in front of them on the ice.

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"Like it?" she asked.

"Like it!" Eliot gulped.

"If they don't elect you queen, I'll picket them as being unfair to organized beauty," Cranston said gallantly.

"Ooooo... look!" Elaine pointed. People, in dribs and drabs, like the ones that have to get up enough courage to be the first on the dance floor, were making their way out onto the ice. The lights, spotted all around the area demarked by the snow men, made the scene as bright as day. Colors, garish and gay, sombre and rich, bizarre and lovely, moved out onto the ice. The skates made all but the most clumsy look like something out of a Disney fantasy.

The music blared out in the hush of the night covering the small sound of the skates and the hushed voices of the people. It wasn't very good music, but it was loud and in keeping with the spirit of the affair. It was a waltz, and naturally it had to be the Skater's Waltz.

Cranston said, "May I, before you are monopolized?"

Elaine glided into his arms and they skated off. Eliot sat on a snowbank in silent awe as he thought of his luck. What price now all the cynicism which he was so wont to spout to all the other leg men on the paper. He was in love and that was that.

Out on the ice, alone because of the size of the place and because there were still plenty of people on shore trying to get up enough courage to venture out, Cranston and Elaine skated to the strains of the waltz.

She it was who broke the silence. "Who are you really?"

"What do you mean, my dear?"

"You're not like the other people of your age that are up here. You're taut and lean. You don't need a mid-winter vacation. Besides, since I've seen you in the Sherlock get-up, you look familiar. Where have I seen you before?"

"Perhaps in the papers. I'm a criminologist, my dear."

"Oh, of course! You cleaned up that rotten numbers racket a while ago... I remember now."

"My fame precedes me. I wish I could live up to it. This mess has me worried."

"No luck, eh?"

"None at all." On shore, Cranston could see Eliot waving his arms wildly. He directed the girl back in that direction. The only sound now was the crisp sound of the blades on the stone hard ice.

"Hey, you're too faraway! They're starting the judgment!"

"Oh, for King and Queen?" Elaine asked.

"Yeah. C'mon."

On shore, Cranston watched as the young lithe figures whirled away. He watched as they made their way past

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the reviewing stand that had been set up near the throne, but on shore. The men on the stand eyed Elaine appreciatively. As a matter of fact, so did everyone. There was a burst of applause from the bystanders.

It was a foregone conclusion. The judges saw all the rest of the contestants but when it was all over it was Elaine and Jerry Eliot who were handed the batons which symbolized their king and queenship.

They both looked a little flustered as they mounted the stairs that led to the throne. "Aren't we the ones, though?" Eliot asked.

"Pretty suave, I call it. Look at those photographers. They're using so many flashbulbs, I'm afraid I'll get sunburnt."

On shore watching, Lamont and Miss Stone admired the youngsters as they made their way up to the throne and got set. They held their sceptres in regal gestures. Their sceptres flashed down, the cameras clicked and the carnival was officially started.

Nearby, Haight and Crispin were engaged in a low and long winded argument. Haight had gone all out. He was wearing a mortar board and gown and looked exceptionally silly standing on skates in the regalia of a professor, waving his long thin arms around. The skates made him seem about nine feet tall. He towered over little Crispin.

Crispin had turned up his nose at the idea of gayety and frivolity and was dressed for a walk on any city street. His tight starched collar looked more out of place than Haight's tomfoolery.

Perhaps twenty feet further on, the male de Silbis, almost as thin as Haight, stood next to his wife like an exclamation mark next to a period. Her rotundity made his thinness more remarkable.

They were dressed in Bavarian clothes and looked quite absurd. They were arguing. An occasional vagrant gust of wind blew odd words up to Cranston.

He had heard, "Be still or I'll..." and "How dare you talk like that..." But then the wind had shifted and that was all he did hear.

Miss Stone was saying, "Now if those ruffians only don't show up and ruin everything..."

"Who do you mean?"

"Those inbred natives I told you of, last night. They're all part of one big sprawling family named Coffin. Last year some of them got drunk and came down and raised an awful rumpus."

"Nice folks, eh?"

"Yes. The sheriff is related to them in a distant second-cousin sort of way, so he did absolutely nothing about it, of course. Just as he does about everything else."

"Sheriff's quite a character. I spoke to him today."

"Wearing, isn't it?"

"Very. What happens now?" Cranston pointed out to the ice, where swaying couples were dancing on skates. Eliot and Elaine still sat in lonely splendor on the throne.

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"Oh, a little bit of everything. Games, contests, free drinks, name it and they have it."

"I see. The Chamber of Commerce is all out."

"I'll say. They've built this from a tiny hamlet into a well known resort and they're not going to hesitate to spend anything that will pay them back ten fold. These affairs do bring more people every year, you know."

"I suppose so. But I don't think the Coffins will help much if they do anything."

"I imagine they've been spoken to."

On the throne, Elaine said, "Get a load of that snowman there. He doesn't like our looks any more than I do his."

"He is pretty grim looking, isn't he?"

While they were both looking at the cynical snowman, a stone thrown from the darkness outside the lights crossed in front of the throne. Eliot threw himself in front of Elaine to protect her.

"Look out... something's up!" Another stone, bigger this time, crashed right by them and knocked the smile off the snowman's face.

"Someone else doesn't care for the cynic, I gather," said Eliot trying to keep things light and cheery. But Elaine was looking at the snowman. The stone had just knocked the smile off the immobile face, but shortly after that, more snow, loosened by the blow, cascaded down. Elaine stared in silent horror. Eliot felt her tremble and followed the direction of her horrified glance. His breath caught in his throat. Peering out of the clean white snow was a dark and eldritch thing.

The snowman had a new smile. This was a smile that showed teeth. Human teeth.

CHAPTER VI

FORTUNATELY, Elaine fainted before the next stone took the top of the snow man's head off. For as the snow dropped to the ground, hair was revealed. Long straggly grey hair that descended like an obscene cloud around the whiteness of the snowman.

Enough snow had dropped off to show too, the dried and frozen features of a long dead woman. Her face was distorted into what might have been a grin of amusement or horror. Whatever emotion had been her last one, was now frozen into place.

At sight of the first thrown stone, Cranston ran past Haight and Crispin barely hearing Haight say, "But Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill and all those others are but part of the pantheon of superman heroes which go back to the Zend-Avesta and the Gautama Buddha and allied legends, don't you see that? Whereas the Fool Killer is from the pattern of Fate, the weavers of Cloesus. Right back to primitive man!"

Crispin's answer was lost as Cranston long-legged his way around the edge of the ice towards the spot where his keen eyes had seen a flicker of motion.

Past snow-laden trees, around the thronged edge of the lake he ran like a figure of vengeance. But it was delayed vengeance for there was too much space to cover, hampered as he was by the ice skates he was wearing. By the time he got there nothing remained but scuffed snow to prove that any human had thrown the

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rocks.

He looked from the scuff marks in the snow out to the throne. Yes, this was in a direct line. Whoever had been the thrower had stood here, for all the good it did him. Back of the edge of light the darkness was primordial. No flicker of whiteness even showed. It was jet black.

Cranston sighed. It was futile to attempt to do any tracking. He moved out across the ice. Eliot was chafing Elaine's wrists. To one side, the improbable figure of the sheriff moving majestically like an ocean liner came into sight. He had been in the outer darkness like the rest of the townfolk, watching the "foolishness."

The sheriff, fishy eyed, stared blankly at the cold dead eyes that peered out of the snow. He brushed some of the snow away from the corpse's face. Cranston was at his elbow by this time.

"Pears to me like I seen this woman somewhere," he said heavily.

"Any idea where?" Cranston asked.

"It'll come to me. May take time, but it'll come to me."

On shore, even Haight and Crispin became aware that something was amiss. Haight looked out across the ice and said, "Perhaps we had better see what is up."

His black cloaked figure looked like a starved bat, as with his mortarboard set at a rakish angle he skated across the ice. Crispin, skateless, moved carefully behind him.

Cranston looked around as Haight came up. "Hello, do you know who this is? You've been here a while. The sheriff thinks she is familiar. Speak up, man!"

Haight stared at the icy face with fear making a livid thing of his face. He tried to move his mouth but no sounds came out. He pointed at the face and his arm shook. His eyes rolled upwards and he fell over backwards.

He crashed down onto the ice like a bag of potatoes. Instantly, Cranston bent over him. His breathing, his pulse proved that he had fainted. Cranston pressed his hand on the ice and then pressed the cold hand to Haight's brow.

Crispin, taking tiny mincing steps approached. Cranston looked up at him. "Any idea why he fainted? Does he have a weak heart?"

"He has a weak brain, but not heart as far as I..." Crispin stopped and Cranston wondered if he too were going to faint for he looked at the dead woman and his voice was a gurgle.

"That's augh... that's..." He pointed down at the fainting man. "That's his wife!" He pressed his fingers to his eyeballs as though to blank out the sight. "His wife, I tell you... his wife!"

The ice carnival was beginning to look like a battlefield. Elaine was still unconscious. Haight showed no sign of coming to and Crispin was standing with his hand pressed against his heart fighting down nausea that biled up in his throat.

The sheriff, completely unmoved, said, "Death on ice. Good way to keep a corpse."

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Cranston eyed him with distaste and said, "You sound as if you had a lot of experience with corpses."

"Do. I'm the town undertaker in addition to all my duties as sheriff." Behind them there was a commotion. It was Mr. and Mrs. de Silbis. The man said, "We are accursed. It is all your fault, woman!"

"My fault! Listen to the man! I am going around killing people in order to ruin the resort which I have built up with my two bare hands. Without the slightest help from the man who is supposed to be my helpmate!"

"Tcha!" said Mr. de Silbis, "it is the wife of that crazy one, the professor."

"If he had to kill his wife, it would have been so much more considerate to have done it at home. But no, he has to bring her all the way up here just to hurt us, two hard working people who never asked life for anything but a piece of bread and butter, a dry crust of bread if need be."

Eliot said, "With imported caviar, I am sure." He went back to chafing Elaine's wrists.

"But wait," Mrs. de Silbis squinted her eyes in thought, "did we or did we not see his wife leave for home?"

"Umm... so we did. She took the four o'clock train that day we went into town to get butter. You remember the day, they charged us a penny a pound extra, the black marketeers."

"I remember it as if it were yesterday and not three weeks ago. It was also the day I bought some nylons and they charged me a quarter extra."

"So! That is where the money goes!" Mr. de Silbis drew himself up. "I work and slave my fingers to the bone and for what? So that you may cover your fat legs with nylons! So!"

He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her away to one side. Even the sheriff looked at them with some distaste. "No manners."

Wrinkling his nose, Cranston nodded at the corpse. "Think this is a hunting accident?"

"Well now, let's not be hasty." Cranston looked from the lackluster eyes of the sheriff to those of the dead woman. He took in her whole face. It had not been too pleasant a sight in life and death had brought no new dignity. His eyes dropped down the length of her thin, wide nostriled nose to her small mouth. There was a mole on her chin. It had some coarse hair growing from it.

Behind him, Cranston heard Elaine Say, "Oh, Jerry... I thought... I dreamt... No..."

Turning he saw her covering her eyes. She had looked up and seen the snow man. Eliot patted her ineffectually on the shoulder and said, "There, there... take it easy..."

Cranston said in a not too pleasant voice, "Do you do something or do I have to call in the state troopers?"

"Don't yell at me, I'm too sensitive." But the sheriff looked worried. He meandered off in the same direction that de Silbis had taken with his wife.

On the ice, Steven Haight opened his eyes, closed them and then forced them open again. "It is Helen, isn't it?"

Crispin dropped to his knees on the ice next to the man and said, "You must be brave."

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"I can be brave and still not understand... how could she be here? How? I got some letters from her in New York... She was busy and happy. Why, oh, why, should she have come back here, to her death?"

Muzzily, Haight wiped his hands across his eyes. He staggered to his feet. Crispin put his arm around him. Haight said, "And to think one time when we had a slight argument, I said to her, in anger, if you're not careful, the Fool Killer's going to come along and sweep you away... Fool! I am the fool, not she! How could I have let this happen?"

"But, how could you have prevented it?" Crispin asked. All his animosity was gone. "You can't prepare for the completely unexpected. I think it would help if you could think that the Fool Killer had taken her... and not some human being!"

CHAPTER VII

THE carnival was ended. Jerry Eliot looking around him at the way the people had gone from gaiety to sombre distrust of each other, from vacation happiness to cranky surly suspicion, was reminded of the Masque of the Red Death. For no matter what color death wears, he always casts his pall far.

Elaine was recovering slowly. For a while he had feared that she might be in shock. But her resilient youth was snapping her out of it, as no medicine would.

She nodded to a man who stood sunk in thought, wearing a ski costume. It was only when they had passed the man that Eliot realized that it was Peter Gohan's friend, Jim Thompson, the other ski teacher. Thompson had been down in the dumps over his friend's death. This new manifestation certainly hadn't helped any.

Was there, could there be any relation between the suicide of a chambermaid, the death of a ski instructor and the murder of an inoffensive little woman well past middle age? It was too much for him. Resolutely he put it out of his mind, but not until he had thought, with a quirk of a smile, "swell vacation, come to the mountains and forget all about covering a section where death and disease made news almost every day." He realized almost with a start that the clean snow and the permanence of those snow capped, eternal-looking clouds had made him forget for a while the nightmare that was haunting his and every other intelligent person's days and nights...

But it was all back and somehow intensified, for in the squalid section of the city which was his beat, he was used to death and torture. Out here, it seemed terribly wrong. Sometimes, when he was having a tenth cup of coffee in the shack the reporters kept across the street from headquarters, he had thought that maybe it would be better if something did go wrong, if there was a flaw in the scientists' reasoning and a chain re-action started and wiped the whole brawling, filthy world out in one-eighteenth of a second. That feeling had gone, had been wiped from his mind like a word off sand.

He was back wondering if it mightn't have been better if man had stayed one with the apes and had never discovered the secret and power of his rotatable thumb. But looking down at Elaine's sweet and precious face, he could not continue to be cynical. She was so fresh, so worthwhile. He thought, if man has something like this to fight for, then by all the gods, he can fight with his back to the wall, be it in a concentration camp or in the face of inevitable catastrophe. And he understood in a flash how man with all his faults could keep bumbling along, making himself eternal in his children because that was the only eternity he could be sure of...

Somehow she was in rapport with him as he knew that she would always be. She said, "With the snow crisping under our feet, all that back at the lake doesn't seem very real, does it?"

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They stood with arms linked looking across the top of a peak that seemed to go up to the sky. Balanced carefully on the very tip was the moon and it was a very dainty looking moon. A crescent that seemed to be laughing at their petty preoccupations.

Miss Stone was ahead of them. She had her head drawn in, turtle-like and she was scuttling along. He called, "It's only us, Miss Stone. Hey... Patty!"

It was only then she stopped and turned around. Her face was as old and almost as curious looking as had been the corpse's. "Oh, I... see... it's you. I'm frightened. I've seen other people scared. I've kidded them when they were on the way to the operating room and I knew they had about a one-in-one-hundred chance to come back alive... I kidded them, I thought I was helping by making light of their fears... I never knew that real fear was like this. My stomach feels as though it's been kicked. The backs of my knees are trembling. It was all I could do to breathe, until I heard your voices. I guess... I guess I'm scared..."

It was anti-climactic but they knew what she meant. This kind of fear, fear that made every bush suspect, that made your adrenals pump fluid through your body was not the kind of fear about which you jested.

Eliot took one of her arms and Elaine the other. They guided her back to the seeming haven of the hotel. Once inside, the primitive night fears seemed far away. Color gradually began to pump back into Miss Stone's face. She said, "I am sorry. You must think I'm the typical old maid. Afraid of her very shadow..."

"Are you kidding?" asked Eliot. "I was scared stiff too, if it'll make you feel any better to know it."

"And," laughed Elaine, "if it'll help any, I confess I am afraid of shadows!"

Upstairs in his room, Cranston who had come back to the hotel very thoughtfully, was looking at his brief case which lay on the bed. There was still so little to go on. He had an idea, just the vaguest glimmering of an idea that things were not quite the way they looked. That some kind of cross purpose was at work. Through the window, the silvery cold light of the moon made his room almost day bright. He eyed it for a moment. Now, he'd be able to see those tracks in the snow.

He was a person of instant decision. Picking up his brief case, he made his way downstairs. He passed the living room where all the guests were sitting and standing, talking in hushed whispers. To one side, he saw Crispin and Haight. Haight had a glass in front of him and was about to take a swig.

Along the other side of the wall he saw Elaine, Eliot and Miss Stone. The other people looked completely doleful and this was exaggerated by the gala costumes which they had not had time to change. He could hear various people saying, I don't care what happens, I'm leaving here tomorrow. This is too much!

Down the hall Mr. de Silbis was haranguing his wife who was attempting to pass him and get to the living room. "Fool," she said, "dolt, imbecile. Don't you see that if we do nothing, all these people will leave and then where will we be? The height of the season and no guests! Nice, eh?"

He grumbled something.

"I tell you," and her voice lowered, "now is the time to tell the fat oaf to get to work. Make him act like a sheriff, have him tell all these people that no one can leave till the murderer has been found! You see?"

"My dear, I take it all back. You are a gem of a woman, you are indeed ingenious. How neat. Yes, come, we will speak to the sheriff!"

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Cranston smiled to himself. Greed was taking care of something that had worried him. If the sheriff did hold all these people it certainly would help.

He started again for the front door and then paused. After all, the tracks out in the snow would hold for a while. He had wanted to find out more about the death of Peter Gohan. His room was just down the hall. Why not do it now when everyone, even the servants were in the main living room?

Cat-footedly, he made his way to the locked door. He pressed against it, felt the resistance of the lock and opened his brief case. He flipped past two of the sections and his long hand paused at a small leather case. He unsnapped it and a flat piece of metal which had been ground into a shape that was a little like a button hook was in his hand. It slid into the keyhole without a sound. Just as soundlessly, the door opened.

Once inside he dropped the case on the bed and took his fountain pen flash from his breast pocket. Across the bulb, a piece of tape cut off almost all the light. The veriest whisper of whiteness criss-crossed around the room. It was nice, like all the other rooms. But of the character of Gohan there was little left. A trunk near the bed acting as a sort of divan under the window was the only hopeful thing he saw.

It, too, was locked, but a pick of a slightly different shape took care of that. He slipped the cover of the trunk back. He had no idea what he might find. He wasn't even looking for anything in particular. He was just hoping to find out a little about Gohan. In the trunk were some clothes. That wasn't much help. He shrugged and riffled through the clothes. Under them his groping hands felt something that was shaped like a book. He pulled it up and out of the trunk. It was a book of sorts. But it had never been bound. Looking at the pages, he realized that they were cut from pulp magazines. Evidently Gohan had enjoyed horror stories for the pages were stories from various wildly named magazines like Eerie Stories, Terror Novels and Eldritch Tales.

The only common denominator was that they all seemed to have been written by the same man if it was a man. The name under the story title on each of the twenty short stories was B.E. Loved.

It was a curious name and even more curious to find it in magazines devoted to raising hair on the napes of people's necks.

Cranston looked over the rest of the room after locking the trunk again. But there was nothing of the slightest interest there, nothing that you would not expect, skiing texts, cans of ski wax and the like.

He left the room as unobserved as he had entered. Taking but a moment he left the stories in his room and then finally made his way out into the snow.

He walked across the ice down to where the carnival had been held. The snowman was gone. At least the sheriff had found enough energy to remove the woman's body.

Cranston wondered if B.E. Loved had ever written of a corpse in a snowman. With a wry grin, he thought that it was quite probable for writers don't miss much.

He was standing now in the scuffed-up place from which the stones had been thrown at the snowman. He looked all around. The rock thrower had made no attempt to hide the fact that he had been there.

Following the very plain path in the light of the argent moon, Cranston realized that there might well have been more than one person. Pausing in the blackness that made a circle around the base of an evergreen, he went into the darkness.

It was Lamont Cranston who entered that ominous patch with a brief case, but The Shadow, who came back

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out into the light again. He had slipped the broad black hat out of the case, whipped the cape out and now, harsh face shaded by the brim of his hat, he stepped silently back into the trail.

Flitting from one patch of darkness to the next, only the keenest eye would have known that a human was in the forest. The way led up hill. He paused at the crest and looked behind him. The lake, the hotels around it, were doll like. Ahead of him lay what?

Never pausing he went on. He saw ahead of him a stretch of solid blackness that could only be a group of houses. He was even more cautious now as he came closer.

It was a little settlement of perhaps twenty houses. They were rundown; spiritless looking places, with slanting eaves, and sagging window frames.

Life had passed this little hamlet by. Just so might this section have looked a hundred years ago. No telephone wires cut across the sky. No electrical poles were to be seen. Outhouses behind the houses showed the lack of plumbing.

Making his way from house to house, The Shadow looked for any sign of life. He was almost ready to give up when he came to the most dilapidated of any of the places. The one house that he was sure was unoccupied was the only place where people were awake. In the others snores made the night hideous.

Gathered in front of a dying fire were four men. He looked from narrow bitter face to even narrower bitterer face.

A jug sat in the position of honor. One of the men was reaching for it. He said, "Went off nice."

"Yeah. But if I'd let it up to you, you never woulda hit it." This was from the oldest of the men. He spat in the fire.

"What do we do now?" the youngest man asked and there was a sadistic gleam in his eyes.

"Wait," the other talkative one said.

"Wait, all the time wait. Cancha ever do somethin'?"

"We'll do something when I say so and not before. Bet that body stirred them up plenty." The man smiled and it was a horrid sight. Blackened teeth made a backdrop for narrow lips.

They sat again. There was about them a quality of timelessness that made even The Shadow uneasy. They were so obviously ready to wait forever to get their way. Of course, young blood ran a little quicker, but the older men controlled the younger enough to prevent anything like haste.

And they sat.

The scream, when it came, tore through the night like a knife through human flesh. Even the iron nerves of The Shadow jumped. But not the men in the house. They exchanged silent secret glances. Their narrow lips curled up into what might have passed for amusement.

One said. "Thought Ira was due tonight. Hasn't touched her for a week."

The others nodded.

CHAPTER VIII

SILENTLY as a thought, The Shadow made his way to a window where a light had flashed on. He looked into this window. Then he was sorry.

For, in the center of the room, a man who might have been poured from the same mold as the four he had just left, was standing running a belt through his fingers. A woman lay on the floor sobbing. It was not the violence that upset The Shadow, for that he had seen more than his share of, it was not even the pain that crawled across the woman's face like a live thing. It was the expression on the man's face as he felt the leather of the belt. He ran his fingers over it lovingly. When his fingers touched the belt buckle, the expression was intensified.

It was so unclean that The Shadow looked away for a moment. When he looked back the belt was flailing down through the air. The woman just lay there and expected it. That was part of the horror too. She made no move to run away. She didn't even cover her face with her hands.

While the door slammed open and the man and woman stayed frozen in their places by the unexpectedness of the intrusion; The Shadow thought, maybe those old Americans had something. Maybe there is a function for the Fool Killer.

To the startled occupants of the room, The Shadow might well have been a man from Mars. His long strong arm flicked out and snatched the belt from the man's hand. This restored him a trifle. His reflexes automatically responded.

As the belt slipped from his grasp he swung a punch at the darkness that was The Shadow's face. The punch missed and The Shadow was grateful for the physical release he felt for his emotions as his fist crashed into the man's lean face.

The man wiped his hand across his bruised mouth and said, "I'm gonna kill you for that. Nobody lays a hand on a Coffin and gets away with it."

His hand was behind his back. The Shadow cuffed him with the side of his hand and looked down at the woman. She said nothing.

When the man's hand came back into view it was made longer by a clasp knife. He pressed a button on the side of it and four inches of razor-like steel whipped out.

He came at The Shadow. The knife swung around in a circle but The Shadow's fist went in a straight line.

The Shadow was grateful for the pain as his knuckles crunched on the man's chin. The man teetered. His hand relaxed and the knife fell to the floor near the woman.

He fell close to the knife.

The Shadow could do nothing more. What was there to do? He left as he had come with a bitter brackish taste in the back of his throat. As he passed the window he glanced in.

The woman had finally moved. She was near the knife. Her expression was like that of a child at Christmas. She reached out and touched it. She ran her finger along the sharp edge and the smile became broader.

She sat cross legged on the floor with the knife in her hand. Her hard black eyes were staring at the naked

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throat of the man who lay like a bundle of old clothes in a heap on the floor.

Pacing through the woods back towards the hotel, The Shadow thought that, as sorry an exhibition as it had been, still it had taught him the calibre of the people whom Miss Stone had compared to that other long in-bred group, the Jackson Whites.

Strange what the consequences of sequestration could be. No man is an island, all are part of the whole, he thought. You can't cut yourself off from the stream of life. It just doesn't work. Nature doesn't like it and when nature disapproves she can be a cruel and hard task mistress. Another generation would see the Coffins and their, whole kith and kin starting to retrogress physically. The percentage of idiots would increase, anomalies, like extra fingers would become more and more obvious. Flaring his nostrils, The Shadow filled his lungs with clean winter air. He felt as though he had been in a sewer. And yet he had to find out what part of the pattern this settlement made. Had to know where they fitted into the jigsaw... or were they the jigsaw puzzle?

Back at the hotel most of the guests had gone to bed. Lamont Cranston closed the door behind him carefully. Ahead in a couple of big easy chairs, he saw Haight, Eliot and Elaine.

He waved to them.

"C'mon over here," called Eliot.

He joined them. Haight had been drinking again but this time it had not affected him. No matter what he drank he could still see his wife's face in that weird background. The puzzle wrestled at the back of his mind. How could she have come there? Who would have done a thing like that? But it was hopeless; he had no clue, no vaguest idea.

"Mr. Haight's been making Fool Killer fans of us," Elaine said. "You know if there were such a figure, I have a list of nominations of people whom I would like him to carry off so I'd never have to see them again."

"Like who?" asked Eliot indulgently.

"Like wolves in cheap clothing who think that all models are gay devils."

"I see." Eliot looked angry.

Cranston relaxed in a chair and let the warmth go through him. It felt good. He was getting over the emotional impact of his trip to Coffin Corner.

"Any of you read pulp magazines?" Cranston asked lazily.

Haight frowned. "Pulp? What's that?"

"The opposite of slick," said Eliot. "Slick magazines make their money from their ads. Pulp magazines make it on the selling price of a dime or whatever."

"Oh, you mean those blood and thunder things?"

"More or less," agreed Cranston. "But none of you have answered me."

"Well, if you must look at the skeleton in my closet," said Eliot grinning, "I read 'em all the time. I always

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wanted to write and that's a good place to start."

"That's good. Do you know a writer of horror stories named B.E. Loved?"

"Sure. He's a corkin' good one, too."

"Simply wizard, as the English say," said Elaine.

"You mean you read 'em, too?" He was delighted.

"Sure. Ever since I can remember. It's one of my secret passions. Sorry?"

"Of course not. Gee..." He looked at her like a calf.

Cranston cleared his throat. "All of this is very helpful for those long winter evenings in the future when you're married, but do you know anything about this Loved?"

"It's obviously a pen name. But there's no field more anonymous. You could probably find out from the editor of one of the magazines."

"Yes, I had thought of that."

"Why do you ask, Mr. Cranston?" Elaine looked puzzled.

"May have nothing to do with it, but I found that the dead ski instructor, Gohan, was evidently a fan of Loved's."

"That's not too unusual. There are regular cults that spring up, particularly about horror writers," Eliot said. "Then, there's one magazine, Science Fiction it's called, where most of the writers are electrical engineers, astronomers, electronics men. All of them write under assumed names, of course. But never turn up your nose at the pulps. Lots of top writers started there."

"But I still can't see," said Elaine, "what this can have to do with all the things that have been happening up here. Really I can't."

"As I said, it may not have a thing to do with it. I just know so little that I can't leave a single stone unturned."

Outside, out in the cold, there was a thumping sound. It was repeated. Haight reacted strangely. "Don't let him get me..." It was a plea. He cowered down in his chair.

"Don't let who get you?" Eliot asked.

"Those footsteps... the only warning you ever get that the Fool Killer is near is his heavy footsteps. Save me!"

"The liquor must have sneaked up on him again," Eliot said.

"Shall we get him to bed?" Elaine asked.

But Cranston was at the window. He held up his hand for silence. The thumping got louder. He opened the window and dropped from it. It was but ten feet, to the ground. As soon as he was outdoors he realized what the sound was. Some ice had let go and was rolling and rocking down the side of the hill. The thumping

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sounds were the lumps of ice caroming off trees.

He came back in the door. Haight was still cowering in his chair. Cranston explained the sound and sat down again. Haight made a visible effort to pull himself together.

"I'm sorry... I'm behaving like a fool."

"You have a perfect right to, after what happened tonight," Elaine said. "Mr. Cranston, do you think Miss Stone would have some bromides?" she asked. "I think this man needs sleep more than anything else."

Cranston agreed. Elaine went off to wake Miss Stone. The three men sat and looked at the dying fire. They were silent.

Miss Stone hastily donned a wrapper and joined them. She said, "You poor dear, how stupid of me not to think of a sleeping tablet. Come along and I'll get it for you."

Cranston told the younger couple to go along to bed, that he'd care for Haight and they left. Miss Stone, Haight and Cranston were in the dispensary. Miss Stone opened the locked medicine chest and groped for the bottle she wanted.

Haight brightened up a little at the prospect of a night's sleep. Cranston leaned against the door and with blank eyes looked at the room. It was tastefully done. Quite obviously Miss Stone had done some decorating. The walls were white, but around the room up to about five feet, narrow bands of blue about half an inch wide were in parallel rows.

It made the room look smaller and warmer. The lines ran right around the room. She had the pill out and was filling a glass of water. Haight muttered his thanks as she handed the pill and water to him.

They escorted him up to bed. "This seems to be getting habitual," he said. "All my thanks."

"Forget it," said Cranston and the nurse at the same time. They heard him lock himself in and walked away.

"Now," said Cranston, "you try to get some sleep. You look worn out."

"I am exhausted," she said. "Good night, Mr. Cranston."

As Cranston got undressed he thought, what's more, I need a good night's sleep.

And yet, not a half an hour later, Miss Stone was out in the snow shivering more from horror than the cold! For death was again abroad!

CHAPTER IX

THE note that sent her outside was under her door when she finished washing her face. She had no idea how long it had been there. Nervously she picked it up. It read, "If you don't come alone, you won't learn anything. Be under the tree behind the dispensary in half an hour."

It wasn't signed. She knew she was being a fool even as she threw a coat around her. She smiled at the idea that perhaps the Fool Killer would get her. But it was a grim smile.

In half an hour? But how long had the note been there? She wondered, had a cigarette, looked at the time and

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nerving herself for an ordeal, she went downstairs and out into the cold. Behind the hotel, under the tree, she looked at the dark window that was the eye to her workshop. It was a blind eye. She never had any idea how long she stood there before the ceiling light in the dispensary flashed on, suddenly, shockingly.

She was blinded for a second. All she was aware of was a blob, a dark form and it was near her medicine chest. She blinked and cleared her vision.

The angle at which she looked up, cut off part of the lower section of the room. She could just see the top of the band of blue.

The lurking figure was clearer now. He had opened the door to the medicine chest. His back was to her, but it was narrow and strangely familiar.

She watched as a reaching hand went to the second shelf... the second shelf? That was where the poisons were! His hand hesitated over the third bottle and then descended to the fourth! And the fourth she knew as well as she knew her own name. It was bichloride of mercury! One of the vilest and most deadly of poisons!

She stuffed the back of her hand in her mouth to keep from screaming but all the time her brain was going like a well oiled machine. The top of his head was about three inches above the top blue band... and he was wispy thin...

There... he was turning around. It was only then that she screamed and screamed. For he had no face.

Instead, under the brim of his hat all she could see was a featureless, eyeless, noseless, earless skin colored mass.

As the first scream resounded his hand flashed to the light switch. The lights blacked out as if there had never been light. The moon was gone under a cloud. It was dark... dreadfully dark out there. She stood frozen by fear... a minute passed and then a black, black mass descended on her. A crunching sound preceded her falling to the icy snow. The man had hit her on the head with a soft hard weapon that made her mind as black as the night.

Torn from sleep, Cranston was a ludicrous figure as, clad only in pajamas, bare footed, he ran around the corner of the house. The scream had seemed to come from... He paused as he saw the huddle that was Miss Stone. He picked her up and looked around. There was no sign that anyone had been there. He became conscious of the cold.

His feet were freezing. He ran, carrying her, back to the house. Inside, out of the cold, Jerry Eliot stood in amazement as Cranston lowered his burden onto a couch.

He was even more amazed when Cranston said, "Let me have your slippers and your robe for a minute, will you?"

Jerry did as he was asked.

Cranston took the slippers and robe and ran back out of the house. When Cranston returned, Eliot was putting compresses on Miss Stone's head. She was still unconscious.

Evidently not many people had heard the scream. It may have been that only the rooms nearby like Cranston's and Eliot's were near enough.

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Cranston peeled Miss Stone's eyelids back and looked at her eyes. He nodded. Then he looked at her ears. There was no blood coming from them. Cranston felt better.

"Don't think it's a fracture, eh?" asked Eliot.

"Pretty sure it's not particularly serious, since I now know with what she was hit. We're dealing with a very considerate fiend."

Just then she groaned. Both men bent over her. She said, "Ugh... that awful blob..." Then her eyes closed again.

The two men looked at each other in surprise.

Perhaps five minutes later, Miss Stone really regained consciousness. "Take it easy, don't try to speak unless you really feel up to it."

"I guess I feel well enough. If only my head didn't ache so! But..." Her eyes became blank and unseeing.

At that moment, footsteps descended the staircase to their right. She looked up and saw wispy little Mr. Crispin entering the room.

She stared at him and her eyes closed. That was all. No dramatics, just her eyes closing. But when Cranston leaned over her, he found that she had fainted.

He looked up at Crispin and wondered what there could be about him to make a strong willed woman faint. Cranston whispered to Eliot, "Get him out of here on some pretext. She's fainted because of seeing him."

Eliot walked to Crispin's side and said, "Want to help me see if I can find out anything about who hit Miss Stone?"

"Why... is that what happened? Of course I'll help."

Cranston heard the front door slam and was smiling when Miss Stone again came to. She saw the smile and it relaxed her. Cranston looked so poised, so confident of ultimate victory that it soothed her. She said, "That was schoolgirlish of me. I'm sorry."

"No apologies, please. I don't know how long Eliot'll be able to keep him out there, so... what happened from the beginning?"

She composed herself, got her thoughts in order and told him everything that had happened since she so foolishly followed the dictates of the note.

"I see," he said when she had finished. "But in all that what made Crispin so frightful a person?"

"Don't you see... the blue lines in my room... the ones that go around the wall..."

"Yes... oh, you mean the top line is only five feet from the floor and the man you saw was only three inches taller than that... I see."

"If it isn't he," she said, "who can it be?"

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"There aren't any other short men involved, are there?"

"None that I can think of."

They sat for a moment in silence. She said, "There's something a little odd... I don't know if it matters or not... but..."

"Anything matters at the moment. Speak up!"

"When I was waiting out there in the cold, and the light suddenly went on I realized that it was odd."

"Why?"

"Because if he had come in through the hall there would have been a revealing flash of light from the hall!"

"True. Anything else?"

"Yes, after I screamed and stood there motionless, I remember thinking to myself that at least a minute went by before he leaped out at me!"

Cranston's face was harsh. This was the first bit of useful information he had received.

She said, "It was stupid of me to have fainted at the sight of little Mr. Crispin for, after all, how could he have made his face into the disgusting thing that I saw?"

"That was the easiest part of all..." Before Cranston could go on, the two men returned. Eliot said, "All we could find was a scuffed up place out in the snow. It was too cold to do much else."

"Thanks," Cranston winked at Eliot so that Crispin couldn't see it. "I think we've accomplished everything we could. I found the only clues, I guess, when I went out there again in your slippers."

Putting his hand in his pocket, Cranston threw on the floor two women's silk stockings. One was packed with a hard white substance. The other was stretched in an odd way.

Eliot looked at the packed stocking and said, "So, that's why she didn't get a fractured skull!"

"Yes, the marauder packed the stocking, or at least the foot of it with salt. That makes a soft blackjack that molds to the head. If I have to get crowned, I'll choose that method."

Miss Stone asked. "But you were going to tell me how the man made himself look so horrible."

"Yes," Cranston said. "There's no puzzle about that, the other stocking explains it."

CHAPTER X

"If you promise not to get upset, I'll show you why the man had no features."

"I'm all right now, I won't faint again. I promise you."

Cranston went out into the hall, taking the stretched stocking with him. He walked out into the hall, but it was a creature out of a nightmare land who walked back into the room a minute later a horror that should never be

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seen...

Eliot gasped... "Wh..."

Cranston's voice came from the horror's head. "Relax, it's me." He took hold of the back of the featureless face and pulled. The stocking, for that was what it was, slipped off his head. His features came into view. He said, "Do you see? You pull the top of a silk stocking over your head and hide the remainder of it behind your neck. The stocking, pulling taut over the face, flattens the nose, hides the eyes and ears and make a rather terrible looking mess of you!"

"Good heavens!" breathed Mr. Crispin. "You were indeed a terrible spectacle. Does all this mean that someone showed their face to Miss Stone in that condition?"

Cranston nodded. "Eliot, will you help Miss Stone to her room?"

"Of course."

The tall wide shouldered figure of Cranston went through the door with all eyes upon it. He walked down the hall and went to the dispensary.

He went in and turned the light on. He looked from the top line of the blue decoration out the window and nodded to himself. Then he looked at the wall closely, at the clean paint that was above the decorative lines. He nodded to himself again and turning the light out, left.

This time when he went to bed, he hoped that he'd be able to sleep himself out for he had a busy day ahead of him.

First thing the next day, right after breakfast, he went into town and looked for the telegraph office. He was taking no chances of asking questions of the natives. He figured it would be easier to look than to go through another question and answer period.

He found it after a bit. It was part of a general store set up. The office of the telegraph company was just a desk with some paraphernalia. He looked it over and leaned on the desk. Finally, a man in a grocer's apron came over and said. "Want to send a telegram?"

"I'd rather have some information."

The man pursed his mouth up.

"I might even be willing to pay for it."

The man unpursed his mouth.

"Send many telegrams out?"

"Nope."

"About how many a week?"

"Mebbe two, three..."

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"I see. Got any idea how many telegrams went out three weeks ago?"

"Yep."

"How many?"

"Two."

"May I see the copies of them?"

The man looked around carefully to see if anyone was watching them. No one was. He said, "For how much?"

Cranston silently opened his wallet and folded a twenty dollar bill around his forefinger.

The man watched him but said nothing.

Another twenty went on the finger.

"Ummm... well... don't ever tell anybody."

Cranston shook his head.

The man went to a filing cabinet and riffled through it. He came out with two flimsies. "I could lose my job for this," he said.

Cranston took the flimsies. "Relax." He looked at the first one. It was one of those having a fine time wish you were here things. The other was pretty much what Cranston had expected. It read, "Please return. Take train from Portstown." It was signed B.E. Loved. It was addressed to Mrs. Steven Haight aboard the New York train.

Handing the flimsies back, Cranston turned on his heel and left. The man looked at the forty dollars he had received and sighed. These winter visitors were the limit.

Back at the hotel, Cranston avoided meeting anyone and went up to his room, got comfortable and slouching in a chair beside the window began to read. He lit a cigar and time passed by quite pleasantly. He was reading the stories which Gohan, the murdered ski instructor, had thought enough of to clip from pulp magazines and save.

The stories were pretty good. All had a little twist that made them horrible, or unworldly, or somehow strange. But it wasn't till he read one called "The Mole" that he sighed and stopped reading. He put it to one side and sat and looked out the window.

The crime had started as such a simple one. But events, uncontrollable and whimsical in their very unrelatedness had conspired to make a tangled web of circumstances.

He heard a clatter outside in the hall and realized that it was lunch time. He got up, dressed and went downstairs. His step was heavy. He was not very happy about the way things were turning out. At the table, Elaine and Eliot smilingly insisted that he join them.

"Sure you two don't want to be alone?" he asked.

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"Nonsense. Sit down. I've told Elaine of all our doings last night."

"How's Miss Stone?"

Eliot nodded to a table. Cranston hadn't noticed, but Miss Stone was seated there, as large as life, eating away. "That answer your question?"

"Guess so."

"She says," said Elaine, "that outside of a headache, she feels fine."

Lunch passed pleasantly enough. But Cranston's mind was far away. He finished quickly and going outside to a phone booth he called the sheriff.

He identified himself and asked, "How's things?"

"Purty good." The sheriff seemed willing to let it go at that.

"Did you have a post mortem on Mrs. Haight?"

"Yep."

"Come, come, man, how did she die?"

"Strangled."

"I see. Still think it was a hunting accident?"

"Now you see here," the sheriff spluttered, "you got no right to act this way!"

Cranston hung up on him in the middle of a splutter. That was that. It had happened as he had imagined. Mrs. Haight had started back to New York, then at the first stop she got a telegram asking her to return.

She took the train back and was met by B.E. Loved. They must have gone into the forest that encroached on the town. Once there, who knew what happened? But it had ended in death. In her being strangled till no more breath went to her aching lungs. Then? How had she gotten from there, for surely the killer had buried her, how had she moved from some quiet spot on the mountain to the inside of a snowman three weeks later?

Cranston was sure he knew that too, but it was going to be a dilly to try to prove. He went back up to his room and again sat and looked out the window. Dusk descended early. Out on the ice he could see some youngsters sailing ice boats. It was a fabulous sport. The boats were simply triangular frames mounted on ice skates. A tremendous amount of sail and jib furled out above the simple body.

Cranston knew that sixty or seventy miles an hour was nothing to one of these racing jobs. The kids handled the cranky jobs as though it were the simplest thing in the world.

Dinner time came and Cranston again ate hurriedly, but when he was finished there was nothing to do. He had it all straight in his mind, but how to prove it?

This killer, once started on his career, had avoided all fancy frills that might lead to detection. Instead he had taken the course that was most difficult to detect. He had strangled and shot seemingly at a time when there

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were no watching eyes... but had there been?

Cranston could not be sure. He sighed heavily and left the room. On the way to the living room, he passed Mr. and Mrs. de Silbis. They were arguing again as seemed to be their habit. It was some mix up that didn't concern Cranston.

Everyone was in the room. Crispin sat next to Haight. Elaine and Eliot were on a love seat near the open fire. Thompson, the ski instructor was mooning in a corner. Miss Stone was regaling some friends with a hilarious account of the proceedings the night before. Cranston was pleased to see that she could jest about her fear.

The front door opened and the sheriff loomed up. He stood in the archway looking in at all the guests till finally there was a silence as head after head turned toward the mountainous man standing there.

When he had everyone's attention he said, " 'Bout time I made an arrest, I reckon."

All eyes were on him. There were perhaps a hundred and fifty people in the room and all were quiet.

"I guess I got a sorta direct mind. I figger that if a man's wife is dead, then in all probability the husband did it. Can't see much else to do. So, Haight, if you'll come along, I'll put ya in jail."

Haight, standing at a window, blanched. All the blood vanished from his face. He tried to keep it light as he said, "As attractive as you make it sound, I can't see why I should accept your kind invitation."

"Tut, tut, we're not going to have any nonsense are we?" The sheriff fingered a huge blunderbuss of an old .45 that was revealed when he opened his coat.

Haight looked around frantically. He saw Cranston and appealed to him. "Mr. Cranston, you're not going to let him arrest me just because he's too lazy to look for anyone else, are you?"

Cranston said, "Got a warrant, sheriff?"

"Yep. Gonna make this all legal." There was a pause, while the sheriff bent his fat arm and reached for the warrant in his inside breast pocket. Outside, some loose ice rattled and rumbled down the side of the hill. It made thumping sounds.

Haight said, "The Fool Killer is after me again!" He tried to smile but it wasn't very successful. He watched the sheriff show his warrant to Cranston and just as Cranston looked up, Haight did an insane thing. Without turning to look, with no warning, he threw himself back through the window. The glass crashed and above the sound they could hear him say, "I'll fool the Fool Killer."

By the time the fat sheriff had waddled to the window and looked through the broken shards of glass helplessly, Cranston, brief case under arm, was at the outside door. He slid through it and was gone.

The sheriff looking out said, "The blame fool... he's running down towards the ice. Lucky I got some of my deputies posted there."

But Haight outsmarted the slow witted deputies. He raced past them out towards the ice. They pulled their guns slowly, confident that they could shoot him as soon as he was out on the insecure footing of the frozen lake.

But he backtracked for a second and threw himself onto an ice boat whose sail was furled. He cut the rope

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that held it stationary and pushed it out on the ice. He lay flat on the back of it and pushed with his feet like a kid taking a belly-whopper on a sled.

He was so flat that he made a difficult target. And it was dark. From above the sheriff called down, "Stop him, you fools!"

They ran out onto the ice but slipped. One fell and in falling dragged the other down with him. By this time Haight had pushed the ice boat about a hundred yards away. They scabbled around and tried to get set. But it was a hard shot with a pistol. He was almost invisible and all they could see moving were his flailing legs.

Long before they came to their senses and ran along the packed snow on the side of the lake, he was out of pistol shot range and unfurling the sail.

One of them hazarded a chance shot as the sail ballooned out and the boat began to slide across the ice as slickly as a greased pig. The shot missed.

But the light of the flash showed the astounded deputies that another ice boat was setting out from the shore. As far as they could see, the ice boat was going by itself.

In this uncertain light it was completely impossible for them to see the black clad figure of The Shadow crouched over the stick at the rear of the ice boat.

But as the second ice boat whizzed by in chase, they heard an eerie, mocking laugh echo and re-echo across the silent lake. The sound was enough to make a man sleepless for nights for it had in it retribution...

The ice boat was gone before the mocking echo of the eerie laugh had died down...

CHAPTER XI

Back at the hotel there was a stunned silence. Most of the people were crowded around the window. They had seen the second ice boat start off in pursuit of the hounded Mr. Haight.

Elaine turned to the sheriff and said, "Now, you small brained oaf, I'm sure you're satisfied. You've driven that poor Mr. Haight almost out of his mind. I don't think he knows what he's doing!"

The sheriff looked down at his huge feet. He shuffled them like a guilty boy. "Didn't turn out quite the way I figgered."

Miss Stone said with a snap. "What did you figger?"

"I..." be grunted unhappily, "I was kinda hopin' that accusin' him would make the real killer speak up. I didn't really think that Haight done it."

Eliot stared at him. "You mean you let your deputies shoot at a man whom you thought was innocent?"

"Waal... cain't be very innocent if he run away, can he?"

Eliot moaned, "Man, don't you realize that Haight is almost insane from the shock of finding his wife murdered and then the added shock of accusation... why you... you... dimwit!"

Dimwit wasn't what he wanted to say, but there were ladies around.

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Elaine said, and there was a bit of a quaver in her voice, "Jerry, who do you think was in that second ice boat; the one that horrible laugh came from? And where is Mr. Cranston?"

Mr. Cranston was nowhere in sight. Instead the darker side of his self, The Shadow, was crouched over the tiller of the ice boat. Ahead, fleeing like the wind, a desperately frightened man was fleeing as fast as the ice boat would take him.

Ice, cut by the front skate, flew up and cut at The Shadow's face. He lowered his head so that the brim of his big hat took the cutting ice. It was a strange sensation, this quiet flight through the night. The Shadow had thought that a trip on an aquaplane was the most exciting sensation he had ever had, but this made it seem tame.

Haight, mind almost a blank, lay on his belly with the tiller clutched in his hand. This must end, and soon... the lake could not go on forever. But while it lasted it cleared some of the cobwebs from his brain. He craned his neck around and saw the filled sail of the following ice boat careening closer. The Fool Killer, he thought wryly, is breathing down my neck... and it serves me right. What did I run for? What purpose does it serve?

His brain snapped to attention. Up ahead was the end of the lake. There would be no sense in tacking around and trying to cut around back across the lake. This was almost the end.

He swerved the iceboat around to a sudden stop. It was too abrupt. He was thrown from the ice boat and landed, stunned, on a snowbank. He shook his head and staggered to his feet. He looked around. The other ice boat was about two hundred yards away. Haight started in through the trees.

In the other ice boat, The Shadow saw what had happened. He slowed his boat down more slowly for he knew that in the darkness among the trees he was sure to be able to catch up with Haight. Perhaps three minutes before Haight vanished into the underbrush, The Shadow, a blob of blackness, descended from the ice boat and trailed the steps into the forest.

Moving as only The Shadow can, lightly and quietly as a breeze ruffling a curtain, he made his way into the rank darkness. He was invisible. Again and again, he would pause and look down at the snow. The footprints led up this way all right.

He stopped and listened. Surely Haight's stumbling feet would make some sound that would carry to his sensitive ears. But nothing came across the night but the melancholy sound of the wind in the trees.

Then... he heard a shot...

Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong. This was not ending according to plan. He went forward faster now. He almost ran. So it was that he almost fell over the body that lay crumpled in an untidy mass on the snow.

Blood made an etching in the snow. The heat of it had made it penetrate into the snow. The curling lines made a bizarre pattern that The Shadow compared in his mind to the twistings and turnings of this case...

He stepped over Haight's body and followed the footsteps that led away into the distance. He realized as he went on trailing that he was approaching the settlement of the Coffins.

He moved through the underbrush and on the hard snow as rapidly as possible. The man he was trailing probably did not know that anyone was even in the vicinity. If he had found Haight in the forest and killed him there, the odds were against his even knowing of the existence of The Shadow.

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He was right. The little hollow where the dilapidated houses lumped in despair was right ahead. The footsteps led to the house where he had scouted around the night before.

Only one thing had changed. This time a fifth man was in the decaying room. The fire was a little brighter. The jug, or another just like it, was on the table. They sat again. The fifth man was the one who had been beating his wife.

He put a single shot rifle on the table near the jug. There was a little secret smile on all their faces. The oldest man said, "That's that."

The fifth man said, "That'll learn him to trifle with my daughter. Not that it wasn't my wife's fault for letting her work in the hotel!"

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," said the oldest man in a terrible voice and the light in his eyes was bright.

They sat. The fire flickered. Their angular faces looked to The Shadow like gargoyles.

One of them put the jug to his mouth as The Shadow placed a .45 on the window sill. He said in a curiously quiet voice, "This makes you all accessories to the fact, you know."

They turned slowly. No one spoke. The man with the jug was frozen into place.

The fifth man said, "It's the one I told you about. The one that hit me and took my knife..."

"Who is it?" the oldest man asked.

"The devil," said one of the younger men confidently. As he spoke he threw the jug at the fire. It broke and the flames licked up the alcohol greedily. The brighter light let them see The Shadow's head, black shrouded.

"It is the devil!" the older man said and launched himself in a dive at the window.

The Shadow hit him on the side of the head with the flat of the gun and he slumped to the floor. One of the younger men said, "Get out and get him from the side. I'll..." As he spoke he too threw himself at the window.

His reaching hand clenched on The Shadow's throat. It was a second or two before The Shadow could pry the hand loose. He smashed the man on the head with the gun, but somehow the man held on. It was silent and terrible. And in that split fraction of time, two of them came out of the house and around to the rear of The Shadow. One of them had the rifle.

As The Shadow pushed the clenching hand away and the unconscious man slumped to the floor, the rifle raised till The Shadow was centered in the sight.

Clouds of smoke billowed out of the old fireplace in the house behind The Shadow. Leaping sparks jumped to the tinder-like floor and aged furniture. The two men whom The Shadow had hit lay quiescent on the floor.

Outside, The Shadow, gun hanging in his hand at his side, stared into the muzzle of the rifle. Off to one side he saw a flicker of motion.

The man who held the gun was enjoying it. He was the one called Ira, the father of the girl who had killed

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herself. The sadist who enjoyed beating his wife looked above the sight and his cold eyes danced.

The other man walked forward and smashed The Shadow in the face. Like a reflex without thinking, without seemingly caring that he was staring into the face of death, The Shadow flipped his gun-filled hand and it crashed against the man's head.

The man fell to the ground. Ira, gun held steady, said, "Good nerves you got... but if you move again, you get what I gave the city feller."

Again, on the outside of The Shadow's vision, he saw a flicker of some kind of motion.

Ira said and his voice was obscene, caressing, "Aintcha gonna beg? Don'tcha want a chance to say your prayers? You're gonna die, you know. Slowly! I'm gonna shoot ya in the belly."

The Shadow was quiet. He had dropped his gun into the snow at a gesture from the rifle. His life was completely at the command of the man with the thin face and glittering eyes.

The man was disappointed because The Shadow gave no response. He said, "This is it."

His finger tightened on the trigger. The Shadow could see it with a terrible clarity.

Back at the hotel, the phone rang. Mrs. de Silbis, all self-importance, came in and said, "There's a long distance call from New York for Mr. Cranston. Where is he?"

But no one knew. Eliot stepped forward. "Perhaps I can take it."

The call was from Burbank and he had heard about the people involved in the case when Cranston had called earlier in the day. He said, "You're the newspaper man, aren't you?"

"So called, yes. Can I help you?"

Burbank said, "Yes. You can tell Cranston that I managed to find out the real name of the man who wrote under the pseudonym of B.E. Loved."

"No kidding. Who is it?"

"The editor wasn't too happy about telling me, but it's Haight, just as Cranston thought."

"Wheww..." Eliot whistled in surprise.

Eliot walked back to the room with his mind in a whirl. What does this new piece of information mean? And where was Cranston all this time?

Out in the forest, in the little hamlet, The Shadow was watching the finger tighten on the trigger. He had no idea of what to do. The man had been too clever to get close enough so that The Shadow could jump him.

And then it happened. The last thing in the world that either The Shadow or the killer expected. As the man shot, his aim was spoiled. The bullet hit too high. It creased The Shadow's head above the ear. He felt as if he'd been kicked by a mule.

The last thing that he saw as he swirled off into unconsciousness was the woman whom he'd saved from the

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beating. She was pulling the clasp knife out of her husband's back. A gush of blood welled up where the knife had been.

The fire in the house made the scene all too plain. The Shadow wondered as he drifted off, if he were to be the next sheath for the knife.

CHAPTER XII

LATER, it was a grisly job carrying Haight's stiffening body down to the ice boat and then sailing back with it.

In the darkness at the foot of the hill that led up to the hotel, The Shadow vanished into the brief case and it was Lamont Cranston, head splitting with pain, dried blood on the side of his face, who staggered into the hotel carrying Haight's body.

The Sheriff spoke first. He said, "Didja have to kill him?"

The body placed on the sofa hailed all eyes. Cranston said wearily, "No, it was one of your second cousins who did that."

"You mean them Coffins are off on the war path again?"

"You have the wrong tense." Cranston was physically ill from what he had seen when The Shadow opened pain racked eyes out in the hills.

"What's that mean?"

"It means they were on the war path. It's all over." Cranston just did not feel up to describing the scene. The woman who had saved his life had taken advantage of the fire.

All five men were in the house when the roof fell in. She had evidently brought them in and then watched to the bitter end. It hadn't been too hard. Her husband was dead, the others stunned.

When the fire was dying down she had reloaded the single shot rifle and then placed the muzzle in her mouth. Nearby was her shoe. She had used her big toe to pull the trigger.

Miss Stone, edging away from Crispin who was standing near her wringing his hands as he looked at the body of his fellow in Americana, said, "Do you mean that all this horror is at an end?"

Cranston swallowing the drink nodded. "All neatly tied up and ready to be forgotten, I hope."

The sheriff, by much huffing and puffing reached around and came out with a pair of handcuffs. He said, "Shall I cuff this little feller now? The nurse told me about what she saw last night."

Cranston shook his head. "Get me some colored scotch tape and I'll take care of that... Crispin had nothing to do with it." Cranston thought a moment and then said, "But wait, most of you have been upset by all this; I suppose you deserve an explanation. Eliot, up in my room you'll find a story by a pulp writer named B. E. Loved. It's called 'The Mole.' Bring it down, will you?"

Eliot leaned over and whispered Burbank's message to Cranston who nodded and said, "I was positive I was right. But some substantiation helps."

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They all sat and looked at Cranston. Eliot returned with the story. The pages were turning yellow.

"Read it aloud, will you? It's short, even though it holds a man's fate," Cranston asked.

Eliot looked puzzled and sitting down began to read out loud...

"The Mole by B. E. Loved..."

"Hold it..." Cranston said. "Most people when they change their names do either of two things. They take a name whose initials are the same as their own or they occasionally pun on the meaning of their names. Haight, whose name is pronounced Hate, just took the antonym of his name. Go ahead, Jerry..."

THE MOLE

By B. E. Loved

The sweat trickled thru the thick black hairs on the backs of his hands. His hands lay limp at his sides... limp because he was saving their strength, saving their strength for what he knew they had to do. Had to do tonight. Tonight or never. It could no longer be put off. Her voice, once pleasant and soft had coarsened into a hideous imitation of what it had been. It went on now like a cheap plastic recording, scratchy and off tone, as though the needle was worn down by a thousand replays was scratching along on the nubbin. She said, and it was a question, "How do you do it? How can you? You know that I was here waiting, that your good food waited for you on the table, that I had slaved over the stove to cook it, that..."

He turned his ears off. He had had to learn to do that years ago. He knew all the words in her vocabulary and a queasy lot of whining monosyllables they were. They had to do always with food, or clothes or furniture. Or, how could he have forgotten this for even an instant... money. Money, always money. He wondered in some spare back room of his mind what happened to all the money he turned in to the house. He had no particular vices... a glass of beer with the boys sometimes or, as tonight, a flyer on an occasional horse. But he won as often as he lost...

Her voice, through some trick she had acquired, suddenly managed to break through his thought stuffed ears. He heard her say, "I won't stand it, do you hear? I don't have to stand it and I won't! Either you come straight home in the future or..."

He even knew what the dire threat was going to be... not that she'd leave him... oh no... never that... no such possible bliss as that... no the threat and a real one it was, was that she'd invite her ancient crone of a nagging mother to come and visit them. Visit, he thought what a small word to clothe so much hell. She had come on one visit... it had lasted forever. It had lasted from what was to have been a week end to a week end that stretched and stretched till it covered one whole horrible year.

He looked up at his wife across the round, dirty, crowded dining room table. A dining room table that was never dined off of, he thought dully. It had been years since he'd eaten anywhere but in the kitchen. Eaten in the kitchen alone because she insisted that she got weak with hunger if she waited till he got home from work at eight o'clock. So she ate at five and cooked his food at five. She cooked his food for him, there was no denying that. But she left it, cold, greasy and foul in a dirty frying pan till he got home. He turned the fire up under the pan. He set the kitchen table, he ate the rank food, alone but for her nagging presence in the other room.

The greasy frying pan, the cold foul food had somehow become the symbol in his mind of his wife. The round vacuity of the pan, the cold unreason of the unseasoned food, the dirt of the seldom scoured pan, all

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summed up her small soul so well that sometimes the two, woman and frying pan became twisted and muddled in his mind.

He checked his impression as he looked at her across the table. Looked at her as he had not dared for so long now, not dared for fear of what he'd do. He looked at her shining greasy face and saw the black iron frying pan. He smelled of her and his nostrils closed as they did at the rancid smell of the cold food. He listened to her nerve scratching voice and it sounded like the complaining shrill that steel wool let off on the infrequent occasions when she swiped at the pan.

He had taken off his shoes when he came home. Taken them off that he might ease that bunion that yearly crowded his foot out of the shoe more and more. It seemed that she had noted the shoes coming off and felt that it was a personal insult.

"It's bad enough you come stragglin' in here with beer on yer breath at all hours, but what's more to take off your shoes... What do you care if I wanted to go to the movies? No, all you want to do is lay down in your sodden state and stare at the ceiling and think about that woman. Ha... that hit you right where you live, didn't it? Didn't think I knew about her, her with her fancy clothes, so it's a shame to respectable women that have to live in the same block with her!"

He dropped his eyes from her round face and watched a drop of sweat trickle down through the forest of hair on the back of his hand along to the tip of his finger. How, he wondered, had she found out about Mae? It didn't matter much. Mae was cheap; no sense in saying she wasn't. But how had his wife found out about the one evening he'd spent with Mae? Well, it didn't matter much. Mae had been great fun though...

"I see you sittin' there with that little dirty squint in your eye... No you just listen to me; I've had about as much as any woman can stand... I say it now and I..."

He pushed his chair back and stood up. Suddenly he was sweating more than he ever had in his life. He shook his head to clear the sweat away from his eyes. He looked at her, looked as deep into her eyes as he could for they were almost too shallow for belief... In his stomach, strange things rumbled and twitched. He thought of a phrase he'd read, somewhere about a man who had butterflies in his stomach. He had them all right... but they felt as big as bats and they writhed and clawed at the lining of his belly.

He kept staring at her as he moved forward. He was staring so blindly that he forgot that you had to duck your head in order to miss the stupid rococo lamp shade she had hung in the center of the room. His head crashed into it.

"Now look what you've done, stupid. If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times there's no reason why a man can't remember to duck under a..."

She stopped short. Stopped as though someone had wrenched her windpipe shut as he reached up and ripped the lamp shade free from the bulb. She blinked suddenly in the flood of raw light that poured down on her. Perhaps the increased light helped her to see that which she had not seen. For as she looked at his face, her fat red hand went up to her throat. She gasped, "No... no... no..."

She was still shaking her head idiotically from side to side as his hand clasped on top of her hand. His hands squeezed on her hand so that it acted like a garrote. The unformed words bubbling on her lips transmuted to flecks of spittle that frothed out of the corners of her now blue lips. His hands were sweating so much, he was sweating so hard that he couldn't tell if the moisture on her face was her tears of agony or drops of sweat falling from his face onto hers. He resisted the maniac pleading in her eyes and instead focused his sight on a hairy mole on the side of her chin. His stomach turned as he remembered how back in their early days

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together, he'd laughed about it, kissed it, called it her beauty spot... To think that there had ever been anything of beauty in this thing that was dying in his hands.

He stood that way for a long time. For so long a time that his hands were cramped and sore when he finally released his hold. He realized that she had been dead for minutes while he held on in a grip that he dared not slacken. His hands, spider like in the grotesque shape they had assumed in strangling her, fell to his sides. The unshaded light beat down on her unlovely face. Somehow when he had thought of killing her he had never pictured her like this, limp, relaxed, head lolling on one side of her short fat neck.

He thought, is she really dead? Is it possible that the tongue will now be forever silent? He wrestled with his stomach as he leaned over and pressed his ear against the too soft limp flesh. No sound... her heart was still. And if her heart was so still, so was her tongue.

For the first time he had a feeling of exultation. It was done. It was finished. He sighed like a man who sees the end of a race in sight. Now all there was to do was get away. There was no hurry. No one was likely to come to their house. She'd driven his friends away soon after they were married. And as for her friends... she had none. Acquaintances, fellow gossip mongers, yes. But friends who'd come and spend an evening in their too overcrowded railroad flat? No! There was no danger of interruption. Not if he stayed for hours, and he had no intention of doing that.

He moved away from her sacklike body and surveyed the room. What should he take? What of him was here that was precious? He realized and it was a little wrenching shock, that there was nothing here, nothing in the three crowded dirty rooms that he wanted. Not a picture, not a single inanimate object that was not somehow part of her, part of her domination.

He went to the door and paused there, hand on door knob. His clothes? He had his one good suit on his back. He grinned suddenly, nervously. How stupid of him. He was more wrought up than he had thought. He'd forgotten to put his shoes back on. Before he took his hand away from the door knob it came alive. It rattled in his fingers. He stopped breathing. He stopped thinking. His eyes raced across the room. The window that leads to the fire escape that was the only route. Three long steps would take him to it. Then out the window and down to the street. He'd get away somehow, he had to. But just as he took the first step, he wondered who can it be why run away when it may be nothing? Perhaps it's just one of the kids in the building... sure... that would be it.

He took a deep breath and standing so that his big body cut off any view of the room or its contents, he opened the door. Opened it just a slit. Just enough to look down and see a woman, his next door neighbor. One of his wife's tongue companions.

She looked up at him and said, "Oh, I didn't know you were home already."

His voice was loud. Louder than he wanted it to be. He asked, "Well, what is it? What do you want? My wife's gone to bed... got a sick headache..."

"Hmm... no wonder, with this heat what it is. I'll be surprised if we all don't come down with prostration."

Her voice trailed off as he closed the door. He waited there, ear plastered to the thin door panel till he heard her close her door. Then and only then he drew a deep breath.

He congratulated himself. A fine fool he'd have felt like racing down the fire escape stairs with that nincompoop screaming at the top of her lungs. A little sound, an echo of a sound more than a real sound crept into his mind. He wondered what it was. He looked around the room, nothing to make a noise... but there it

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was again. A little louder now... He backed against the door and it's coolness felt like a bulwark against madness. The sound was clearer now. A creaking... a creaking in the room where there was no movement. Mice... not even the insolent intruders that haunted this house could make a sound as loud as that. His unwilling eyes flicked across his dead wife's body. They returned rapidly. For it was she who was making the noise. Her fat drooping body was sliding sliding from the position in which he'd left her sliding off the chair so that any second now her heavy body would crash to the floor.

He pulled himself together, slowed down his hurried breathing and stepped to her side. Sure enough, she was tilting sideways. That was what had made the noise. The cold shabby chair had creaked its warning as she slid limply over.

He got there just in time. Her sweat-wet body was cold, clammy, as he wrestled to keep her from slamming down. It cracked his muscles to hold her jelly fish limp as she was. He managed though and eased her down till she was lying on the worn out rug. Her hairpins rained out of her hair as he rolled her under the shadow of the table. Better not to have her face glaring at him as he left.

Erect once more, he stepped to the door, opened it, closed it rapidly behind him. No knowing what enemy eyes were peering at him. He put the key in the lock and felt a little better as he heard it click home.

The stairs were a torment. As he tiptoed down, anxious not to meet anyone he knew. Anxious to forestall any questions as to where he was going, anxious just not to meet any face in this inferno that would remind him of her. He knew that with all the traffic these tenement stairs had to bear that the odds were against him, but still he hoped against hope.

He made it safely all the way down four flights of stairs but there his luck ran out.

The straggly hair and beaten countenance of a woman he knew vaguely as the wife of the block's most notorious drunkard looked up at him pathetically. He knew what she was going to ask before she asked it. He beat her to it.

"No, Mrs. Frannin, I haven't seen Jim tonight. Don't know where he is..."

She smiled a little fragment of a smile. He knew that she knew that he knew where Jim was. Jim was the same place he always was down the block, in the cool comfort of the gin mill. But he kept up the pretense that they all did. He said, "In this weather, he may have been knocked out by the heat and had to stop off somewhere... you know how it is..."

She nodded as she edged past him up the stairs. Yes, she knew how it was.

He paced quickly to the outer door. As was his habit, he glanced at the rusty mail box. They never got any mail, but nevertheless, he always looked. He caught himself and smiled. As if there'd be any mail at twelve o'clock at night.

The smile faded from his face as he thought... that's how the cops catch you. Because you have little habits... little things that you mostly aren't even aware of... he'd have to be careful... dope out every move or he was a dead duck.

The street was crowded, but then it'd have been surprising if it wasn't. You can't coop people up in coffin size rooms that is you can't and expect them to stay in them on a steaming night like this. The stoop was overflowing with sharp faced brats. He smiled a hello at a couple of them he knew. As he stepped down the final three steps that were to rid him forever of this house, he wondered why he found such horror in the

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sophistication of these young people. It was good he supposed that they were sophisticated. Naivete in surroundings like these would be asking for death. There was no room for childish unknowingness here. These kids gobbled up awareness with their mother's milk. They knew all the angles... they had to.

No time for thoughts like these. He knew that he needed all his concentration if he was to get away with murder. He flipped an idle hand at the beat cop who was mopping his red face with a dripping handkerchief.

"How's things?"

The cop grunted, "How do you think, on a night like this? There's been more devilment in the last four hours than there's been in the last month!"

He smiled and moved on slowly... must walk slowly, mustn't arouse even a flicker of suspicion, must walk slowly, breathe slowly. But think fast. Faster than ever before... where did he go from here? Down the block and around the corner. Mustn't even try to plan too far ahead. The secret was to meet each obstacle, overcome it as it arose.

But there were so many obstacles... so many potential stumbling blocks. Suppose he did get away from the neighborhood, where he was known, suppose he did make that train that he had in mind, suppose he did get away from this city that he hated with all the hate of the defeated then what?

Another city... another puky job, another woman... another... no! He mustn't think ahead. The important thing was to walk away from the beat cop, get around that corner into the subway. The subway just to be lost in the anonymity of the cave under the streets. Even that would be better than this walking, feeling as if he were tiptoeing over hidden bombs, feeling that any eye might know him for what he was – a killer fearing that every voice raised in clamor might at any moment burst out shrilly Stop that man! He killed his wife! He strangled her. Look, her life is on his hands. Stop that maniac and then the sound of bullets... the keening of a police whistle and all the cops in all the cop cars shrieking in pursuit, sirens raised in a cacophony of pursuit.

There he'd made the corner. But the saliva dried in his mouth. He gulped down cotton. How was he going to get past the gin mill. There was Jim now, staggering out looking for a friendly shoulder on which to weep. What to do... duck down behind this garbage can and pray that the drunken eyes would fail to see him. Yes, that was the only thing. He dared not risk his impatience on a sodden drunk. He might give himself away betray the fact that he had to getaway.

He dropped, invisible behind the garbage can. The night air was a mixture of rotten fruit, decayed garbage. There, Jim was almost at the corner. He was safe. In just a second he could rise from his hiding place and walk on. Then the subway and..."

The hand that dropped onto his shoulder was almost reassuring. The hand belonged to the beat cop and his voice was sorrowful. He said, "You didn't even get off the block... tough luck... tough luck too that your nosey neighbor called the cops when she started to brood about the bright light in your house spilling out. Tough luck..."

His mind reeled. All this... all this and he didn't even, make the block... The words tough luck intoned their way deep, deep into the furthestmost recesses of his numbed brain... tough luck...

Tough luck, tough luck... no... ten o'clock. Tough luck... ten o'clock... wait a minute... what was the connection between tough luck and ten o'clock. He stirred restlessly, opened his eyes and looked into the cranky red-rimmed eyes of his wife. She was alive and she was screeching. "It's ten o'clock on a Sunday morning and you're still in bed. You... you... get up!"

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Her voice had gone up on that. He squinted and his eyes focused on the hair that sprouted out of the mole on her face.

He sighed for he knew it had to be done all over again...

CHAPTER XIII

JERRY cleared his throat and said, "Quite a yarn."

"He told me one time that his wife would not give him a divorce. I see now..." Crispin relapsed back into thoughtful silence.

"All the stories that Haight wrote, under that other cynical name, have that sort of wry twist to them and most of them are about husbands who are tied to impossible wives," Cranston said. "You see, when he wrote these stories it was not for the money. And he was certainly ashamed of it because he made it such a secret, but in those stories he managed to work off some of the bile that life with his wife accumulated. Then one day, he just couldn't go on kidding himself with stories... like the end of that story. And you remember, Mrs. Haight had a mole on her chin. Like the end of that story, one day he realized that he had to do it all over again... that wish fulfillment was not enough... so he killed her."

"But," said Mrs. de Silbis, "we saw her get on the train. How did she get back here?"

"That was easy enough. He sent her a telegram. He signed it with his pen name, which she must have been curious about. Something may have slipped out about it... or she may even have known. May have found out and taunted the scholar who wrote for the pulps."

Miss Stone still eyed Crispin with distaste. "But what about the little man I saw last night. That couldn't have been a tall man. You can make yourself look taller with special shoes, or even on stilts, I suppose, but how can you make yourself look almost a foot shorter?"

"Go out in the back where you were assaulted by Haight last night and look into the window of the dispensary," Cranston said and picked up the spool of scotch tape that Eliot had brought to him.

She shivered even though Eliot and some of the other men were with her when she stood under the tree just as she had last night. The light flicked on and they all looked up at the window. She got it first. She said, "Why you can't see the blue bands from here! The window sill cuts off the view! But..."

The light went out and Cranston busied himself. A few seconds later, the lights went on and the people under the tree saw Cranston. He was next to the wall... and on the wall was a blue band. It seemed to make him shrink. Miss Stone had trouble adjusting her mind. She was so used to gauging things by the height of the blue band that this seemed all wrong. A little while ago they couldn't see the band. Now it was there and Cranston looked short.

Cranston called down for them to join him in the dispensary. When they came through the door he said, "The one time Haight tried to be clever he gave himself away completely. He wasn't really trying to implicate Mr. Crispin here, he was just trying to keep suspicion off himself."

They watched while Cranston reached out and ripped a line off the wall. It was scotch tape. Cranston said, "You remember, Miss Stone, you said that there was a period before the light went on; well, he spent that time putting the scotch tape around the wall. You recalled that the door couldn't have opened or you would have seen the light from the hall. That proved that Haight was there waiting for you. He may even have had

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the tape prepared before he left the note under your door."

"I see," she said. "Then later, when he turned the light off you noticed that he took time out..."

"Well, he ripped the tape off then and once that was done leaped down and belted you on the head."

"I see," she said. "Then he just ripped the stocking disguise off his face, dropped the loaded stocking next to me and..." A thought struck her. "What about the sleeping pill? I automatically figured it couldn't be him because of the pill!"

"It was easy enough to hold the pill in his mouth. I'm sure after he hit you he went back and really took the pill!"

"Busy little bee, wasn't he?" asked Eliot. "Oh, say, that fellow that called you from New York said for you to call him. Something is up."

Cranston sighed and heaved himself to his feet. He went out and called Burbank. It was as he feared. Burbank, his information collector, had found traces of a crime that required The Shadow's presence. And that quickly.

Cranston asked, "Have you a time table there, Burbank?"

"Sure, I've got it all looked up. If you can catch the night train out of there in twenty-five minutes, you'll be able to be back here in time!"

"Twenty-five minutes..." and it would take at least ten to get to the station. Cranston sighed again.

"You still there, boss?"

"Yes. I'll be along. Good night, Burbank."

"Gee... you sound tired. Try and sleep on the way down, huh?"

"I will. Bye now."

When Cranston returned he faced a volley of questions. Everyone had passed the time picking holes in Cranston's story.

He held up his hand. "Whoa... one at a time... and, if you're going to have me answer you, you'll have to follow me around. I have to catch a train out of here!"

They did. That is the Sheriff, Miss Stone, Mrs. de Silbis, Jerry Eliot, Elaine and Crispin. Cranston was stuffing clothes into his suitcase. His brief case lay on the bed all ready to go.

"Now look... this can't go on!" This was the sheriff trying to sound authoritative. "It don't hang together! Why should he put his wife in a snowman? That don't make sense. If he'd buried her under the snow, why chances are she wouldn't a been found till the spring thaw!" The sheriff paused with the air of one who has put a real poser.

"It should be quite obvious even to you," said Cranston nastily, "that Haight had nothing to do with that! That was the work of your dear departed relatives, the Coffins!"

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"Huh?" The sheriff stared stupidly at Cranston who was tucking his slippers into his suitcase.

"Haven't you got the train of events straight in your mind?"

"Guess not."

"Neither have we," said Eliot. And he spoke for Miss Stone and Elaine.

"Remember the girl who killed herself?"

They all nodded.

"That was the crux of the matter. The Coffins, whose relative she was, thought she had a crush on young, handsome athletic Peter Gohan!"

"Didn't she?" asked Elaine.

"Might have been better if she had! No, she was in love with Haight. Why we'll never know. But who can know the way of a maid with a man? That was the final blow, I am sure. I think Haight went to his wife and asked for a divorce. She refused, and he told his girl friend about it. I am sure he was quite depressed and hopeless about it.

"She went up to her room and killed herself and that was the last straw, the thing that drove Steven Haight to making his eerie stories come true!"

"He must have felt as if," said Elaine thoughtfully, "as if his wife had actually killed the girl he loved."

"Yes, I am sure he did and in a way she did. However, you now know that Haight set her off on the train and sent a telegram which intrigued her enough to make her come back again. No one noticed her. Why should they? She was a homely middle aged woman.

"We'll pass over what followed. However, after he had killed her and started to bury her the whole thing became entangled and began to work at cross purposes... for someone saw him burying her!"

"Who?" The sheriff was leaning forward.

CHAPTER XIV

"ONE of the Coffins... I think, although I could never prove it, that it was the girl's father who saw it. And I think too that Haight, almost out of his mind, must have said something, either when he was killing his wife or afterwards, that let Coffin know that this was the man over whom his daughter had killed herself!"

Eliot asked quickly, "Then Gohan was killed before they knew that Haight was really the man? No... that isn't right... Why did the Coffins shoot him?"

"That was one of the most tragic things in the whole tragic mess. None of the Coffins killed Gohan either!"

The sheriff said, "Haight killed him too?"

Cranston nodded. He was strapping his suitcase shut. They followed him as he ran downstairs, threw some money to Mrs. de Silbis and ran out to the station wagon.

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"Oh, no you don't," said the sheriff and piled into the car. It groaned under his weight. The others followed suit.

"I'll drive," Eliot volunteered.

"Fine, as long as it isn't that maniac who drove me here."

"Wish you wouldn't talk about my kin that away." The sheriff sounded almost wistful.

"Sorry... where was I?"

"The reason for killing Gohan?" Elaine asked.

"That's it. There was no reason."

"How come?" Eliot twisted around from the wheel to ask. The car slewed dangerously on the icy road.

"If you get me there in one piece I'll tell you. You know now, as I found out, that Gohan was a fan of B.E. Loved's. That's why poor Haight decided he had to die!"

"This is going too fast for me." Elaine shook her head. "This doesn't make sense."

"It does to a murderer's frantic mind! Remember the telegram that was signed with Haight's pen name?" They all nodded in the dark car.

"I can almost see what happened. There weren't too many people to whom Gohan could talk about reading. But he figured Haight was a professor, a bug on legends and fantasy, so he kept telling Haight all about B.E. Loved, whose work he liked so much!"

"I see now." Elaine looked sorry. "In his mixed up, frightened mind this could only mean one thing. Gohan was trying to blackmail him! You can see why he'd think that, can't you?"

Miss Stone said, "Of course, he must have thought that Gohan knew about the telegram and knowing that, knew of the murder!"

"What a pity." Elaine looked out the window at the dark clouds scudding through the sky. The car raced on through the night.

"Now then!" The Sheriff cleared his throat, full of self-importance, "That takes care of the crimes which Haight committed. Now... who killed Haight? I thought sure when you come in with him dead that way, that he couldn't be the murderer."

Ahead, down the road they could hear the keening whistle of the train speeding along. Cranston looked at his watch. It was getting awfully close. If he missed this he'd have to wait till the following morning and according to Burbank that would be too late.

"Woven through this whole tragedy was the inbred hatred and decay that two hundred years of inbreeding had developed in the decadent Coffins."

"There ye go apickin' on my relatives again!"

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Cranston stared straight into the sheriff's fat-folded eyes. "What of it?"

He gulped, "Oh well... nothin'... nothin' at all!"

"It was the Coffins who, with their bizarre and sadistic humor, put the body of Mrs. Haight in the snowman. Again it was one of them who threw the stones that revealed the body in front of the whole carnival!"

The car stopped in front of the station. The train was pulling in at the other end of the station. Eliot braked the car to a halt and leaping out grabbed Cranston's bags and walked towards the track.

Speaking over the sounds of the halting train, Cranston said, "Satisfied that they had ruined Haight, they then waited for him to make a break. When he did, they shot him... or at least the girl's father did."

"Old Ira, huh?" the sheriff asked.

"Right."

The train was halted. The porter dropped down the little set of wooden steps, and took the bags from Eliot.

The sheriff looking worried said, "Jeepers, what am I gonna do about that! If I arrest him, the whole clan will come gunnin' for me."

"It won't be necessary," said Cranston as he swung one foot up on the train steps. "His wife killed him."

"Sary done that?" The fish eyes were popping now. "Not that he hasn't had it comin' for years. She was a very patient woman!"

"What's more, she saved my life when Ira was all set to kill me!"

"Good for her. I'll get her a nice write-up in the paper. I own a little piece of that."

"Make it a nice obituary. She's dead too. She killed herself after wiping out the whole immediate family!"

"Jeepers..." The sheriff was speechless.

Cranston waved good-bye to Eliot, Elaine and Miss Stone, and boarded the train just as it started.

The train picked up speed. Cranston waved good-bye as he went into the corridor of the train. Seconds later he was gone... the train had passed out of the station.

They stood and looked after the retreating tail light. Elaine said, "There goes quite a hunk of man."

They turned and went back to the hotel.

THE END