

FOUNTAIN OF DEATH

Maxwell Grant

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FOUNTAIN OF DEATH

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CHAPTER I

WHEN you talked to Noble J. Elder, you didn't wonder what the initial "J" signified.

That at least was the opinion of Johnny Craver. He was sure of one thing; that Elder's middle name wasn't Johnny. It simply wouldn't fit.

For Johnny Craver had been a very confused young man until he met Noble J. Elder, the proprietor of Sapphire Springs, founder of the Sapphire Sanitarium, and organizer of the Self Society that brought young men like Johnny back into the world where they belonged.

The name Noble J. Elder began like a title and ended with a descriptive flourish. Eminence and dignity were in his bearing as he sat behind the great desk in his private consultation room; while his shocky gray hair and smooth, time-molded face marked him as a man of years.

Most impressive, however, of Elder's impressive features were his eyes.

They were kindly, patient eyes, mild even to their twinkle which seemed to have caught the color of the deep

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blue pool that was visible from Elder's window, amid the surrounding ring of stalwart pines that guarded it.

Apparently Elder's desk had been placed where he could keep a constant eye upon the famous Sapphire Springs which gushed like a living fountain from the exact center of his extensive premises; but if Johnny judged rightly – and he was one who might – Noble Elder was more interested in the folk who patronized those waters, rather than the blue springs or the green trees.

For the curative properties of these surroundings could be attributed to Noble Elder quite as much as Sapphire Springs. Indians, pioneers, and settlers all had owned the Springs in turn, but it had taken a wise gentleman named Elder to prove that here lay the cure for mental as well as physical ills. Discovering the true Fountain of Life and packing its contents into blue bottles at thirty–five cents a quart had merely been Elder's first step to fame. So many visitors had come to see this remarkable source of health that the Sapphire Sanitarium had sprung up in Arabian Nights' style and now was restricted to the members of the Self Society who were desirous of imbibing Elder's philosophy along with the variety of aqua pura on which he held complete monopoly.

Johnny Craver had imbibed both in copious quantities and was now receiving his final treatment. Smiling as he chatted, Noble Elder did not forget the blue–tinted carafe which rested on his desk. From that water–bottle, he replenished both Johnny's glass and his own, as a toast to his recuperated patient's coming return to the outside world.

"No jitters any longer, Johnny?"

There was a touch of humor in Elder's tone; the encouraging touch that it always carried.

"No jitters. No butterflies, either" – Johnny tapped his diaphragm – "the kind that used to be flying around here."

"Moths, Johnny," corrected Elder. He raised his glass with a smile. "It took nature's camphor to disperse them."

"Camphor?" queried Johnny in surprise. "You mean there is camphor in Sapphire Water?"

"There might be," laughed Elder. "It contains about everything else that is healthful. Here is our latest analysis, direct from the State Health Department. But wait" – Elder's face became serious as he laid aside the paper he was passing across the desk – "here is an analysis of more importance. Your own, Johnny."

Passing the other sheet to Johnny, Elder finished his glass of Sapphire Water and folded his arms while he awaited the young man's reaction. Reading the typewritten report, Johnny began to shake his head.

"I was pretty much of a mess when I landed here, wasn't I?" began Johnny. "I came in on the end of a one–week hangover inspired by a two–week binge. What was I seeing, pink elephants?"

"You'd passed that stage, Johnny. You were talking about snakes, mostly with six heads."

"And of course I wanted something to drink –"

"So we gave it to you. Sapphire Water."

Johnny reached for his glass.

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"I certainly hated the stuff," he recalled, "but I couldn't do without it now. You're sure I can get it bottled in New York?"

"Yes. All the best pharmacists carry it. Only there are other bottled goods in New York, too, the kind that won't agree with you."

"I know." Johnny gave a savage nod. "I'm laying off."

"Of drinks only?"

For the first time, Elder's voice was sharp, but only to force home his point. Instantly, Johnny's fists tightened and Elder's eyes observed the action of the fingers that gripped the glass. Leaning forward, resting his chin on his interlaced hands, Elder spoke a steady reminder.

"Revenge is not right," declared the gray-haired man. "Only justice is right."

"I know," admitted Johnny. "But I'm not thinking of those fair-weather friends who helped me drink up what was left of the money that was owing me. I'm thinking of a gentleman named Claybourne."

Elder's gray eyebrows raised, puzzled by the name.

"Jerome Claybourne," specified Johnny. "You must have heard of him, unless I clouded the issue by terming him a gentleman."

There was a head-shake from Elder.

"I must have been pretty incoherent," admitted Johnny, "because Claybourne was the cause of all the howls I was making when I landed here. I must have been seeing his fat face on all those snake-heads."

"You mentioned something about your father's partner –"

"That's Claybourne. He's the gentleman – excuse the term – who swindled dad out of nearly everything. Father would have been alive today, if he hadn't lost that last fifty thousand. If I could lay these fists on Claybourne!"

They were tight fists, Johnny's, and as he raised them, they seemed to draw him to his feet. Into his enlarging eyes came a wild look that directed its fury upon the man before him. In this resurgence of his recent dementia, Johnny was in a fair way to mistake the mild and kindly features of Noble Elder for the fat, piggish face of Jerome Claybourne. Then Elder's calming tone intervened.

"Violence is not justice. Be honest with yourself before you render judgment upon others. Opportunity comes only to those who rightfully deserve it."

Those statements flowed from the lips of Noble Elder like the blue water that gushed from Sapphire Springs. A month ago, Johnny Craver would have called such phrases bromides, but now they carried the weight of a sound philosophy.

"You're right, Mr. Elder," agreed Johnny. "If anybody needed violent treatment, I did when I arrived here. Only I didn't get it."

"Of course not, Johnny. We treat everyone as gently as we can."

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"And you certainly were more than honest, before you judged me."

"It is my own rule. I should keep it."

"But when it comes to opportunity," asserted Johnny, "it's one thing I don't deserve."

"Why not?" inquired Elder. "You can make your own opportunities, you know."

"I only hope so. I owe a lot I ought to repay."

"To whom?"

"To you, Mr. Elder." Johnny leaned forward, earnestly. "I was all set to pitch myself into the street from a range of twenty stories, when my friends took hold of me."

"At least you have a few friends left," smiled Elder. "Why not thank them instead of me?"

"Because they shipped me here to be rid of me. They just didn't want their nice sidewalk splattered. You're the man who put me straight."

Elder had risen from the desk and was coming around it. He laid a firm hand upon Johnny's shoulder.

"You're the man who will keep yourself that way," declared Elder. "You were weak, but I have made you strong. The rest is yours to maintain or acquire: health, happiness, wealth –"

"Did you say wealth?" Subsided into his more normal self, Johnny gave a hearty laugh. "That's a long way off."

"The long way can always become a short way."

"I hope you're right," decided Johnny, "because I owe you plenty, Mr. Elder."

"You owe me nothing, nor does anyone else."

"But if you run this place free, how do you manage to get along?"

"I have found the short way," replied Elder with a smile. "When you have found it, you will understand."

Timed almost to Elder's final statement, a polite rap sounded at the door. In response to Elder's call of "Come in" a drab-faced man entered. He was one of the attendants at the Springs, an unofficial fellow, whose main job seemed to be to dip out Sapphire Water and distribute it to the guests.

"Hello, Kirkwood," greeted Elder. Then, to Johnny: "You know Kirkwood, of course."

Johnny gave a matter-of-fact nod. Vaguely he recalled that the drab man's name was Kirkwood and that was sufficient. Judged by his expressionless face, Kirkwood could hardly be cultivated, even as a mere acquaintance.

"The car is ready, sir."

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Kirkwood gave the information in a dull, but methodical tone, which Elder acknowledged with a bow. Then, clasping hands with Johnny, the gray-haired healer stated:

"I am sending Kirkwood to New York with you. He will return when you no longer need him. Good-bye, Johnny, and good luck."

As the door closed on Johnny and the trained seal who accompanied him, Noble Elder slowly shook his head. Then, returning to his desk, he pressed a button and stood waiting, staring out past the pure blue spring, to watch the station wagon that swung along the pine-arched road, carrying Johnny Craver back to a turbulent world. As dust swallowed the departing car, a woman's voice spoke methodically:

"You summoned me, Mr. Elder?"

"Yes, Agatha." Elder turned to face a woman whose looks were plain to the extreme. "I want you to call New York for me."

Agatha picked up the telephone, which seemed all the more odd, since with her straight, primly parted hair, she looked like someone straight from Puritan days. But she was efficient, this secretary of Elder's, even though make-up wasn't part of her office equipment.

"You want to talk to Mr. Cranston?" queried Agatha, in an even, efficient tone. "About Johnny Craver?"

Elder nodded.

"You know everything, Agatha," he complimented. "Yes, I'm worried about Johnny. He needs watching, more perhaps than I can possibly give him, now that he has left here. I hope that I can depend upon Cranston to do all that may be needed."

Thus did Noble Elder survey the prospects of Johnny Craver, a young man whose future would depend upon the philosophy that he had absorbed at Sapphire Springs along with the curing waters.

In leaving the rest to Lamont Cranston, Elder was placing Johnny in good hands; perhaps better hands than Elder himself realized!

CHAPTER II

"SO what about Johnny Craver?"

Margo Lane put the question in a piqued tone and meant it, though her motive was somewhat double-edged. She wanted Lamont Cranston to feel that she resented the time he had lately wasted on Johnny, whose chief forte had always been the wasting of other people's time. But there was also a dash of curiosity in Margo's nature, which she felt that she could satisfy by pressing the question bluntly.

"Poor Johnny," returned Cranston, sympathetically. "He always seems to have a tough time of it."

"And so does everybody else," reminded Margo, "when they begin to turn soft-hearted on his account. You ought to know better, Lamont."

"Yes, Johnny always was a weakling."

"That's just what I mean." Margo's dark eyes flashed significantly. "Such people shouldn't concern you."

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"You think not, Margo?"

"Not if you're thinking of your friend The Shadow," returned Margo, pointedly. "His job – and so I might say yours – is to handle strong men, of the wrong kind."

"Quite right," nodded Cranston. "Only we're dealing with a different Johnny."

"He looked like the same Johnny when I saw him, except that he isn't drinking."

"But he is drinking, Margo, a wonderful beverage called Sapphire Water. It's done wonders for him."

"You mean that stuff from the place where Johnny took the rest cure? Why, you could fill one of those blue bottles with Catskill punch right out of a Manhattan faucet and nobody would know the difference. Not even Johnny."

"Probably not, Margo."

There was something calm in Cranston's reflective tone; a note that Margo was quick to catch. Instantly her manner became serious, for she recognized that the subject was deeper than she supposed. Cranston's summary of "probably not" gave Margo her cue.

"You mean that Johnny is a mental case?" demanded Margo. "But I thought he'd improved!"

"So he has," affirmed Cranston. "His Sapphire sojourn cured him thoroughly. He's a different person, a strong one, at least on the surface."

"Then it's all for the better –"

"You remember the old Johnny," interposed Cranston. "He was always denouncing others and taking it out on himself."

"Yes," nodded Margo. "He was always trying to drink up bars and pitch himself out of windows. His friends managed to stop him before it became fatal."

"Well, suppose" – Cranston's calm gaze became speculative, but Margo saw a glint of foresight in those eyes – "suppose that Johnny became his old self in a strong way."

"You mean he'd take it out on others instead of himself?"

Cranston nodded, slowly, but emphatically.

"He ought to be watched," decided Margo, seriously. "Yes, he really ought to be."

"His friend Noble Elder thinks the same," said Cranston, with a smile. "That's why I've been watching him. It's even more important, now that he's shipping his trained seal back to Sapphire Springs."

Margo's eyes opened in wonder.

"Trained seal?" Incredulity filled Margo's tone. "You don't mean they have such things flipping around the waters of the health resort? You mean Johnny brought one with him as a pet – or as a sort of fetish?"

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"This one is a human seal," explained Cranston. "It answers to the name of Kirkwood. He's an attendant from the sanitarium; they call them trained seals, just for short."

"I should have remembered. What does this one look like?"

"It has everything but whiskers. Just a blank face and a vocabulary limited to 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir.' Of course it knows how to buy Sapphire Water by the case and keep pouring it whenever Johnny looks dry."

"At Johnny's expense of course."

"No." Glancing at his watch, Cranston gestured that it was time to be leaving the restaurant where they were lunching. "Johnny is really broke. His good friend Elder is financing him back on his feet."

"Including buying bottles of his own spring water at retail?"

"Elder can't do otherwise and still expect New York dealers to handle Sapphire Water. But don't worry about Elder; his patients always pay their debts."

"You mean his cures are that good?"

"Exactly. Elder's tonics, physical and mental, are good for wealth as well as health. As I said before, he's merely afraid that Johnny's cure will be too rapid, that's all."

Things were getting too rapid for Margo, right then. Leaving the restaurant during their conversation, she and Lamont were now in Shrevvy's cab and it was riding post-haste somewhere. Shrevvy rated as the original demon driver of Manhattan, which was why Cranston had bought his cab outright and kept Shrevvy as a salaried driver.

There were times when Cranston wanted to reach certain places a little faster than anybody but Shrevvy could take him. Those were often times when Cranston happened to be his other self, The Shadow, so it was Shrevvy's job to pilot a black-cloaked crime-smasher in a cab that usually looked empty when it contained such a passenger.

Of course Cranston never admitted his dual identity, so out of respect to his visible employer, Shrevvy felt it proper occasionally to show full speed by daylight. But this occasion seemed to have some justification, as Margo gathered when the cab went winging down a ramp. From the corner where she had telescoped, Margo managed to gasp:

"Why all the rush, Lamont?"

"We're meeting Johnny," replied Cranston. "He is seeing Kirkwood off, and he said he'd wait for me at the train gate. I gave Shrevvy the speed sign on the chance you might want to see Kirkwood before he left."

The cab was shrieking to a halt at the bottom of the ramp, and Margo found herself precipitated amid a mass of redcaps. Since neither Margo nor Cranston had baggage, the porters parted, and Margo found Cranston whisking her among a lot of train gates where an amplified voice was delivering an "All Aboard!"

"Too late," decided Cranston. "There goes Kirkwood's train. Well, we'll look for Johnny."

Margo took a long breath and blinked. Then:

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"Is this Penn Station or Grand Central, Lamont?"

"The Pennsylvania Station," replied Cranston. "You didn't have time to guess the direction, the way Shrevvy brought us here. Anyway, you ought to recognize the place."

"I'm recognizing the people," returned Margo. "Look, Lamont, there's a sunbonnet job that couldn't have come from anywhere except the Pennsylvania hill country."

"Very interesting," remarked Cranston, turning in the opposite direction, "but I'm more interested in finding Johnny."

"Sunbonnet Sue is looking for somebody, too," said Margo. "Well, if anybody is looking for her, they'll find her. What a plain face she has!"

"There's Johnny, coming from the train gate," interposed Cranston. "This way, Margo. We'll meet him."

"A face like a dress-shop dummy," mused Margo, across her shoulder. "You know, Lamont, you could make that face into almost anybody's. Why –"

Twisting her elbow from Cranston's helpful hand, Margo stood stock-still and stared most impolitely. Then:

"It just couldn't happen, Lamont," Margo declared. "But look for yourself and see the man who's meeting Miss Prim Puss. Over there by the other train gate, see him? He must be her twin brother; his face is just as blank as hers, absolutely without expression!"

Plucking for Lamont's arm, Margo found it wasn't there. Turning, Margo saw him coming toward her with Johnny. In a sprightly mood, Johnny was quick to catch Margo's astonishment.

"Hello, Margo," he greeted. "What's bitten you?"

"That man over there," returned Margo. "I don't mean he bit me. I just mean" – Margo stared, more puzzled than before – "why he's gone, and his girl friend with him."

"You mentioned an odd-looking woman," recalled Cranston. "But what was odd about the man?"

"The same thing," explained Margo. "He was the original dead pan, as frozen as the Great Stone Face."

"Sounds like Kirkwood," laughed Johnny. "Too bad he just left. We could have compared him with your candidate in the line of impersonality."

"But does Kirkwood have a girl friend?"

"Spare the thought. Still" – Johnny's forehead furrowed – "Agatha was just about his speed. She's Elder's secretary. Good folk, both, but about as individual from the human standpoint as those big pinetrees that look like a set of matched golf clubs. How did I stand it at Sapphire Springs, anyway?"

Cranston's keen eyes saw their chance to press home a more current subject. Calmly, he asked:

"How are you standing it here, Johnny?"

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"All right," acknowledged Johnny. Then, his own tone calm, he added: "I'm going to the Claybourne reception tonight. Will I see you there?"

For once, Margo could have sworn that Cranston looked amazed, though the impression might have been the reflection of her own astonishment. At least Cranston was silent long enough for Johnny to continue:

"I know. Claybourne is supposed to be my worst enemy. But I reduced him to a pet peeve and now he doesn't rate at all. Give credit to Noble Elder. He knocks such foolish notions out of you."

"I'm glad to hear it, Johnny," returned Cranston. "Yes, we'll see you at Claybourne's. How about coming along with us for the rest of the afternoon?"

"And dinner?" added Margo.

"Both out," smiled Johnny, with a shake of his head. "I need a nap – it's the last thing Kirkwood reminded me about – and I've reduced to two meals a day, both already eaten. But if you're going past my hotel, you might drop me off."

Shrevvy's cab was waiting, as usual, having wormed itself into a cul-de-sac from which the cab starter couldn't budge it until Shrevvy sighted the proper passengers. It wasn't until they neared Johnny's hotel that the young man became talkative.

"Do you know," said Johnny, "the best thing about the help that Elder gives you is that it makes you want to help others, even strangers that you've never met. For instance –"

The cab stopped as Johnny was drawing a folded slip of paper from his vest pocket. Tucking the paper away, Johnny opened the door and smiled.

"I'll tell you all about it tonight," he promised. "It can't prove more boring than the usual conversation at Claybourne's."

With that, Johnny was gone, and the cab was pulling away. Turning to Cranston, Margo said:

"He's doing wonderfully, Lamont!"

"If you mean Johnny Craver," returned Cranston, steadily, "I would say he is doing too wonderfully. He will bear watching this evening, Margo."

"Is that what Noble Elder told you?"

"Approximately. He said to watch for a crisis, and he was right."

The sudden thought struck Margo that Lamont Cranston might be very right, too. He usually was.

CHAPTER III

IN his sixteenth story hotel room, Johnny Craver uncapped a blue bottle and poured himself a copious draught of Sapphire Water. Raising his glass, he looked off beyond the narrow stretch of horizon that he could see between the taller buildings and drank a toast to Noble J. Elder.

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"Good old Elder," affirmed Johnny, aloud. "Maybe you're drinking with me at this moment." Johnny tilted his head. "Anyway, I guess I'm looking in the general direction of Sapphire Springs. Maybe not, though."

Solemnly finishing his drink of water, Johnny gave a sudden laugh and reached for the bottle.

"I'm looking Kirkwood's direction, though," chuckled Johnny. "Due West, the way the tunnel goes under the river. So here's to you, Kirkwood. I hope the three quarts in your suitcase will hold out until you reach the ever-flowing Springs."

With that, Johnny's face went solemn again, as though it wasn't right to jest about such matters. Johnny sat down suddenly, still nursing his second glass of water.

"Don't mind me if I talk aloud," spoke Johnny. "I'm only pretending that you're still here, Kirkwood. That's why Elder sent you along, to encourage me to speak my thoughts. It must have been, because you never answered, Kirkwood."

A pause; a few sips of the energizing spring water. Then:

"If I hadn't talked, you would have stayed. That was your job, Kirkwood, and I admire you for it. You found out I was all right, so you went your way. But it was boring to have you around, so here's to you, Kirkwood."

Finishing the glass, Johnny thumped it on the table; then stared at the blank wall.

"You were a crutch, Kirkwood, that's all you were!" Johnny's tone became defiant. "A human crutch that Elder sent along because he thought I needed it! I'm talking to you, Kirkwood, and I might as well be looking at you, because that wall is no blanker than your face!"

"I'll prove it!" Coming to his feet, Johnny drew a pencil from his pocket and drew a circle on the wall. He added two lines for a pair of closed eyes, a circle for a nose, and a straight slit for a mouth. "That's you, Kirkwood, old frozen face!"

Standing back, Johnny surveyed his character sketch; then proved that he had something of the artist in him. Stepping to the wall, Johnny began to add expression to the thing that he had drawn.

"All you need is a little touching up," declared Johnny. "That's all, Kirkwood, old boy. Some eyebrows like mine, a sharper nose, a grin like the one I used to give you – only you wouldn't take it."

"Funny about you, Kirkwood" – leaning back; Johnny studied his improvements, which indeed has something of his own features – "do you know, the way you always kept watching me gave me hope that some day you'd turn human. I'm human enough, and I was trying to help you, but maybe I'm too human."

"You weren't watching me to acquire some of my charm – if any." Johnny gave a disparaging chuckle. "You were watching to see that I didn't eat too much, that I drank enough Sapphire Water, that I took my nap. You were watching when I talked and laughed to learn if I was the old Johnny or the new."

Flinging the pencil across the room, Johnny gave a disgruntled snarl and flung himself in an easy chair.

"That's the way the old Johnny acted," he sneered. "I can be my old self, now that you aren't here, Kirkwood, but I won't keep on with it." Drawing himself erect in his chair, he added with steady dignity: "I'm the new Johnny Craver – here to stay."

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It was then that Johnny's hand dipped to his vest pocket as it had in the cab. Bringing out the folded sheet of paper, Johnny opened it and shook his head sadly.

"Too bad," he declared. "Well, maybe I can be a good example instead of a horrible one."

Reaching for the telephone, Johnny called a number that he read from the paper. When a voice answered, Johnny politely inquired for Miss Linda Brock; then tilted his head in characteristic fashion as he sensed a delay at the other end of the wire.

At last a woman's voice spoke, stern, austere.

"Who is calling Miss Brock, please?"

"A friend," replied Johnny. His tone carried a full note of conviction. "A friend she has been waiting to hear from."

Whispers were vague across the wire, indicating a secret consultation at the other end. Then a girl's voice spoke in a tired monotone:

"I am Linda Brock. Who are you?"

Johnny paid no heed to the lack of query in the tone. With the same sincerity, he said:

"I'm Johnny Craver. You've heard of me but not by name."

"You've been away to Sapphire Springs."

"That's right. It did me good, Linda. If you're in the same whirl that I was, you'd better take a trip there. It will do you good."

"I believe you, Johnny."

Though there was no lift to the monotone, the words were encouraging, so Johnny rallied to his theme.

"Why can't you come with me to Claybourne's reception?" queried Johnny. "You're invited, aren't you?"

"Yes. I am invited."

"Then why don't I stop around for you?"

"No." For the first time Linda's tone was sharp. "You must not come here."

"I'll meet you at the reception, then. What kind of a dress will you be wearing?"

"A blue evening gown. With aquamarine ear-rings and bracelet. If I go to the reception at all."

"But I must see you, Linda," insisted Johnny. "I want to help you, the way I was helped."

"Receptions bore me." For the first time, Linda's tired voice seemed to carry appropriate expression. "Suppose I meet you afterward."

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"Fine," expressed Johnny. "Where?"

"I'll be waiting in my car in back of Claybourne's. It has a Connecticut license plate."

"And the number?"

There was a peculiar pause; then Linda's voice came in its previous monotone:

"I shall send it to you. Watch for a messenger when you leave your hotel."

"Anything else, Linda?"

"Yes." The tone was lower, more emphatic. "If you have written my name and address, tear them up. Dispose of them utterly. Understand?"

The receiver clicked sharply at the other end and Johnny found himself staring at the drawing on the wall.

"It was like a question, Kirkwood," said Johnny. "Her voice had a lift to it, like I hoped it would. So she wants me to tear up the paper. Good. I'll do it."

Johnny tore the paper on the way to the window. Raising the sash, he let the fragments flutter out into the afternoon air. Sniffing the atmosphere as though he expected the pine-tinged ozone of the woods surrounding Sapphire Springs, Johnny gave a disappointed shrug and turned back from the window.

"I'm getting tired, Kirkwood," Johnny mumbled. "Like I always do, every afternoon. Maybe it's gotten to be a habit, this nap business."

Half-sprawling on the bed, Johnny reached for a pillow, then came back to his feet.

"Mustn't forget the Sapphire Water," he said. "Finish a bottle before taking a nap. You drilled that rule into me, Kirkwood, you old drillmaster, you."

Finishing the glass he poured, Johnny relaxed upon the bed and let his head dip deep into the pillow. He was muttering that naps made him tired and meaning it the opposite way about. But today, with Kirkwood no longer present to dispute the point with silence, Johnny was finding it literally true.

At least the breeze from the open window resembled the zephyrs that played about Elder's pine trees, for the noise of city traffic dwindled itself until Johnny mistook it for the gurgle of Sapphire Springs. Within five minutes, he was deep into a sleep as sound as those that he had enjoyed at the sanitarium.

The depth of that slumber was evidenced when the telephone bell began to ring. The bell was close beside Johnny's head, but he didn't hear it. After continuing for a full minute, the bell suddenly ceased, leaving Johnny totally undisturbed.

A deep sleep was something that Noble Elder had always prescribed to his patients. According to Elder, a mind that slumbered well would be sharper when it was awake. All that had made sense to Johnny Craver, who had agreed that sharp wits were what he needed most in life.

Johnny was going to need sharp wits tonight. He had paved the way for it, with that mystery call to a girl that he had never met. And now, while Johnny slept, matters were shaping themselves into a situation where even sharper wits than Johnny's – like The Shadow's – might encounter complications.

CHAPTER IV

IT was dark across the street from Johnny's hotel and the fact pleased Sheff Gilbin. What didn't please Sheff was the necessity of being here at all. Particularly, he didn't like having Hippo Borgand along, since Hippo's build wasn't suited to concealment, even after the forty pounds reduction that he had manoeuvred at Miami Beach.

"It's all set, I tell you," assured Sheff. "The Brock girl has fallen for it completely. It can't fail."

"But listen, Sheff –"

"Sheffield to you, Mr. Borgand, and don't forget it when we arrive at that reception."

"All right, Sheffield," gruffed Hippo. "Only you can't trust dames, particularly when the dizzy kind."

"What language, Artemus!" Sheff's tone was shocked. "What sort of acquaintances did you cultivate during your recent vacation?"

"I cultivated the right sort," retorted Hippo, "but there were a lot of others tried to cultivate me. Now listen, Sheff – Sheffield to you – I've seen this Brock number and she's a blonde. To me, all blondes are dizzy –"

"And that's the game," put in Sheff. "We're playing on the fact that she's a hypochondriac. That's a better term than dizzy, so remember it."

With that admonition, Sheff pressed his companion further back into the doorway, as far as the physical contours of Artemus Borgand, more familiarly Hippo, would allow. Before he could protest, Hippo saw the reason.

A large, well-polished car had stopped near the hotel and a girl's face was peering from it. Along with the face, a gloved hand was beckoning to a corner lounge, who came over to the car and stopped there. The light was good enough for Hippo to identify the girl as Linda Brock, while Sheff was tallying on the happenings across the way.

"She's giving him a note, all right," undertoned Sheff, "and it looks as though she is handing over some money with it. There he goes to watch for Craver."

"And the car is staying so she can point him out to the bum," added Hippo. "That's funny, though. I thought you said the Brock dame had never seen this Johnny guy."

"That's what Shebley said," recalled Sheff. "He's never seen Craver either. We'd better stay, to make sure this doesn't slip. Meanwhile keep that muffler around your dress collar. Evening clothes don't show well when you're snooping from a doorway."

Whatever Sheff's qualms, they were due for a sudden ending that came in clock-work style. As a young man in evening clothes sauntered from the rather shabby hotel, a woman's hand waved from the limousine, the corner bum took his cue, shambled up and thrust the message into the young man's hand.

Instantly, the limousine was away, so smoothly that it had purred past Johnny Craver before he knew it was around. He turned just in time to see a girl's face looking back at him from the rear window; then the big car turned the corner. Nor did Sheff and Hippo fail to perform like human cog-wheels. The moment they saw the note delivered, they were out from their doorway and walking rapidly along their own side of the street, away

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from the hotel.

"That's that," summed Sheff. "Now remember, Hippo, we're not working the big con tonight. You're fronting for something solid."

"In other words," returned Hippo, "I'm to ride along with old Claybourne."

"And be ready to back whatever you offer."

"You mean with a check-book?"

"Yes, and not a rubber one. Only whatever you do offer, phrase it as a man of your repute should."

"Banish your apprehensions, Sheffield," Hippo's accent became a Bostonese that fitted the character of Artemus Borgand. "Gentlemen of breeding cast a contagious influence upon me, whenever I am in their presence. In falsifying my genealogy, I chose a lineage of true sportsmen. I have literally imbibed their heredity to an extent where I allow myself to be bested at nothing; not even in so trivial a competition as an ostentatious display of dignity."

The two men were around the next corner by the time Hippo had finished his harangue. By then, Johnny Craver couldn't have spotted them, even if he had looked, which he didn't. Still standing outside the hotel, Johnny was staring at the figures on the paper in his hand.

It wasn't a Connecticut license number. In fact it didn't belong on any automobile plate that Johnny had ever seen. Such numbers didn't run: R-3, L-5, R-3, L-7, R-1, L-6. Only one type of numbers followed that pattern; they were the combinations of safes.

Folding the paper, Johnny tucked it in a pocket of his white vest and strolled around the nearest corner, hoping to find a cab on the avenue. One was parked half a block away, so Johnny stepped into it and gave the driver Claybourne's address.

A great change had come over Johnny Craver.

No longer was Johnny talking to Kirkwood, nor even to himself. His afternoon nap reminded him of a Rip Van Winkle sleep. He'd awakened as a new man, but in a sense a composite of two former selves. He had become precisely what Lamont Cranston had stated that he might: the original Johnny Craver, rendered strong by a brief period of a complete new life.

Situated on a secluded avenue, the Claybourne mansion was a pretentious relic of early century Manhattan. Set back from the street, the brownstone residence had all the appearance of a museum, which it could rightfully be termed, for its present incumbent, Jerome Claybourne, was the third in a line of greedy tycoons who had each succeeded in outbreeding his predecessor.

In the huge reception hall that constituted but a fraction of the mansion's interior acreage, Jerome Claybourne was receiving guests in his accustomed style. Among the early arrivals, Lamont Cranston and Margo Lane had gone through the usual formality of meeting Claybourne and the members of his family who fronted the statuary that adorned the marble staircase. Now, Cranston had sauntered off among the other guests to learn if Johnny Craver had really fulfilled his boast of coming to these unwelcome preserves, and Margo was considering herself to be something quite unnecessary, when she suddenly found herself the victim of opportunity.

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Said opportunity happened to be none other than Johnny Craver, who sauntered into the reception hall in a manner as debonair as Cranston's.

"Hello, Margo." Johnny's greeting came in a warm, confident tone. "I hoped to find you here, though I guess you wouldn't thank me for it. Finding it frightfully dull already, aren't you?"

Margo nodded. She could have said that there was nothing dull about Johnny. His face had a warm flush; his eyes were keen and carried a calculating stare. He was different from the old Johnny with the wild, distorted stare; different, too, from the rather mild and uncertain young man that Margo had met this afternoon.

"You've been through the ordeal?"

Johnny's gesture toward the marble staircase signified what he meant by the word.

"Yes, I've met the Claybournes," Margo acknowledged. "I suppose they'll be surprised to see you here."

"If Claybourne is, he won't show it," assured Johnny. "Not unless we poked an apple in his mouth. I've never seen a pig express astonishment in any other way. My simile fits Claybourne rather well, don't you think?"

"In a way, yes," compromised Margo. "He does look as though he's lived on the fat of the land."

"Most of it went to his head, then," retorted Johnny. His half-smile made it difficult to guess how serious he might be. "Well, I suppose I should pay the family my disrespects. Meanwhile, do me a favor, will you?"

"What's that, Johnny?"

"Look for a girl in a blue evening gown." For the first time, Margo noted a vague expression in both Johnny's gaze and tone. "I'm supposed to meet her, but I can't seem to recall her name."

Margo's puzzled stare must have registered with Johnny for he steadied instantly and laughed off his remark in jocular style.

"Just a whim of mine," said Johnny. "Sapphire Springs made me fond of blue. Thought I ought to meet a girl who preferred the same color. Too bad your gown is green, Margo!"

Johnny wandered into the reception line and soon was meeting Claybourne and his equally portly wife, who was heavily encrusted with jewels. There were two younger members of the family, a Jerome Claybourne Fourth and a daughter of fifteen who seemed to be outracing her slightly older brother in the avoirdupois derby that characterized the Claybournes. As she watched the meeting Margo was more than slightly astonished.

Jerome Claybourne gave a slight start at seeing Johnny, but the young man must have smoothed it in a really affable style, for next Claybourne was not only shaking hands but clapping Johnny on the back, while Mrs. Claybourne was spreading smiles amid her jewels. Then, instead of motioning Johnny along the line, Claybourne was turning him over to the junior set, as though he were one of the family.

This was something that Cranston really should know about, but before Margo could turn to look for him, she heard his calm voice beside her.

"I see it, Margo. It may mean more than we suppose. Keep a close eye on Johnny; he's yours from now on."

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"But if he needs watching, Lamont –"

"He does, but I can't spare the time for it, at least not now. When I took a look at the reception line, up popped the devil and his twin brother, though I wouldn't care to say which is which. I might be unfair to the other."

Following Lamont's eyes, Margo saw the two men he meant. One was tall, a trifle gaunt, with a trace of suavity; the other was portly, but large enough of frame to minimize his overweight. To Margo, both men looked too distinguished to fit the classification that Cranston had applied to them.

The pair happened to be Sheff and Hippo, operating under more pretentious titles which did not deceive Cranston in the least. He knew them for a brace of crooks de luxe; they were tagged as such in The Shadow's own private files, although each individual's past was totally untainted by anything resembling a police record.

What even The Shadow had not learned was how the purposes of this conniving pair might cross the path of Johnny Craver – who belonged in a totally different category.

CHAPTER V

MARGO decided that catching up with Johnny Craver was like overtaking an eel. Having decided to become the life of Claybourne's party, Johnny was almost anywhere and everywhere. But he was always squirming into sight again, which was something of a help.

At last, Margo hooked him briefly, or, rather, Johnny hooked himself to a glass of champagne that came by on a waiter's tray. Suddenly observing Margo across the bubbling foam, Johnny gave a guilty wince and handed her the glass.

"It's yours, Margo," he said. "I'm still working on Sapphire Water – or at least I should be."

"I'd say you were working on the Claybournes," bantered Margo. "What sort of compliments did you pay them?"

"Nice ones. The old lady liked it when I told her she looked better in more jewels. I didn't add that she'd put on enough more bulk to display them properly."

"And the kiddies?"

"I said I was pleased to see how much they'd grown; which they have, sideways instead of straight up. Halfway compliments are sometimes best."

"What about Claybourne?"

"He wants to talk to me." Johnny's gaze turned toward a heavy oak door which was the entrance to Claybourne's private smoking room.

"So I'm giving him his chance."

"His chance?"

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"Yes, because I know he won't come through." A grit of Johnny's teeth amplified the glint in his eye. "Forget and forgive; that's Claybourne's motto. He forgets the wrongs he did you and forgives you for those you didn't do him. I'm going in there to prove it."

"And then?"

Johnny staged the clam act, instantly. He watched Margo coldly until her look of curiosity faded; then, as if changing the subject, he asked, smilingly:

"Did you see my girl in blue?"

"No blue jobs under forty," replied Margo, with a head-shake. "Would any of them do?"

"Not according to specifications," said Johnny. "Perhaps I'm too ambitious, or maybe I just played a hunch for the fun of it. Maybe I'll meet her somewhere else."

As Johnny turned to the smoking room, Margo's vigil ended for the time. Cranston had disappeared into that same room, half an hour before, along with the pair of smoothies he was watching, so the Johnny proposition could now be his as well.

Johnny was really quite a proposition.

In Claybourne's ornate smoking room, Cranston had just completed one of the most interesting half-hours that he had ever spent. He had watched two first-rate swindlers operate in reverse, with a speed that was almost breathless.

Either Sheffield Gilbin and Artemus Borgand had reformed through too much contact with society, or Cranston had done them an injustice in branding them con men. They had talked themselves into buying exactly fifty thousand dollars worth of very doubtful stock which Claybourne was anxious to unload in what he considered ethical if not honest fashion.

Wealth was something that Claybourne exuded, therefore he could speak disparagingly of it, having an overabundance. But when Claybourne belittled a stock, he was actually giving a sales-talk. Any stock that wasn't due for an immediate jump seemed a disappointment to Claybourne, whose thirst for wealth was chronic.

Gilbin and Borgand were willing to wait; in fact quite eager if they had a sure thing in hand. In asking Claybourne if Southern Sugar was a good buy, they kept answering each other's questions, always in the affirmative, until they closed the deal themselves, with Borgand signing a check to complete it.

They merely overlooked the obvious.

To Cranston, it was very obvious that Claybourne wouldn't be keeping anything but worthless stock in an unlocked drawer in his smoking room. The way he handled those gaudily printed shares made them look like coupons that had come with the boxes of fifty cent cigars that were in the same drawer.

Now Cranston had found a silent supporter in his simple but exact opinion.

That supporter was Johnny Craver. Arriving just in time to witness the conclusion of the deal, Johnny let his lips deliver an understanding curl. Momentarily taut, he was turning to speak to Gilbin and Borgand, when he suddenly compromised in favor of a bottle of pre-war Scotch on Claybourne's sideboard.

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Cranston's analysis was prompt.

Not having seen Claybourne bring those sugar shares from the desk drawer, Johnny was forming conclusions from previous knowledge of Claybourne's ways. A stranger would have assumed that there was a wall safe behind an oak panel of the smoking room; but not Johnny Craver.

The logical answer shot straight to Cranston's keen mind. Johnny knew that Claybourne didn't keep valuables here, because he knew where Claybourne actually kept them.

Hearing the gurgle from the Scotch bottle, Claybourne was reminded of another sort of thirst. Turning, he saw Johnny, and immediately outdid himself, a giveaway that he was anxious to divert talk from the deal he had just closed. Pouring himself a drink, Claybourne clinked glasses with Johnny as he laid a warm arm on the young man's shoulder.

"Johnny, my boy!" Claybourne's tone was rich with insincerity. "You're with us again and we're glad!" He turned to the others and added with the same warm fakery: "Fill your glasses, gentlemen, and drink with us. To your father, Johnny!"

It took the double Scotch, his first in months, to stifle the things that Johnny could have said. That one drink lifted him into a silent fury which dispelled itself as suddenly. Narrowing his eyes to hide their glare, Johnny waited for Claybourne to go on.

"Like my own son, Johnny is," announced Claybourne, "because his father was like my own brother. Good old Craver; he had just one weakness: investments. We pulled them through, though, didn't we, Johnny?"

Gulping another drink, Johnny nodded.

"Not as much left as I hoped." Claybourne shook his head. "Johnny didn't understand at first and it hurt me to explain. But that's all forgotten now, Johnny. I've made allowance because you were young and headstrong."

Across his glass, Johnny stared at the others.

"Forget and forgive," said Johnny. "That's Mr. Claybourne's way. It's nice of him."

The statement was for the benefit of Gilbin and Borgand, as if Sheff and Hippo didn't know. Johnny meant that Claybourne would forget he'd talked them into buying worthless stock and would put it the other way about. Also he'd forgive them for claiming they were swindled if they'd be suckers enough to come back for another trim.

Cranston understood and more. When Johnny put down his glass and turned away, saying that the rest of the Claybourne family was expecting him, it meant that he'd made up his mind to something drastic. The dip of Johnny's fingers to his vest pocket was an added clue that Cranston didn't need.

It was just the clue that Sheff and Hippo wanted, as they preserved their poker faces. Turning away from Cranston, they said good-night to Claybourne, who promptly insisted upon seeing them to the door. Blocked by the sudden exodus, Cranston wasn't able to follow closely on Johnny's heels, even if he'd wanted.

Besides, Cranston was depending on Margo.

Luck, not dependability was sometimes Margo's forte. She'd almost forgotten Johnny when she came down the grand staircase after a brief tour of the second floor.

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It was Johnny's voice that captured her attention. He was at the telephone, around on the opposite side of the great stairway, from Claybourne's smoking room.

"Hello... "Johnny's tone became subdued, but Margo was drawing close enough to hear it. "Yes, this is Johnny... You're meeting me, of course?... Yes, right away, where we agreed... The blue gown? Of course... If I can't admire it in the dark, we'll go where there's some light... Now hurry... Please –"

Johnny's voice was just beginning to phrase a name when Margo arrived too close. That name, the one that Johnny claimed he had forgotten, remained unuttered. Instead, the telephone clattered on its stand and Margo found herself staring into Johnny's face, cold and gray in the slight gloom beneath the stairway.

"Sorry, Johnny," began Margo. "I didn't mean to snoop. I was only going to tell you –"

"Tell me what?"

It was Johnny's tone of the afternoon, dry and lacking vigor though the words themselves betokened challenge.

"That I hadn't found her," explained Margo. "The vision in blue, if you hadn't forgotten her."

Those eyes of Johnny's were staring straight past Margo; indeed, they could have been staring through her. Then, with a quick turn on his heel, Johnny swung through a door at the rear of the hall, giving Margo a glimpse of a passage leading to the kitchens. As the door came clattering back, Margo turned and looked toward the front of the reception hall, wondering what it was that Johnny saw.

It must have been Cranston.

Margo saw Lamont coming in from the front door, carrying something folded over his arm. He sensed the meaning of Margo's expression.

"You've seen Johnny?"

"Yes." Margo gave a sweeping gesture. "He was at the telephone; now he's gone through to the kitchen."

"He should have gone out," decided Cranston, "like the others did." Glancing toward the staircase, Cranston saw some guests coming down. "Come along, Margo. It appears to be our privilege to tour the second floor."

Margo didn't state that she'd already exercised that privilege. Close beside Cranston, she ascended the grand stairs and gave a gesture toward the left, where a broad doorway showed a lighted picture gallery.

"Most everyone has finished looking at the paintings," said Margo. "Let's go in there, Lamont. We'll have a chance to talk. I want to tell you about Johnny –"

Apparently Lamont didn't want to hear about Johnny. He was gone, when Margo looked around. It was rather amazing, that vanish of Cranston's, for it must have covered about thirty feet of the well-lighted upstairs hall.

Yet it wasn't quite complete. If Margo hadn't spent about two seconds in staring in the wrong direction, she might have seen the cloak that was sliding over Cranston's shoulders or caught the flip of the slouch hat that he was placing on his head.

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You had to look quickly to spot that transformation, even in the light. Once done, as it now was, all that remained was moving blackness. When blended with anything resembling darkness, all traces were gone. Cranston had reached a suitable doorway just before Margo looked that way.

By then there wasn't any Cranston for Margo to see. He had become The Shadow.

CHAPTER VI

THREE to the right... Five to the left... Three to the right...

Johnny Craver was working the combination from memory, from the slip of paper that he'd studied at intervals during the evening. Tense but steady, Johnny was listening while he worked, listening for any sounds that might threaten to disturb his task.

Johnny was in Claybourne's trophy room, an extensive apartment near the rear of the third floor. Maybe Claybourne who could conveniently forget so many things, had forgotten that it was in this very room that he had once discussed Johnny's pitiful inheritance and had produced the few exhibits that went with it.

Clever of Claybourne to have his wall safe in this room, the last place where anyone would look for it. All around the walls were trophies of the hunt, not Claybourne's expeditions but those of less grasping relatives who had wasted time as sportsmen during the last few generations.

There were deer heads, moose antlers, stuffed catamounts and owls, even big fish mounted on plaques. Interspersed among these dead creatures were the things that had slain them, old rifles, shot-guns, quaint pistols, bows and arrows, rods and reels, along with a fair quota of harpoons.

All the place needed was the smell of powder and formaldehyde, being a cross between a gun shop and an animal cemetery. Lacking such odors the room compromised by taking on a ghostly atmosphere from the light that spread through the high transom to show the wall decorations looming like ghostly shapes..

Glass eyes of deer and moose, the lifelike stares of unblinking owls would have been enough to frighten an ordinary burglar precipitated into this chamber of horrors. But Johnny was no ordinary burglar. He had known where to look. Old Claybourne had let his hair down – what hair he had – that night when he had so sorrowfully brought Johnny here. He'd let his young visitor see the safe behind the elk horns.

Right now those elk horns were inverted. Johnny had swung them around and up, the way he remembered Claybourne doing it. Set in the opening revealed by the swivelled mounting was the shiny door of the wall safe, catching the full glow from the hall light past the transom. If the combination proved correct, Johnny would be having another look at Claybourne's treasure hoard, this time with the added pleasure of examining it.

Seven to the left... One to the right... Six to the left...

The safe door opened as noiselessly as its tumblers had fallen. It revealed a strong box stuffed fatter than the fish and owls. Claybourne was a master of financial taxidermy, judging by the tight-packed contents, for Johnny recognized the stuff as gilt-edged bonds and negotiable securities. Nor was Johnny modest in the way he drew those contents forth.

It had been well-packed before, this wall safe. The sight had thrilled Johnny the first time he saw it. He hadn't forgotten, though, how Claybourne had gone meticulously through the entire stack, searching twice before he discovered the few pitiful remainders that represented all of Johnny's father's fortune.

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It was Johnny's turn tonight. He wasn't looking for remainders; he was taking the bulk, and would send back what he didn't want, should he decide that Claybourne deserved such consideration. Johnny's chuckle came low, sharp and defiant, in the semi-gloom below the inverted elk horns.

This was the old Johnny Craver, but with a strength he'd never known before, both mental and physical. The health he'd gained at Sapphire Springs was fortified by the advice he had received there; but both – particularly the advice – were warped to suit Johnny's return to his former self.

Justice without violence; Johnny felt he was dealing it. Honest with himself, he was rendering judgment upon Claybourne. He was finding opportunity because he deserved it; making opportunity in fact. By a combination of all those, Johnny was finding a short way to wealth.

Faintly, a muffled rumble reached Johnny's ears. Instead of alarming him, it rendered him alert. As though he had rehearsed it, Johnny was packing Claybourne's securities into tidy bundles, slipping them into imitation leather folders that he had found stacked with them. Into one pocket, then another, he placed these trophies of his own expedition, smoothly, but in no great hurry.

The rumble was from the mansion elevator, an expensive but old-fashioned contrivance at the right of the grand staircase. Having used it personally to get here, Johnny had timed the trip and knew exactly how long to allow. Even if Claybourne came directly to the trophy room, there would be time for Johnny to avoid him; at least so Johnny thought.

He was thinking wrong.

Before he could turn to close the door of the wall safe, Johnny heard the elevator stop. He'd overlooked one factor; that he couldn't detect the elevator's rumble until it neared the third floor. Now a door on this very floor was clanging open and Johnny's schedule of departure was clipped to the bone. Panicky for the first time, Johnny sprang across the trophy room and started to yank the door open only to remember that he'd thrown the bolt.

Footsteps were outside the door by the time Johnny had unbolted it. Sliding close against the wall, Johnny was under the shelter of a moose head when the door opened to admit Claybourne. Johnny had swung away from that side of the door where the light switch was, so Claybourne didn't see him while turning on the lights.

What Claybourne did see was the empty wall safe beneath the swivelled elk horns. But for that, Johnny could have reached the hallway with the sneaky strides that he was taking. Down that same hall were the back stairs that offered exit, but they were useless now.

With a cross between a snarl and a gasp of horror, Claybourne swung about, straight toward the doorway. Knowing he'd be recognized, Johnny made a frantic effort to avoid it by springing past the doorway and slapping off the light switch. Whether Claybourne spied his face in that moment, Johnny didn't know, for the man's voice was incoherent with rage and dismay. What Johnny did was swing about, driving both fists hard for where Claybourne's fat face should have been.

Only Claybourne wasn't there.

With a wallow like a walrus, Claybourne was reaching the wall, grabbing for something that he had no trouble finding in the darkness. The thing was a shot-gun, its location quite as plain in Claybourne's mind as the position of the wall safe. That fact should have warned Johnny, but it didn't. He simply thought that Claybourne was starting a wild threat with one of the antique weapons.

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"Stop or I'll shoot!"

Claybourne was making an oblique charge as he bellowed the time-worn formula and Johnny was stopping because he thought that Claybourne couldn't shoot, not with that double-barreled wall trophy. Arm half across his face, Johnny made a sharp cut for the doorway as Claybourne thrust the muzzles straight for him. Converging like the walls of a funnel, the two men were practically pouring themselves into the doorway with only a few feet between them.

A trifle ahead, Johnny thought that he was clear; only the hallway light was bothering him, when suddenly it was gone. Who had turned it off and why, Johnny didn't know or care, but he was due to do both, an instant later.

The hallway light wasn't out. The blackness from the doorway was alive. It came with a cyclonic surge that spun Johnny from its path, twisting him against the wall, still under the muzzles of Claybourne's gun. Fat fingers were tugging at the shot-gun triggers at that very instant, but the mass of human blackness wasn't overlooking Claybourne.

The gloved hand of The Shadow shot upward out of nowhere, driving the gun barrel to a high slant above Johnny's head. That must have happened a split second before Claybourne pulled the triggers, though it all seemed to occur at once. Instead of merely clicking, the hammers produced a roar that shook the room with it, as a double-barreled discharge could.

Reeling despite himself, Johnny saw Claybourne go tumbling backward, kicked into a somersault by the double load. Human blackness was gone, somewhere deeper in the room, for The Shadow had wheeled from the glare of the lighted doorway. Then, as the one victim of the tragedy, a bulky form crashed to the floor, landing with uptilted head, its great eyes glittering in the glow from the doorway.

Jerome Claybourne had at last added himself to the list of his family's sportsmen. He had bagged the big moose head hanging on the wall above the door!

CHAPTER VII

THIS wasn't laughing time for Johnny Craver. His pockets bulging with wealth that wasn't his, he more than ever needed a quick way out. The comic result of Claybourne's marksmanship had not been his fault; nor could Johnny take credit for it. Claybourne's foresight in keeping a loaded gun handy proved Johnny's own lack of proper calculation toward the future. Nor were those missed shots fully wasted.

A double-barreled roar meant something in a house full of servants. Yet Johnny didn't seem to realize it as he stood stupidly by the doorway, wondering what had happened to the mysterious rescuer who revealed himself only as a cloaked whirlwind. Shouts were coming from downstairs, but Johnny didn't even hear them, the way his ears were ringing from the effects of Claybourne's misplaced fire.

Sweeping suddenly from darkness, The Shadow caught Johnny's arm and whirled him full about. He wanted to thrust the young fool through the doorway, rush him away from here and arrange explanations later, but Johnny was slow in catching the idea. So slow that in a trice The Shadow's plan had changed; he was hurling Johnny headlong out into the hallway, while he personally was taking a long low dive into the darkness of the trophy room.

Claybourne was launching a new attack, this time with a harpoon that he had found to hand when coming up beside the wall where he had landed. The sincerity of his hurl gave it a surprising accuracy for the barbed spear arrowed a path right through the center of the doorway, which was fortunately vacated just before the

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shaft arrived.

On hands and knees, Johnny heard the harpoon punch the hallway wall only a few feet above his head, while from the trophy room came a clattery sound announcing The Shadow's dive had tangled him among the moose horns on the floor. The shouts that Johnny heard from the front stairs were another factor in his rising panic. From now on it was every man for himself.

Racing for the back stairs, Johnny reached them just as Claybourne came lunging out into the hallway, waving his hands and screaming for bigger and better harpoons. Seeing the servants, Claybourne sent them running after Johnny and joined the chase in person. The back stairs were alive with hubbub when The Shadow came from the trophy room. Hearing more footsteps pounding up from the front, The Shadow made a quick glide into the elevator, eased the door shut, and started down.

Always calculating, The Shadow was charting Johnny's course to the dot. Chances for a reasonable exit were nil, since Johnny's clatter and that of his pursuers would rouse the servants in the kitchens. Since Johnny knew of the connecting door alongside the grand stairway, he would naturally choose it in a pinch. By then The Shadow would be in a position to help or hinder him whichever was preferred.

Sometimes The Shadow's calculations could go wrong. Either that, or something very strange was guiding the actions of Johnny Craver.

As Johnny thrust open a door at the bottom of the back stairs, he found a squad of skillet men awaiting him. Chefs and waiters had armed themselves to greet the arriving clatter, confident that whoever came first would be the man to stop. Approached by a half-circle of waving frying-pans, Johnny gave a good impersonation of a hunted rabbit. He saw two doors: one, unguarded, led through to the reception hall; the other, cut off by his challengers, opened into the back street.

Instead of taking the route that the kitchen help had overlooked, Johnny drove madly through the circle. Waving his arms as he ran the gantlet of frying-pans, he warded off the worst blows, but took a few that staggered him. The kitchen police were close behind him, howling as loud as the wolf pack that was clattering from the stairs, when a pair of men came lunging in the back way, blocking off Johnny's last hope of escape.

Claybourne recognized those timely blockers and bellowed his approval.

"Good work, Gilbin! And you too, Borgand! Hold that thief and we'll take care of him!"

The trouble was, they didn't hold him. Sheff threw a headlock on Johnny that should have clamped him cold, while Hippo blocked the doorway in big man style. But the pair suddenly became confused as the skillet crew arrived. They seemed to fear that blows which were meant for Johnny were intended for them instead. Hippo shoved in through the doorway to ward the clouts from the general direction of Sheff; who in turn forgot all about holding Johnny in order to protect himself.

Suddenly free, Johnny was out through the doorway which in turn was bottlenecked by Sheff and Hippo, particularly the latter, as they still couldn't get it through their heads that they were not the targets of the frying-pans. Arriving in the melee, Claybourne was grabbing the members of the kitchen crew, blaming them for something they were arguing was not their fault. All this took time, and plenty.

When Claybourne finally forced his way through and reached the rear street, there wasn't a sign of Johnny Craver. The scene was deserted, except for a pair of tail-lights that twinkled around the corner, just in time to escape Claybourne's notice; tail-lights with a Connecticut license plate between.

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In the front reception hall, Lamont Cranston was strolling around from the elevator, which opened near the door of Claybourne's smoking room. No longer The Shadow, he had stowed his cloak and hat conveniently beneath the stairs and was now nodding to Margo Lane as she came down the grand staircase.

Practically all the other guests had gone and Margo could freely show her relief at seeing Cranston. Left behind by the rush that had surged to the third floor following the shot-gun fire, Margo had heard the subsequent clatter down the back stairs and had hoped that it meant that Cranston was still in circulation.

Now knowing that he was, Margo asked ardently:

"What's it all about, Lamont?"

"It's about Johnny," replied Cranston, calmly. "He just tapped Claybourne's safe, up on the third floor."

Margo tilted her head in the direction of the kitchen door on the far side of the staircase.

"And all that noise?"

"More trouble for Johnny. Don't worry. We'll take care of him when he comes out this way."

"But why should he come out this way?"

"You saw him go in, didn't you? Reversing the trail is the usual policy when the going gets hot. Get ready – here he is."

The door from the kitchen clattered open at Cranston's words, but it wasn't Johnny who appeared. Instead, Claybourne came storming through, shaking his fists back at a handful of servants who were trying to explain matters as they followed along. Behind them came two gentlemen named Gilbin and Borgand, who were brushing themselves off and looking quite as disgruntled as Claybourne.

Seeing Cranston, Claybourne stopped short, scarcely noting the members of his immediate family as they poked their faces timidly from the curtains of surrounding rooms.

"Hello, Cranston," said Claybourne, abruptly. "Well, he did it."

"Who did what?"

"Craver, the ingrate," returned Claybourne. "He sneaked up to my private strong-box and robbed it. He and some masquerader all in black, who managed to disappear."

Behind Cranston's back, Sheff and Hippo exchanged startled looks. Then, beginning with grins, they worked their expressions back into the more respectable features of Sheffield Gilbin and Artemus Borgand.

The exchange of smiles denoted mutual satisfaction over a task well done; the next move was to be solemn, which they did. Cranston was looking the other way, and before Margo noticed them, these swindlers who loved to be swindled were quite the sugary gentlemen once more.

Jerome Claybourne was snatching up the telephone, vowing vengeance and more.

"If Craver thinks he can consummate this outrage," stormed Claybourne, "I'll show him. I know where he's stopping, at a cheap hotel called the Pilgrim. What a fool I was even to condone his visit here, but he's the

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greater fool. He hasn't anywhere else to go except back to his hotel. I'll call the police and have them apprehend him red-handed!"

While Claybourne was phoning the police and bellowing for rapid service, Cranston did the polite thing under these embarrassing circumstances. He bowed a solemn good evening to the members of the Claybourne family and suggested to Margo that they be on their way.

Family and servants were dispersing, except for the few who like Gilbin and Borgand were standing near Claybourne on the far side of the very grand staircase. Nobody noticed the brief trip that Cranston made to the near side of that same stairway to pick up what at a distance looked like an ordinary top coat that he draped across his arm, hiding a slouch hat flattened underneath.

They were outside the front door when Margo said:

"Poor Johnny. Do you really think he'll go back to the Hotel Pilgrim?"

"I think so," replied Cranston with a nod. "What worries me is how long he will take to get there."

Odd that Lamont Cranston should be worrying over such a trifling matter at a time when Johnny Craver wasn't. Or perhaps it was Margo Lane who should have been worrying because her feminine charm wasn't sufficient to make Cranston forget crime and its possible consequences.

Such charm had certainly overwhelmed Johnny. He didn't care who caught up with him, provided that they took a long time doing it.

At that moment, Johnny Craver was utterly oblivious to the fortune that was sprouting from his pockets, utterly oblivious to the sumptuous trappings of the lavish limousine in which he was riding, utterly oblivious to all Manhattan Island.

Johnny was lost in utter rapture over a blue-gowned blonde whose starry eyes had the same color as the aquamarine studded bracelet and ear-rings that matched her identifying attire. He had found the girl of the dream that hadn't been a dream.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Linda Brock wanted to be cold, she put a warm look in her eyes. Not that Linda was cold by nature; it was simply that she had a mind. A mind was a bad thing to have if you made it up the wrong way, as Johnny Craver could have testified if he'd been in the mood.

There was only one mood to be in when Linda gave that look and Johnny was in it.

"Fancy meeting you," spoke Johnny. "Right where you said you'd be – but I don't even know your name."

"You knew it this afternoon," reminded Linda, mildly. "Or don't you remember?"

"How could I remember anything about you before I met you?"

"Suppose I remind you. My name –"

"Don't tell me." Johnny shook his head. "Just let me guess. Or let me create a name. What shall I call you?"

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"How about the girl in blue?"

"Are you?" Johnny looked for the blue gown which was rather lost in the gloom that was dominated by Linda's wealth of bare arms and shoulders. "Oh, yes, blue" – he stared squarely into Linda's eyes – "blue, like sapphires."

"Aquamarines," corrected Linda. "An aquamarine is blue too, you know." Her gaze became very serious. "But when you say sapphire –"

"You speak of health, happiness and wealth," added Johnny. "All three the glorious bounty of magnificent Sapphire Springs, where trouble is washed away by the eternal flow of nature's true contentment."

Anyone else would have said that Johnny was quoting verbatim from a prospectus written by Noble J. Elder, but Linda didn't say so. Her eyes went really starry in their far away gaze as though she was hearing inspired words that she too had absorbed.

"Really?" queried Linda, in a heartfelt tone. "Is it really that wonderful there?"

"So wonderful I never should have left there," declared Johnny, seriously. "I miss the scent of the pine-laden air, the ripple of the clear blue water that reflects the cloudless sky overhead."

"Is the water really blue? Or is it just the bottles?"

Johnny began a disdainful smile that faded when he saw that Linda was really seeking honest testimony.

"The bottles are quite justified," explained Johnny. "At best, they give only a meager reflection of the Springs' true color. You should go there" – gently he tapped a finger to Linda's left ear-ring – "and learn the difference between an aquamarine and a sapphire."

"I wish I could," sighed Linda. "But somehow I feel that I should win out first, entirely on my own. There is something I must conquer."

"That was my trouble," acknowledged Johnny. "But it licked me first. I couldn't get away from distillery products."

"Maybe they're what I need," declared Linda. "My problem grips me when I'm sober. Which reminds me; you brought them, didn't you?"

"Brought what?"

"These." Deftly, Linda began to draw the fat envelopes from Johnny's pockets. "Don't bother to check them; they'll be safe with me. What's more" – she was methodically stacking the bundles of Claybourne's wealth – "I'll give them back quite willingly, whenever I'm asked."

Johnny laughed politely, to show that he didn't care. He'd had his fun in robbing Claybourne. Then:

"Will I have to ask politely?"

"Quite the contrary," returned Linda. "I simply wilt under threat. Don't think I'm crazy. I'm just a bona fide victim of what is technically known as –"

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"Never mind," interrupted Johnny. "Noble J. Elder says the first step to a cure is to ignore. He practices mental surgery but he doesn't believe in speaking of operations. Believe me, if you go to Sapphire Springs –"

The car had stopped, so smoothly that Johnny didn't realize it, but Linda was accustomed to luxurious brake-bands. The glint of aquamarines fascinated Johnny as Linda raised her arm in a departing gesture.

"We're at your hotel," said the blonde. "Good-night, Johnny, and if you want these" – she was packing a large rubber band around the envelopes that bulged with Claybourne's wealth – "you will know where to reach me."

"But I don't know!" Johnny was stepping from the car as he spoke. "If I only had your phone number –"

"You mean you've forgotten it so soon?" interposed Linda. "After calling me from Claybourne's? If I believed that, Johnny" – Linda's laugh was as ripply as Sapphire Springs – "I could really believe that you'd forgotten my name, too!"

About the only thing Johnny hadn't forgotten was his room number at the Hotel Pilgrim. He wasn't even sure of that, but the hotel clerk was, when Johnny stopped at the desk. Receiving the key, Johnny looked at the number and rode up to the sixteenth floor. Practically stumbling into his room he was beginning to realize what a few double Scotches could mean when taken as chasers after about ninety gallons of Sapphire Water.

Fumbling in his pockets, Johnny found them empty and was a trifle puzzled. Stepping further into the room he tripped over what proved to be a fresh case of Sapphire Water, purchased that afternoon by Kirkwood, the man who forgot nothing. Floundering to a chair, Johnny picked up the telephone and thickly demanded long distance.

At the operator's answer, Johnny muttered:

"Get me Sapphire Springs... Don't know what state it's in... Only know the state I'm in... You won't have any trouble finding it... There's only one Sapphire Springs... Only one Noble J. Elder... Get the name? Noble J. Elder... He's the man I want to talk to... Yes, person to person..."

Johnny tried to pace as he awaited the completion of the call. What made it harder was the case of Sapphire Water, so he kept shoving it toward the window. Facts, and troublesome ones, were whirling through Johnny's mind; the best way to lick them was to imagine that he was back at Sapphire Springs.

It just wouldn't work.

The wail of the police sirens made it difficult, though Johnny mistook them for fire trucks. There weren't any fire trucks around Sapphire Springs, so the shrieks spoiled the illusion, particularly when they began to close in on the Hotel Pilgrim. Staring from the window, Johnny looked for the fire trucks, but all he saw was a taxicab that stopped so suddenly that Johnny looked ahead of it, wondering why it hadn't kept on further.

The sirens were getting very close. Savagely, Johnny reached to close the window, when they stopped. He was his old self now, angry, moody, thwarted, ready to avoid challenges instead of meeting them.

Johnny could hear an elevator rumbling. It reminded him too much of Claybourne's. Wanting something more pleasant, he began to think of Linda. Who she was, he didn't remember, but somehow she belonged to Sapphire Springs, probably because she liked blue. Johnny could picture her emerging from those clear blue waters, like some naiad, one of those sprites that gave perpetual flow to Grecian fountains.

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Yes, that was just what Sapphire Springs needed: a naiad. Linda would be a perfect candidate and her picture would certainly improve the bottle labels. Maybe Noble J. Elder would pay for the idea and charge off some of the cash that Johnny owed him.

The telephone bell didn't interrupt Johnny's thoughts. It simply crystallized them. Here was his chance to sell a real idea, if he could only remember the naiad's name!

"Mr. Elder?"

Johnny put the query as he lifted the receiver, only it wasn't Elder's pleasant voice that replied. It was a gruff voice and it said:

"You're Johnny Craver?"

"That's right. Is Mr. Elder there?"

"This isn't Mr. Elder. This is Inspector Cardona."

The words doused Johnny like a bucket of blue from the icy depths of Sapphire Springs. He was cold sober in an instant, his voice frozen somewhere in his throat.

"Don't try anything, Craver." Cardona's tone was blunt, commanding. "If you've got a gun, forget it. The odds are five to one against you. My squad is outside your room right now."

The receiver clicked as though that settled it and like an echo came an ending of the elevator rumble, a clang of the door. Inspector Cardona had miscalculated the time element, perhaps purposely, but he wasn't far off.

Not far off in distance, either, considering that the elevators were just around the corridor corner from Johnny's room. Half a minute – maybe less – and the squad would be here, depending upon how well they could read room numbers in the gloomy hall.

A short, bitter laugh slipped from Johnny's lips. He was himself alright, his old self, ready for the thing he'd tried before when he felt that life was trapping him too tightly in its unnecessary mesh.

One touch of breeze from the open window told him just that. This time there weren't any unwanted friends around to stop Johnny from taking the easy way out that had preceded his visit to Sapphire Springs. Only enemies were in the offing and to escape them by suicide would be a pleasure.

Staring straight at the open window, Johnny started toward it with a quickening step. His pace at the finish was a half run, for he fancied that he could hear the door opening behind him. Just short of the window, Johnny tripped and took a lurch across the sill; instinctively, he threw his hands toward the sides of the window to halt his stumble.

Then, sneering at his own folly, Johnny let his fingers miss their grip. Headlong he pitched outward, expecting the blackness to swallow him.

It did.

That blackness, however, was not the sort that Johnny sought. Instead of receiving him, blackness overtook him, living blackness in the form of a cloaked shape that swept in from the opened door.

Again, Johnny Craver was in the grip of The Shadow, the rescuer who had saved him from an earlier death.

CHAPTER IX

IF ever a man fought hard to die, Johnny Craver qualified for that distinction. In The Shadow, Johnny was meeting someone superhuman, so he retaliated in kind. Twisted back from the window, facing the blackness of the room instead of the great outdoors, Johnny decided to put the yo-heave to the cloaked tackler who had interrupted his excursion into eternity.

It was really very simple. All Johnny had to do was pitch The Shadow from the window and follow through. Wiry of build, his system hardened by the iron in Sapphire Water, Johnny showed how a mass of latent ability could be concentrated into a display of sudden power. Using the window-sill as a fulcrum, he levered his body backward with a force that carried The Shadow clear over his head into the same sort of dive in which Johnny had been so suddenly interrupted.

The window stopped proceedings. It wasn't big enough to accommodate two plungers all at once. Halted by the raised sash, The Shadow ricocheted straight downward for a return bout. Fighting off The Shadow's grip, Johnny grabbed a handy weapon from the floor and sizeable though it was, attempted to bludgeon The Shadow with a clumsy club that would better have suited a Hercules.

That lost Johnny the advantage.

A moment later he was recoiling from The Shadow's furious thrust. Poked squarely in the diaphragm, Johnny folded in a corner of the room, leaving The Shadow in complete control of both the situation and the missile that Johnny had tried to hurl. But the new state of things was not recognized by arrivals who had failed to witness the old; namely, Cardona's squad.

Cardona had exaggerated the statistics. His squad numbered only three; not five. He was right though, about them being ready to shoot, for they launched into the room with revolvers poked ahead of them. Seeing the glittering muzzles of the police positives, The Shadow made a quick whirl from the window and in that moment, the headquarters men saw him give a sideward fling to the shape with which he grappled.

The detectives were too late to stop the tragedy. Over the sill toppled the clumsy figure that The Shadow released. Maybe Johnny Craver had sought suicide, but this was murder, at least from the police standpoint. From a fleeting glimpse, Cardona's men gauged the direction that The Shadow had taken and drove for him, guns spouting flame. They were firing high and such shots didn't count with The Shadow.

The cloaked fighter came headlong through the trio, spilling them in an uneven row. Hesitating at the door, he turned to deride them with a low-toned taunt that he customarily reserved for men of crime. The frustrated members of the force didn't stop to debate why The Shadow was behaving out of character; instead, they went after him, guns and all.

It was a long way down to the ground floor.

The police were using the stairway instead of the short route that had appealed to Johnny. They chose the stairs because that was the way The Shadow went. Odd how he turned corners just when they saw him, as though waiting for them to keep within range. Only The Shadow was always out of range when they fired.

An elusive chase, this.

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After a few floors down, The Shadow pursuers almost thought they were imagining that they saw him make the turns ahead of them. Still they kept nicking the corners with their gunfire, hoping to stumble across their prey as a result. It didn't occur to them that The Shadow could have sidestepped somewhere and let them pass him; at least not until they reached the lighted lobby.

Then they saw that there wasn't anybody within shooting range ahead of them; no one except Inspector Joe Cardona who was standing with folded arms, a frown upon his swarthy face. Halting their helter-skelter race, the astonished detectives announced what had brought them.

"We were after a guy who did a duck out on us."

"What's more, we know who he was – The Shadow!"

"We ought to have clipped him, after seeing him pitch young Craver out the window."

That last comment brought a lift of Cardona's eyebrows. Unfolding his arms, he gestured to the door.

"Too bad about young Craver," growled the inspector. "Come out and take a look at him."

The detectives went out to take a look and found the sidewalk thoroughly spattered, but not with Johnny. What they saw was the total ruin of a full case of Sapphire Water, its broken blue glass strewn everywhere. That crate of health fluid was the bludgeon which Johnny had used against The Shadow only to have it driven back against his ribs. It was also the blocky object, sizeable enough to be a huddled body, that the detectives had seen The Shadow pitch from the window on the sixteenth floor.

Up in room 1614 the telephone was ringing. From his corner, Johnny was stirring in a feeble effort to answer it. A cloaked figure, stepping in from the door, performed that service for him. Then the voice of Lamont Cranston came calmly from the darkness:

"Hello... Elder? This is Cranston... Yes, I'm with Johnny, looking out for him... He seems to be all right, except... Well, you know what the wrong liquid diet can do for him..."

"Yes, I'll take care of him... No, don't worry... No need to send Kirkwood back here... You say Kirkwood just arrived and reported everything was well with Johnny?... It was, when Kirkwood left..."

"About Johnny? It's nothing very serious... Of course, if he needs another rest, I'll ship him to Sapphire Springs... Good-bye, Elder. I have to look out for Johnny..."

It was The Shadow more than Cranston who looked out for Johnny and in a very emphatic way. Considerably recuperated, Johnny was snarling as he stumbled toward the voice he heard, both hands extended for another grapple. What Johnny wasn't expecting was the cloaked elbow that jogged up from the telephone.

Out of the surrounding darkness that elbow clipped Johnny's outstretched jaw and slumped him back into another coma. The only thing that prevented him from falling was the gloved hand that caught Johnny's arm and then drew as well as guided him out into the corridor, into the empty elevator.

Dropping down to the second floor, The Shadow disembarked his groggy companion. There was a back way out, a narrow flight of steps leading down through a service exit. In the rear street, Johnny revived considerably thanks to the fresh air and at this low altitude there wasn't any chance for him to repeat his suicide efforts. Frisking Johnny's pockets, The Shadow found them empty, so he steered Johnny off along a narrow street, with calm, low-toned instructions.

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"Just keep walking, Johnny. There will be a cab coming soon. Wait for it at the cigar store, three blocks ahead."

With Johnny navigating in the stolid fashion of a zombi, The Shadow returned into the hotel and opened a door connecting with the lobby. Peering from the fringe of half-framed blackness, The Shadow watched a lone detective who was stationed by the desk. Apparently he was waiting for news from upstairs where Cardona had unquestionably gone, so The Shadow waited too.

At last the desk phone jangled. The detective answered it on the instant.

"No, inspector... Yes, inspector... No, inspector... Yes, inspector..."

The Shadow interpreted these replies to mean that the detective hadn't seen anyone come through the lobby, that he'd been ardent in his duty meanwhile, that the missing elevator hadn't come down to the ground floor, and that he'd look at the dial to see where it was.

By the time the detective was back at the telephone saying "It's on the second floor, inspector," The Shadow was gone, out to the rear street, bound for the cigar store three blocks away.

There wasn't any sign of Johnny at the appointed corner, so The Shadow took it that Shrevvy's cab had picked him up. With a whispered laugh, The Shadow blended into the gloom.

Rather previous, that laugh, as Mr. Cranston was to learn when he shed his present trappings.

CHAPTER X

SHREVVY poked his keen pointed face from the cab and said:

"Funny. He's supposed to be here."

"You mean he was supposed to be here," corrected Margo, from the rear seat. "That is, if you mean Johnny."

"Who else would I mean? The chief wouldn't have stayed around this long, would he?"

"No, and neither would we, if he happened to be with us. Those patrol cars are zimming pretty close, Shrevvy."

At that reminder, Shrevvy clicked off the cab lights just as a police car whizzed past the corner. Being of a distinctly dark pattern, the cab was overlooked, but luck played more than a healthy part.

"Better get going," decided Shrevvy, half to himself. "Take a big loop and work back this way. If they spot us they'll think we're coming, not going."

The grand circuit carried Shrevvy considerably further than he'd planned, clear to the neighborhood of the Penn Station which wasn't so far from the old Hotel Pilgrim as Margo remembered from that afternoon. Sight of the station gave Shrevvy the smart idea of riding down the ramp, tossing a few bits of banter with the cab starter, and pulling out again. He could say later that Margo was a passenger from Penn Station and have an alibi to prove it.

Shrevvy's notion brought unexpected dividends. In fact it topped one mystery with another.

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Pulling out from the ramp, Shrevvy jammed the car to a halt, pointed diagonally across the street and exploded:

"Johnny Craver!"

It wasn't hard identifying Johnny. His chin had its defiant thrust, his eyes a quick glance. His shoulders showed their habitual stoop and he showed a customary sign of being nervous when he thrust his fingers through his rumpled brown hair. In looking anxiously for someone, Johnny jostled passers-by who stopped to give him harsh looks in return, which Johnny ignored in characteristic fashion.

There wasn't any way of reaching him.

Right now, Shrevvy's cab was becoming the vortex of a sizeable traffic jam which he had personally caused by halting too close to the ramp. Horns were honking from a barrier of vehicles that were blocking off all paths to Johnny, even for Margo, if she'd tried to cut across the street on foot.

So Margo didn't try, especially when she saw it was too late. Another girl had captured Johnny ahead of her.

From a stopping limousine, a blonde vision in blue emerged from a rear door and reached Johnny in a dozen high-heeled strides. The blonde's advent really stopped traffic, for she looked like something launched straight from a ball-room.

The girl was more visible than her gown when Margo first saw her, because only her head and shoulders could be seen through the crowd. She was plucking Johnny with one hand, trying to hand him a package with the other, and the gestures of her expressive arms were exciting much admiration, except from Johnny.

Excitedly, Johnny waved the blonde dream back to the limousine and nodded that he would follow. By then, Margo had opened the top of Shrevvy's skyview cab and was standing up to look out through. That was when Margo gained sufficient down-slant to observe the blue evening gown that matched the blonde's scintillating bracelets.

Clutching the package as he huddled into the limousine, Johnny shoved the girl ahead of him and the big car cut a quick swath through traffic around the next corner. Margo landed in the back seat as Shrevvy's cab shot forward, but intervening traffic forced a turn in the opposite direction.

"Looks like Johnny had another date," parried Shrevvy, through the connecting window. "What do we do now?"

"You've done enough," snapped Margo, as she climbed from the depths of the back seat. "I guess all we can do is head back to the Hotel Pilgrim."

"Guess that's all," decided Shrevvy. "Anyway, the police didn't snag Johnny."

"Not unless that was a policewoman," returned Margo. "She was wearing blue, you know."

"I didn't notice," declared Shrevvy. "Anyway, most lady cops are heavier on beef than she was." He paused, with a sudden look back. "Say – are you kidding?"

"Not a bit," retorted Margo. "Keep watching for that limousine. We may cross its path."

It was a rather close prediction.

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The mystery of the blonde was matched by the new riddle of Johnny when Shrevvy suddenly saw him, tracing his way back along the very street where he was supposed to have waited at the cigar store. Jamming the brakes, Shrevvy added the comment:

"Can you beat that! Right away the dream lady ditches him, back where he isn't supposed to be!"

"Only this is where he ought to be," reminded Margo, "from our selfish standpoint, anyway. Take him on board, Shrevvy."

They took him on board and he settled in the seat beside Margo, muttering thin excuses that were thick in tone.

"Hello, Margo." Johnny spoke as though recognizing something that was creeping out of a fog. "Didn't know I was going to meet you. If he'd only told me –"

"If who had only told you?"

"Whoever he was. Somebody all shrouded in black –"

"Don't you mean somebody all unshrouded in blue?" interrupted Margo. "No, you couldn't, because she wouldn't be expecting you to meet me at all. And for the sixty-four dollar question: Why pass up a date with a blonde in a limousine for a brunette in a taxicab?"

Johnny's reaction was a startled, guilty stare. He seemed to be regarding Margo as some modern sibyl who could reel off past, present, and perhaps future with the precision of an ancient oracle. Then:

"You saw her? Outside of Claybourne's? An hour ago?"

"Don't be naive," rejoined Margo. "I wasn't outside Claybourne's; I was inside. But let's skip it. We'll talk about something else until we meet Lamont."

Meeting Cranston was part of the quickly planned schedule that Cranston had personally arranged while riding from Claybourne's with Margo. The meeting was to be at midnight at a quiet spot favored by the conservative minority of cafe society. With half an hour remaining until that time, Margo was quite sure that Cranston would keep his appointment.

So Cranston intended, but he was undergoing a hectic half hour.

At present Cranston was at the Cobalt Club, a place noted for its limited membership. Police Commissioner Weston also belonged and was usually found there evenings, this one for example. Right down, Weston was rendering himself obnoxious by bellowing over a telephone in the grill room.

Slamming down the telephone, Weston turned to his calm-faced friend and demanded:

"What do you think of that, Cranston?"

"It was quite good, commissioner."

"Quite good? What was quite good?"

"Your call to the Hotel Pilgrim. Was the phone disconnected?"

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Weston gave Cranston a haughty look.

"It's only about five blocks to the Pilgrim," reminded Cranston. "You were shouting loud enough to be heard there, commissioner."

Weston's hauteur increased.

"You were at Claybourne's party, weren't you?"

"Until it broke up," returned Cranston with a nod. "Claybourne talked about calling the police, so I dropped over here, hoping I might assist you with a few meager facts."

"We have too many facts already," grumbled Weston, "but not the sort we want. Anyway, you couldn't provide them."

"Why not?"

Stiffly, Weston gave his friend a broad-faced stare. Pointedly, he demanded:

"You wouldn't know what Craver did with those securities he took from Claybourne's, would you?"

"I rather fancied that he carried them to the Hotel Pilgrim," returned Cranston. "That is, if he went there."

"He went there alright," announced Weston, "but now he's gone again. They've searched his room inside out, but there's no trace of those stocks and bonds" – Weston paused, impressively – "a half million's worth, by the way."

For the moment, Cranston appeared nonplussed. He could have controlled his expression, but he didn't try. It fitted the occasion and what was more, his manner was genuine. In searching Johnny's pockets as The Shadow, Cranston had assured himself the securities weren't there and therefore assumed that Johnny had stowed them in the hotel room, where the police would find them.

Then, rather indifferently, Cranston proposed:

"Maybe Johnny took them along with him."

"I don't think so," asserted Weston, "because in that case he wouldn't have bothered to stop at the hotel. Or wouldn't that occur to your nondeductive mind?"

"It might," returned Cranston. "Still – the circumstances –"

"Were unusual," completed Weston, abruptly. "Somebody met Craver in that hotel room, Cranston; a person well qualified to take care of both Johnny and the securities, individually."

Cranston's expression was one of query.

"An old friend of ours," added Weston. "Or maybe just a friend of yours. The Shadow."

Immediately Cranston's manner relaxed.

"That settles it, commissioner," he assured. "Claybourne will get back everything he lost."

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"I'm not so sure," retorted Weston. "From latest reports, The Shadow was at Claybourne's, too, apparently aiding Craver's escape. The same thing happened all over again at the Hotel Pilgrim. Well" – Weston shrugged – "if The Shadow is acting in good faith, he can easily prove it."

"How is that, commissioner?"

"By returning Claybourne's securities within the next twenty-four hours. If he doesn't, we'll know that The Shadow has turned to crime and we shall act accordingly. Think it over, Cranston, and you'll agree that I'm right."

Though Cranston didn't agree, he was thinking it over when he left the Cobalt Club to keep his midnight appointment. Of one thing, Cranston was sure, and too sure; namely, that Weston was right in surmising that Johnny hadn't carried the stolen securities from the Hotel Pilgrim.

Unless Johnny had reclaimed them or knew where they could be found, crime's burden would unquestionably be shifted to The Shadow.

CHAPTER XI

"BUT Johnny – you've got to remember!"

Margo Lane was ardent in her plea, so ardent that it seemed that time was running short.

In fact, time was.

This was the next night after the rapid-fire events that had begun at Claybourne's and ended at the Hotel Pilgrim. Though the evening was young, the midnight deadline was rapidly approaching and Johnny still couldn't remember the most essential facts.

"I guess I had too much to drink last night." Warily, Johnny stroked back his hair. "Those doubles at Claybourne's – well, they just knocked me blotto. And later –"

"That was my fault," broke in Margo. "I shouldn't have let you take those drinks before Lamont arrived."

"It didn't matter, Margo." This came from Cranston, who spoke very calmly. "Johnny's memory lapses began before he even went to Claybourne's."

Raising his haggard face, Johnny nodded.

"I phoned somebody from the hotel," he recalled. "That was in the afternoon, but I can't remember who she was."

"The girl in blue?" prompted Margo.

"I suppose so," said Johnny, with another nod. "I was to receive a message and I did. After I read it – well, I didn't want to remember anything else."

"Logical enough," agreed Cranston, "since the message was the combination of Claybourne's wall safe."

"But you called the girl again," insisted Margo. "I heard you, Johnny. You talked to her from Claybourne's just before you went into the kitchen."

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This time Johnny shook his head.

"That was another blank spot," he declared. "I really mean it, Margo. I wouldn't say so if I didn't, because the thing scares me. All I can remember was leaving Claybourne's smoking room and going up in the elevator to the trophy room."

It was Cranston who queried:

"From then on everything was clear?"

"Very clear," affirmed Johnny, "except for the human thunder cloud that barged into Claybourne when he was letting ride with a shot-gun I didn't know was loaded. But honestly" – the tone was strongly sincere – "I didn't feel that I was robbing Claybourne. I planned to send back everything except what was really mine. I'd have called Claybourne and told him so."

"And how much did you consider yours?"

"About fifty thousand. I think Claybourne would have listened, Cranston. After all, he took in that much right while we were in the smoking room with him. It was cruel the way he gypped those two chaps – what were their names?"

"Gilbin and Borgand."

"That's right." Johnny's nod showed there were some things he could remember. "Anyway, that was really what set my mind at rest. It proved how Claybourne had swindled my father and therefore justified my desire to reclaim dad's money."

Margo expected Cranston to criticise Johnny's method, but he didn't. Cranston was being lenient, perhaps too lenient with this young man who interpreted the fine points of justice to suit himself. Still, a broad interpretation was necessary to cover The Shadow's activities in the case. Though his motive had been the saving of Johnny's life, it had indirectly furthered the theft and disappearance of Claybourne's wealth.

That final point most concerned The Shadow and was therefore of importance to Cranston. With only a few hours until another midnight, he hadn't long to meet the law's ultimatum as voiced by Commissioner Weston.

"So you left Claybourne's," Cranston said to Johnny. "You met the girl in blue and gave her the stolen goods."

Wincing a trifle at the word 'stolen' Johnny controlled himself and nodded. Then:

"I should have asked her name," he admitted, "but I was supposed to know it. She promised to return the package whenever I wanted it."

"And didn't she?" demanded Margo.

"No, she didn't," replied Johnny frankly. He reached for a newspaper and gestured to its headlines. "I can't understand this at all."

The newspaper, dated that evening, had much to say about Johnny's escapade, with plenty of hints about an unknown accomplice who had assisted in the compounding of the felony. Likewise there was mention of the girl in blue, variously described by numerous witnesses who had viewed the traffic-stopping thrill near

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Pennsylvania Station.

That grand finale had rather obfuscated the earlier events, by the time the evening newspapers took over the story. The nature of Johnny's crime didn't much matter when compared with the fact that he, a fugitive from justice, had been literally snatched from circulation by an enterprising blonde who rated somewhere between a night-club hostess and a Broadway Godiva, according to confused observers.

It was a wonder that anybody had gained a good look at Johnny, but apparently they had, for accounts were still coming in with his description. Nobody had thought to prevent his departure in the limousine because it hadn't then been known that a half a million dollars was the actual issue at stake.

What had happened afterward, nobody knew; Johnny least of all.

"I can't remember." Johnny groaned as he buried his head in his hands. "I can't remember it at all. I'd swear I met the girl only once, when she came to Claybourne's. I gave her the securities, yes, but I didn't expect them back so soon.

"Maybe I went berserk when I reached the hotel. I did try to throw myself out the window and somebody stopped me, hard. But it was all blackness, even the man who rescued me. He steered me along the street and I recall going past the place where he told me to wait.

"Then I was stumbling back again and it all seemed like a dream. Or maybe I was just in a fog, but it all amounted to the same. I don't remember getting as far as the Penn Station, let alone meeting the girl again, or getting into the car. I thought my own imagination was good, but a lot of people have me stopped."

Margo looked at Cranston and shook her head. It couldn't have been all imagination, this testimony from a cloud of witnesses. Margo could personally swear the same, with Shrevvy to certify her statements. If Lamont wanted to charge it off to another of Johnny's mental lapses, he was privileged to do so.

Before Margo could broach the subject, the telephone bell rang. It startled Johnny, even though he was in the security of Cranston's Manhattan apartment. Answering the call, Cranston found it was long distance, calling from Sapphire Springs.

Gesturing that he wanted no interruptions, Cranston talked to Noble J. Elder and gave an encouraging report regarding Johnny. Hanging up, he turned to Johnny and announced:

"You're welcome back there any time you want to go. Would you prefer to stay here until matters straighten?"

Johnny nodded, a bit doubtful.

"You could leave tomorrow, if you wanted," reminded Cranston, "on the same train Kirkwood took."

"That wouldn't get me there until after midnight," declared Johnny. "Still, it would be better than a sleeper trip. Maybe a rest at the Springs would do me good, but I ought to be cleared to some degree before I go there."

"You will be by tomorrow," assured Cranston. There was a grim note to his words that worried Margo. "Well, Johnny, get some sleep. We'll see you in the morning."

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Accompanying Cranston from the apartment, Margo could hardly wait to pour her flood of apprehensions. In the hallway, Margo undertoned:

"You can't believe all this, Lamont. I know you can't, from the way you just spoke. If you don't turn Johnny over to the police, you'll be – well, at least The Shadow will be blamed for the Claybourne robbery!"

"That's better," said Cranston with a smile. "I'm still in the clear, Margo, and so are you."

"What has that to do with it?"

"We're both still welcome at Claybourne's, which is where you're going right now."

"But why?"

"To find out about that girl in blue. She strikes me as someone who might have been invited to the party but didn't come."

The logic struck home to Margo. If Johnny had told the truth, Cranston's opinion was likely. Assuming that the blue girl had sent Johnny the combination to the safe, it could mean that she had been a house guest at Claybourne's in order to obtain it. Worth testing at least, but there was one point on which Margo couldn't agree.

"These memory lapses of Johnny's. They're just too, too convenient, Lamont. Why you haven't any proof –"

"None except the proof you gave me, Margo."

"I gave you? When?"

"When you told me about Johnny's telephone call; the one he made from Claybourne's and couldn't remember."

"Maybe Johnny was just smart."

"Not from your description. You said he stared right through you, as if he didn't know you. That wasn't smart, when a bit of banter or any idle remark could have thrown you off."

Cranston was right, as usual. He was giving Margo a lot to think about during her trip to Claybourne's. But when he placed her in Shrevvy's cab outside the apartment house, Margo flung aside her own perplexities.

"What about you, Lamont? Where are you going while I'm at Claybourne's?"

"Hunting, Margo, for a different kind of game than you'll find in Claybourne's trophy room – unless you include what isn't there any more."

"You mean the securities?"

"What else? Wish me good hunting, Margo."

Margo did, with silent sincerity. But as the cab whisked her off to Claybourne's, she couldn't help but feel that the slogan of 'good hunting' would be needed less by Cranston than by The Shadow.

CHAPTER XII

THE question of Claybourne's trophies, as represented by his unstuffed wall safe, was quite a problem for Messrs. Gilbin and Borgand. Aloof from the law, these two gentlemen were seated in a lavish hotel suite, bemoaning a loss which in their parlance was defined as fifty grand.

At least this phoney pair could afford to be comfortable in privacy. They were sitting in shirt sleeves and slippers, sprinkling ashes on a costly rug, freely calling each other by their wrong names of Sheff and Hippo.

"Look at this dump." Sheff snarled as though wishing the walls had ears. "Twenty-five smackers a day for a front we can't use."

"And didn't need in the first place," reminded Hippo. "What did Claybourne care about where we came from, so long as our check wasn't rubber?"

"It was good business staying here at first," argued Sheff, "considering we were playing a ten to one shot for a sure thing."

"Five to one," corrected Hippo. "You said yourself that only half of Claybourne's paper would be negotiable. Say, though – now that Craver has the brand on him, why don't we pull out our potatoes by stopping payment on that bank marker we handed Claybourne?"

Sheff's scoff was savage.

"With Craver missing along with the dough? You're big enough to be grown up, Hippo. All that's keeping us in the clear is the fact we played sucker and are sticking with it."

"Yeah? What about The Shadow?"

"You mean why is he in the clear? Because that's his racket. Only this time he may have played it too strong for the commish. If he has, that might help us though."

"How?"

For reply, Sheff began with a sharp smile which on his sallow face gathered a Satanic prophecy.

"This business of The Shadow being always right has given him all the big innings," asserted Sheff. "It's time it was the other way around. If somebody declared an open season on The Shadow, what would happen?"

"I know a dozen guns would go after him."

"And so do I. For peanuts, too, and paid on delivery."

"Say, maybe that would help us get Claybourne's paper, Sheff."

"If The Shadow has it, yes" – Sheff's forehead formed dark furrows – "but I'm not sure just where The Shadow stands. Not until we talk to Shebley."

There was a knock at the door before Hippo could reply and it made the big man scramble in a fashion suiting his nickname. Hippo was grabbing for coat and vest, while looking for his shoes. It wouldn't do for Mr. Artemus Borgand to be caught dishabile in such pretentious surroundings.

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"Forget it, Hippo," snorted Sheff. "You ought to know Shebley's knock. I sure timed it, didn't I?"

Stepping to the door, Sheff opened it, to admit the spick-and-span chauffeur who piloted the Brock limousine. Dapper at a distance, Shebley showed the face of an ingrown rat when viewed at this close range; habitually he probably tried to control that expression, but there was no necessity here. In fact, Shebley needed to be tough, as he plainly saw when Sheff closed the door and leaned against it.

"All right, fancy pants," snapped Sheff. "How come the dame crossed you up last night?"

"How do I know?" Shebley lighted a cigarette to show he wasn't nervous. "She's nuts, as you ought to know, so anything can happen in her league."

"Not nuts," put in Hippo, thrusting his bulky figure forward to accompany his booming voice. "She's just got cryptophobia, or whatever you want to call it."

"Kleptomania," corrected Sheff. "Well, since she got hold of Claybourne's stuff, why didn't she hang onto it?"

There was a shrug from Shebley. Then:

"Look, gents." The chauffeur spread his hands, half-pleadingly. "She ain't rational, that's admitted. I'm the guy can testify to that, being unprejudiced. Her aunts and cousins make excuses and say it all means nothing, but I'm the guy who drives her places and I ought to know."

"So do we," retorted Sheff. "We tested her with those fake phone calls, tipping her off to where she could pick up stuff she wanted."

"Yeah," added Hippo. "We were some of the voices she kept telling you about, saying they controlled her. We told her she ought to find where Claybourne kept what didn't belong to him."

"We said somebody needed that combination," reminded Sheff. "Somebody she ought to help, which turned out to be Craver. We thought the only chance we were taking was with him."

"And it was right in the bag," growled Hippo. "When Craver showed up at Claybourne's, it was just a case of letting him do the job and take the rap. If he trusted the dame enough to pull the grab, he ought to have let her keep the stuff."

Shebley took a slow, weary drag on his cigarette.

"I'm telling you again, that's what he did do," the chauffeur asserted. "We drop Craver near his hotel and I drive the dame home with the package. I'm expecting her to call it a night, when all of a sudden she shows up at the garage, saying there's been a big mistake."

Sheff's eyes snapped a combination of anger and suspicion.

"Didn't that make you think something, Shebley?"

"Yeah, that she'd been hearing more voices," returned the chauffeur. "How was I to know different? I figured maybe somebody at Claybourne's had guessed right, about the Brock dame I mean, and one of you had phoned her to start out again, on another of those things she calls missions."

"Yeah?" Sheff's suspicion was relaxing. "And then?"

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"Well," replied Shebley, "who does she meet then but Craver –"

"And didn't that put you hep?"

"To what? You wouldn't have been meeting her yourselves, would you? I figured you had him tagged, seeing as the coppers didn't. So the stuff looked safe enough."

With a blunt but satisfied nod, Sheff stepped away from the door. Always slow to understand, Hippo thought this an oversight and used his bulk to supplant Sheff's. By then, the others were taking chairs, and Sheff waved for Hippo to join them. The door was something they could forget and did.

"It begins to add up," admitted Sheff. "When you phoned, you said Linda had you drive around in circles, finally dropping Johnny on the other side of Penn Station. Right?"

A nod from Shebley.

"He had the package," continued Sheff, "and all she did from then on was go home."

Another nod from Shebley; scarcely noticing it, Sheff turned to jab his elbows into Hippo's ribs. With a dumb look that in his case stood for concentration, Hippo was staring toward the forgotten door.

"Listen to this, Hippo," insisted Sheff. "It's important. That door's latched; it won't pop open."

"Looked like it was trying to," returned Hippo. "Guess the optimist wasn't kidding when he said I needed binoculars."

"If you mean the optometrist who said you needed bifocals, he was right. But we still need your opinion in case of a tie vote. Craver dropped off at Penn Station so he could hop the midnight sleeper to Sapphire Springs. Answer yes or no."

The others both gave nods.

"Then I win one to two," decided Sheff. "That cure—all joint is the first place he wouldn't go, whether he's nuts or otherwise, because it's where they'd track him. Let's say he went somewhere else. Next question: Did he take what we want with him?"

Neither of the others could decide. Hippo for one was stealing another glance at the door, but he hadn't time to notice that the black crack had widened almost an inch. Sheff nudged Hippo again, as he said:

"Maybe Craver didn't. He could have stashed the stuff in one of those checking boxes. Any mail come for the Brock dame this morning, Shebley?"

"I don't know," admitted Shebley. "I ain't paid to snoop. What with new folks showing up most every day, like the flat-faced freak who came yesterday, saying she was Cousin Janice, my best dodge is being polite."

"All right," acknowledged Sheff, "but get this. When a couple of clucks start playing bean-bag with a half a million bucks, they may get to like it. What did this Linda do this afternoon?"

"Gave me the rest of the day off," replied Shebley "which is unusual. If she goes out, she'll have to use one of those things her aunts call horrid cabs."

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"Those things lose themselves in Penn Station, there's so many of them around there," reminded Sheff.
"Maybe I'm right on the bean-bag business. Only there may be something more to it, such as another voice."

Hippo's slow mood vanished at that suggestion. Half up from the chair that creaked under his action, Hippo threw another of his too quick looks at the door, then faced Sheff with the exclamation:

"The Shadow!"

"Not The Shadow," snarled Sheff. "I told you he'd have given Claybourne a refund by this time. Somebody else is working on that Brock doll" – he swung savagely to Shebley – "and it's your business to do better than just guess who!"

"But – but – how –" Shebley was all stammers. "Look, Sheff – what can I do except remember what the dame tells me? Like all that gush about how can she wait for the jewel show in the Petite Room at the Hotel Regal?"

"Be reasonable, Sheff. You know and I know that even Miss Linda-mania Brock can't get her red-nailed pinkies on that bunch of sparklers, not with Niblo Klemmet running the show. When a wrong guy really turns right – which is something you and Hippo only think you've done – there's nobody could do a put over on him."

The mere mention of Niblo Klemmet stirred Sheff to a further display of facial savagery. It was Hippo's turn to become the scoffer.

"Niblo Klemmet!" snorted Hippo. "Who says he's right, unless you figure right is what we call it and that's wrong. I know Niblo and he's the con man's con. Always let somebody take everything but the gravy and the roast beef and potatoes that went with it, back when there used to be roast beef and potatoes. He was the guy who could fix the fixers, Niblo was. I'll tell you about Niblo –"

Sheff didn't exactly interrupt Hippo's harangue because he wasn't listening to it. Sheff had grabbed a newspaper and was scampering through the pages; now, his question was shot at Shebley instead of Hippo:

"When is that jewel show starting?"

"How should I know?" retorted Shebley. "I only listened to what the Brock number tells me –"

"Then listen to what I tell you." Sheff thrust the newspaper in front of Shebley's eyes. "It starts tonight. Blondie Brock could hardly wait, could she? Only she clammed all of a sudden and then gives you the evening off. All right, Hippo, it's your turn. What power did Niblo have over dames?"

"And plenty," asserted Hippo. "They were the queens that topped the other guy's aces. Why, the time that Broadway con crew were using the show business to take a couple of angels, Niblo had the leading lady taking the con guys –"

"Just like he's got the Brock dame taking us," interrupted Sheff. "He's using a million dollars worth of fancy ice as a front so she can deliver half that much that belongs to us. We're pikers, slumming in this hotel suite while Niblo hires the Petite Room at the Regal.

"You stay on call, Shebley, because we may need you. Get out that other shirt of yours, Hippo, and the tails that go with it. We're crashing the Petite Room in a big way and in a hurry. And oh, yes" – Sheff snapped his fingers as if by oversight – "there's something else we're forgetting."

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Beckoning his criminal companions close to him, Sheff undertoned in mock awe:

"The Shadow."

Nobody saw the door close, nor heard the slight sound of its clicking latch, both actions being preparatory to Shebley's immediate departure. Out in the corridor, blackness seemed to gather itself into a living shape which glided like a cloud of human smoke and blended its cloaked form into the darkness of a stairway.

There was mockery more poignant than Sheff's in the confidential laugh that gave whispered evidence of The Shadow's departure from a scene where he had gained new and needed facts.

CHAPTER XIII

A VERY suspicious woman opened the door of the brownstone house and croaked from the unlighted vestibule:

"Who is it?"

After a moment's hesitation, Margo Lane gave her name; then added, emboldened by the sound of her own voice:

"I have come to see Miss Linda Brock."

"She is expecting you?" came the croak.

"She should be," replied Margo. "I just called her from the Claybournes."

"Of course." The croak lessened its hardness. "Go right up."

Going right up was easy. The house was sparing on lights, so all Margo had to do was follow them like the green line in the subway shuttle. She didn't even glance back to appraise the croaking lady, who was probably some unimportant servant. In a room on the second floor, Margo found Linda seated in front of a dressing table. From the mirror, Linda asked:

"Do I look well in blue, Margo?"

Looking over the lovely shoulders that topped the chair back, Margo saw that Linda was really wearing blue, what there was of it. The same blue in fact that had attracted secondary attention during the traffic tie-up at Penn Station.

"Very well," acquiesced Margo. "But I thought you weren't going out these days, Linda."

"These days or these nights?" Linda rippled a laugh. "I suppose you mean why wasn't I at the Claybourne reception. Were you?"

Margo nodded.

"Then you know why now," continued Linda. "I knew it would be boring. Only you should have guessed."

Turning in her chair, Linda clasped Margo's hand between hers. There was sincerity in Linda's grip as well as her eyes and her smile counted too, though it was mostly plaintive.

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"It's so good to see someone human!" exclaimed Linda. "I just haven't wanted to go anywhere and I couldn't invite anybody here, not with all the relatives around the house."

"I didn't see any of them, Linda."

"You must have seen Cousin Janice, because she's the only person who could have let you in. They've been coming one at a time, not all at once. It must be her turn now."

"Why her turn?"

"Because I'm a –" Linda paused and whistled. "There, now I can get the word. I'm a psychiatric case. They've been talking about me to creatures called alienists."

"Poor Linda!"

"Not poor Linda." The blonde smiled in Mona Lisa fashion. "Better say Rich Linda. They're after my money."

The last words were harsh. Turning toward the mirror as she uttered them, Linda frowned at sight of herself.

"There I go again," she chided. "Copying my Aunt Sabbatha, who thought the family was trying to do her out of a fortune when they were actually supporting her. I take after Aunt Sabbatha, I'm afraid, except" – Linda's face went very serious – "except that I do have money."

Rising from her chair, Linda pressed her hand to her forehead, as though a pang had gripped her. Stepping to a side table, she poured herself a glass of water from a familiar blue bottle and drank it in one long draught.

"Maybe headaches are imagination," said Linda, with a bitter smile. "If that's the case, so is this cure, but it seems to help. Tell me, Margo, did you ever hear of Sapphire Springs?"

"On bottle labels," replied Margo. "Like that one."

"Here are some pictures of the place." Linda handed Margo a beautifully printed folder, with blue the predominating color. "I really should go there, but the family says so."

"And you don't trust them?"

"That's just it." Slowly, Linda shook her head. "I don't trust myself, either. Really, I hate to be like Aunt Sabbatha; she was all smoke and no fire. But I guess since I'm fire, I'm entitled to a little smoke."

Margo caught the general idea.

"You mean you're afraid Sapphire Springs would turn out to be something more than a sanitarium?"

"That's the general idea. I actually accused the relatives of trying to put me away. I thought that would stop the parade of womenfolk who were so sorry for poor dear Linda."

"Did it?"

"Almost. Then Cousin Janice crawled from beneath an uncharted stone. I shouldn't say that, though. She only arrived yesterday and so far she's proven to be quite nice. For one thing, none of the others ever mentioned

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her. That's a real point in her favor."

Beckoning Margo into an adjoining room, Linda waved toward a collection of antiques, or objects which could be termed such, though the unpracticed eye might have classed them under the general head of junk furniture. Almost in the center of the room was a bureau to which Linda pointed.

"Aunt Sabbath's," explained Linda. "I used to sit in front of it and complete my make-up. Last night" – Linda paused; her eyes went questioning – "you won't think I'm crazy if I tell you, Margo?"

"Certainly not."

"I was sitting in front of the mirror," continued Linda, "finishing the final touches, when I noticed" – stepping forward Linda gave her arm a long and daring thrust which momentarily startled Margo – "I noticed this!"

At that, Linda's hand and arm went right through the circular frame where a mirror should have been. Having taken a few steps forward, Margo saw the vacancy and rather felt her look was much the same when she stared at Linda.

"No, don't say it," declared Linda. "Don't tell me I'm crazy if I thought I saw myself in a mirror that wasn't there. It could have been force of habit, poor memory, or the fact that I was feeling a bit hazy. Only –"

Linda gave a long pause, her expression really worried.

"Only I haven't been able to find the mirror," she said finally. "Last night was excusable, but if I've been thinking for weeks that I've been seeing myself in Aunt Sabbath's imaginary mirror, well – then what?"

"A trip to Sapphire Springs," suggested Margo, "before you really have to go somewhere else."

Linda nodded as though she really agreed. Suddenly her manner became furtive. A moment later it changed to a mood of complete confession as she drew open the bureau drawer to reveal a great mass of trinkets, coins, fancy handkerchiefs, and bits of rare embroidery.

"What would you think of a woman who acted like a jack-daw?" queried Linda. "One who just wanted everything she saw for the pure joy of taking it without request of payment?"

"Aunt Sabbath?"

"Yes, she was that way." Linda relaxed, as though thankful for Margo's timely query. "You know why I'm sure there was a mirror in this bureau?"

"Why?"

"Because Aunt Sabbath used to put all her gee-gaws in front of it so she'd see twice as many. Thank goodness I haven't reached that state yet!"

Turning on a high heel, Linda went back to her own room, with Margo following. In the real mirror, the blonde took another look at the brunette and exclaimed:

"Why, you're wearing an evening gown, too! Then we can go there together!"

"Go where, Linda?"

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"To the jewel exhibit at the Petite Room. In the Hotel Regal, you know." Linda suddenly arched a sharp look from the mirror. "Provided the Claybournes won't be there. Will they?"

"Not a chance," assured Margo. "They're mourning over some sort of robbery that occurred last night. Mr. Claybourne isn't in a spending mood."

"How sad," said Linda, indifferently. "The robbery, I mean. I never read the newspapers and the radio is so abominable. But tell me" – her eyes went sharp, though her tone didn't – "how did the Claybournes happen to mention me?"

"Well," began Margo, "when I went there this evening –"

"But why did you go there?" snapped Linda. "I never would, unless I'd forgotten something from the last visit."

"Which I had," ad libbed Margo. "My wrap. Anyway, I was talking to the female child –"

"Junior or the little sister?"

"The little sister. She asked me if I knew you."

"And why?"

"Because, Miss District Attorney" – Margo decided that a few pointed remarks would put Linda more at ease – "little sister fancies that she's a blonde. She is sort of a halfway."

"Did you say way or wit?"

"And or, to use legal terminology. Anyway, one glimpse of you drove her ga-ga. That's why she insisted on showing you all over the house. She wanted to copy your poses."

"I remember." Linda gritted a few teeth. "What did she call that horrible place where all the things stared from the wall?"

"The trophy room. She showed me through it, too, but very briefly. She was afraid of more trouble."

"More trouble?"

"Yes, You wouldn't run when she heard her papa coming and she had to push you behind a screen."

"What a memory that child has!"

"She should have. You were right over by the wall safe when he opened it."

"So that was what he was doing! I thought he was dedicating another set of moose horns!"

"And you sneaked out –"

"I'll say I did. I was afraid I was prying into some secret ritual peculiar to the Claybourne family. Of course little sister had to trip when she tried to follow me. Her daddy caught her."

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"But she never told on you, Linda."

"I guess not." Finishing her prinking, Linda poked her hand against the mirror to make sure there really was one. "She got whaled for being there and I watched from outside the door, thinking it would be a pleasure. Instead, I felt sorry for the kid."

"She knows it. She was sick for a week from that five-pound box of candy you sent her. Anyway, she wouldn't have breathed a word, even to me, unless she'd known we were really good friends. At that she made me cross my heart and hope to die if I told anybody."

"I'm glad you excluded me."

"Well, you already knew, Linda. Anyway, little Miss Claybourne's lips are sealed."

"With chocolate marshmallows." Turning, Linda faced Margo with a bold smile. "I have taking ways, don't I, Margo?"

Whether Linda meant personally or through indirect influence, she didn't specify, so Margo begged the question. They went downstairs together and all the way Margo was wishing she could risk a phone call to Lamont if she only knew where to reach him. She'd struck luck at Claybourne's and hadn't hesitated to follow it through, but now Margo was beginning to worry.

As a mental case with a convenient loss of memory, Linda somehow managed to outmaneuver Johnny. She could remember things when they were tossed at her, yet make it look as though she had forgotten. As for those things up in the bureau drawer, Margo was sure they weren't Aunt Sabbath's.

By the time they were downstairs, Margo was calming her nerves. When Linda stepped into a room beside the old-fashioned hall, mentioning that she always took a last look at her make-up, Margo decided that the blonde was getting back to normal. Watching from the doorway, Margo couldn't quite see Linda's reflection in a curious old mirror in the other room, but of course Linda happened to be blocking off the view.

At least Margo thought so, until she decided that her own make-up must be sagging by default, considering the time that Linda took. So as Linda stepped away, with a flash of blue that had all the elements of a reflection, Margo advanced and replaced her, only to step back with a start.

It was just another of those empty frames, this one set in front of a doorway. No mirror, in fact not anything. This time Linda had kept up with her imagination and Margo felt that she would personally be in the swim if she didn't get out of this brownstone home of fantasy.

Linda was calling sweetly from the doorway, very much the sane self that Margo wasn't. Overtaking the blonde, Margo heard Linda call in a tone of suitable sarcasm:

"Good night, dear cousin Janice."

From somewhere a voice croaked the equivalent of a good night, though the words weren't very distinguishable. Then Margo and Linda were out in the very sweet night air, in darkness so thick and lovely that Margo felt relieved by the hope that it might contain some hold-up men who in a pinch would furnish gentle companionship.

Certainly such characters would run if Margo let loose with the scream she wanted to give. It might even be enough to bring Cousin Janice hopping out in a froggish fashion that would suit her croaky voice. But that

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secondary possibility among the catalog of horrors was enough to maintain Margo's silence.

Headlights cut a sudden swath from the corner and Linda calmly announced that they were in luck to get a cab so quickly. Luck spelled Shrevvy in Margo's mental dictionary, because it was his cab. He'd waited after delivering Margo to the brownstone abomination that Linda called home only because she'd been brought up in it.

It was Linda's voice that calmly ordered: "Hotel Regal," but by that time, Margo felt she could have done the same. Certainly this night could offer nothing in the way of nerve-racking horror to compare with the creeps that the Brock mansion furnished.

So Margo thought, but both she and the night were comparatively young. She'd forgotten in her strain that midnight was The Shadow's deadline.

Deadline with the accent on the first syllable.

CHAPTER XIV

NIBLO KLEMMET, master of suavity, was beaming from behind the bullet-proof show cases that stood at the end of the Petite Room. The name of the room was deceiving; it was small only in relation to the others in the Hotel Regal, one of Manhattan's mammoth gathering places for fashion.

The show cases weren't why Niblo beamed. They only contained crown jewels. What attracted Niblo was the parade of gem-encrusted mannequins, all borrowed for the occasion, like the jewels. When it came to putting up a million-dollar front, Niblo supplied nothing and let someone else provide the difference.

It was all very simple.

People who owned crown jewels because they'd inherited them, always wanted to sell them, but never could unless they let them be seen by a new crop of buyers who wanted to leave them to heirs who would try to sell them.

Crown jewels were worse than a drug on the market; they were a drug looking for a market.

Just advertise crown jewels on display and persons with saleable gems would want to exhibit theirs. It was easy to convince them that flesh was a better background than plush. To find the flesh, you went to the fashion makers who couldn't resist the temptation of bejewelling the models who showed the latest gowns. Niblo's only rule was: the longer the jewels the shorter the gowns, which also suited the scheme of things, since the cost of feminine evening wear ran in direct opposite to the amount of material.

The beaming gentleman named Niblo thought that he had done a right good job on this occasion until he saw the blonde creation styled Linda Brock. Her blue cutaway so outdared the professionals that Niblo felt this amateur would steal the show. A few meek aquamarines in the form of bracelets and earrings were lost in all the glitter.

So Niblo gave the high-sign.

Immediately polite but brawny chaps who looked like the end-men of an adagio trio began to surround Linda with bows and hand kisses. They stooped only from the waist, these henchmen of Niblo's, rather than reveal the guns that bulged beneath their coat tails.

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Never before had such an assemblage of handsome thugs been gathered in one room, all with licenses for the guns they carried. But Niblo was too much a gentleman to abuse the privilege and he expected his row of potential murderers to act accordingly.

They did.

Gracefully, Linda was snatched from Margo's company by courteous hands that ran her along an innocuous gantlet into the little office behind the display cases, while Niblo waited long enough to curl a contemptuous smile at two visitors who had been admitted only after vigorous protest; namely, Messrs. Sheffield Gilbin and Artemus Borgand.

Having officially concluded a fifty-thousand-dollar deal with Jerome Claybourne, Sheff and Hippo were entitled to such courtesy, though they had been forced to leave some of their guns outside. Along with those guns, they'd left the men who carried them, a dozen misfits in hastily rented evening clothes, whose acquaintance with society – if any – had been limited to brief terms as bouncers in some of the third-rate night spots.

This didn't matter to Sheff and Hippo. If shooting started, they preferred that it should be in the broader spaces of the lobby where their guns were parked in the keeping of their owners. What they wanted first was a word or two with Niblo on the subject of investments, the sort recommended by Jerome Claybourne.

For sheer nerve, however, Niblo exceeded all expectations. The intended words were to concern the recent activities of Linda Brock and both Sheff and Hippo were sure that Niblo would deny the very existence of the blonde lady. Certainly, she should have arrived at the office through its private door, unless Sheff and Hippo were very much mistaken as to what they termed the set-up.

As Niblo bowed himself away from the crown jewels and into the office where Linda had so surprisingly arrived, Sheff and Hippo began to talk it over.

"The nerve of the guy," began Sheff. "Having the dame walk right past us and into the office! And we were beginning to think we were suspicious!"

"She doesn't have the paper," argued Hippo. "That was a big bundle Craver took. She'd need a lot more clothes to hide it."

"How do we know Niblo didn't pick it up himself? The securities, I mean. Bringing the dame here could be a stunt to make us think we guessed wrong, if we were dumb enough to believe it."

"Kind of dumb for Niblo to try it," rejoined Hippo, speaking as though experienced in such matters. "Maybe we're all wrong, Sheff."

"Maybe you think so," retorted Sheff, "but I don't see it that way. Meanwhile let's look around and see who else is here."

For one thing, Cranston wasn't at the jewel show. Margo was finding that out while she waited for Linda to return. It didn't occur to her that Linda, having stolen the show, was thinking about taking over what went with it.

In his office, Niblo Klemmet was bringing more jewels from the safe, but there were none worthy of a find like Linda Brock. Stepping to the door, Niblo gestured to one of his over-handsome stooges and the word was passed along that there was to be an intermission in the parade.

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A few minutes later, the models entered the office and began shedding jewels on Niblo's desk while he checked a list of bracelets, pendants, rings and even ear-rings.

"Fifteen minutes for lunch, girls," announced Niblo, genially.

Minus several hundred thousand dollars' worth of glitter, the models filed through another door, where a couple of Niblo's henchmen stood on guard. This back route led along a secluded corridor around to the main lobby.

Only Linda remained when Niblo closed the door. Politely, Niblo suggested that the blonde remove her own few jewels and adorn herself with the choicest of the many. Linda complied willingly and her taste met Niblo's approval.

Diamonds and sapphires were her choice. The myriad tints of the diamonds blended with the gorgeous hue of the deep blue stones, producing an increasing dazzle that gladdened Niblo's eye. She was made to order for gems, Linda was, and it didn't seem possible to overload her.

"You look good," admired Niblo. "With that blue gown of yours, you've turned into a sapphire dream."

"Sapphire?" There was a far away gaze in Linda's eyes, a sparkle that matched the blue glitter that formed an aura all about her. "Why, of course – these are sapphires, aren't they?"

The very word had a grip, for Linda repeated it softly, while Niblo stared, a trifle puzzled by the girl's hypnotic stare.

"Sapphire." Again the blue eyes sparkled. "Sapphire Springs – blue like these – the way Johnny said. Sapphires – lovelier than aquamarines –"

Niblo was no longer listening. He was looking Linda over, wondering what else she could carry in the way of gems. The desk was a medley of brilliance, but in all its worth of precious stones, there were none that befitted Linda, now that the sapphires had all been weeded. The green of emeralds, the red of rubies, would have spoiled the living rhapsody in blue.

A happy thought struck Niblo; with it, he produced a bunch of keys and turned to the door that led into the Petite Room.

"I know what will really top you off," Niblo told Linda. "A coronet from those crown jewels. There's one that's all diamonds and sapphires, the perfect combination. Look yourself over" – Niblo gestured to a full length mirror – "and I'll bring it."

Out through the main door, Niblo left it slightly ajar and that gave Margo her chance. Sheff and Hippo were more interested in watching Niblo open one of the jewel cases, so Margo encountered no opposition when she worked her way behind a fancy screen and gained a slanted view into the office.

From that angle, Margo saw Linda turning from a mirror and stepping back to the desk. Even the dazzle of Linda's decorations didn't prevent Margo from observing the blonde's eager, almost greedy gaze. Those slim hands of Linda's moved toward the desk like tiger's claws, ready to sink themselves into the gorgeous wealth that was heaped there.

Then Linda paused, darting a look over one shoulder, toward a far door that Margo couldn't see. Evidently she intended to leave by that exit and realized that she might be challenged, for suddenly Linda began to strip

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rings from her fingers, bracelets from her wrists and fling them among the gems that heaped the desk.

Linda was racing against time and frantically. Ear-rings, pendant and necklace added their blue to the increasing pile. Next she was stooping to remove a sapphire anklet, kicking her shoe off and on again in one manoeuver. Entirely divested of jewels, Linda did a sleek glide to a corner of the office and came back with exactly what she needed, a pair of light wraps that must have been left by two of the professional models.

One of the wraps was green. Linda spread it on the desk and shovelled the mass of gems into its folds, bundling the whole hoard neatly. The other wrap was blue, Linda's own color, and therefore something that she would logically carry. Draping the green bundle within the blue cloth, Linda placed the latter over her arm and made another glide toward the inner corner that Margo couldn't see.

Immediately, Margo decided to remedy that deficiency. She couldn't let Linda duplicate Johnny's folly of outright thievery. Abandoning caution, Margo sprang through the door into the office, giving a low but sharp call:

"Linda!"

There must have been a mirror in that corner door, for Margo saw the blonde's reflection as she turned. It was an odd sight for Linda was reaching for the knob and apparently opening the door at the same time. Her reflection gave a curious skid, as sudden as Linda's own whirl; then, a slender arm stretched toward a light switch and the red-nailed hand found it. A click and the room was in blackness.

Only the dim light from the corridor and a similar glow from the doorway that Margo had entered, remained to partially disclose what followed.

Recognizing that Linda might stage the tigress act to protect the pelf that she had gathered, Margo decided to beat her to the punch, or claw-work if preferred. Across the office, Margo met Linda in the dark and immediately found herself in a whirling tangle with the bundled wrap the vortex.

There was a shriek from Linda as the bundle left her hands; then Margo lost her own grip on it. But with the shriek, two men came bounding in from the corridor and grabbed for the writhing girls. Somehow, they managed to concentrate on Margo, for Linda suddenly broke clear and dashed out through the corner doorway, the blue wrap trailing with her.

"There she goes!" gargled Margo, wrenching from an arm that encircled her neck. "She has the jewels with her! Stop her – bring her back!"

Niblo's huskies took Margo's word for it. Together, they started after Linda, who by that time was lost around a corner of the corridor. But Margo, blundering in the opposite direction, was immediately caught in a new grip, supplied by Niblo in person, Coming from the Petite Room, Niblo couldn't tell a brunette from a blonde as he reached the darkness of the office.

"So you were trying to snatch the sparklers," growled Niblo. "I should have had more sense than to leave you alone with all that stuff. All right, lady, I'll turn you over to the police. I'm operating legitimate, and anybody who told you different was crazy."

Margo couldn't argue, not with Niblo throttling her. Suddenly sprawled in a chair, she lay there gasping, while Niblo blundered to the light switch and found it. Staring first at the desk, seeing its sparkle gone, Niblo turned savagely toward Margo; then halted puzzled.

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"Say – who are you?" Niblo took two steps forward, then clamped his hands on Margo's shoulders, giving them a violent shake. "What is this? A cover-up for the blonde who was just here?"

For answer, Margo managed to point to the floor. There, lost in the recent riot, lay the green bundle containing the gems. Linda had carried away the blue without its precious contents, unwittingly of course.

"There – there's the jewels," gasped Margo. "In that wrap. We – we saved them."

Picking up the wrap, Niblo recognized its extra weight as he laid it on the desk. A moment later, he had unfolded the green cloth and was recognizing the reclaimed gems. A broad smile was formed on Niblo's pudgy face when a modulated voice spoke from the doorway behind him.

"I'll take those," the voice said. "Careless of me to drop them, so I came back."

Turning with Niblo, Margo's eyes were equally startled at sight of Linda. The blonde was standing in the door to the corridor, her eyes narrowed in a cold, hard gaze.

A gaze as cold and hard as the glittering revolver muzzle that pointed straight from Linda's hand!

CHAPTER XV

THERE wasn't any arguing with Linda.

She was a very different Linda from the half-bewildered girl who had suddenly become eager for somebody else's jewels and then had taken to wild flight.

Maybe the gun spelled the difference. It did with a lot of people, as Margo knew too well. There was just one thing to do when someone meant business with a gun. That was to sit tight and do nothing.

And the blonde meant business.

Niblo saw it too, and remained motionless, his hands stiffly raised. Paying no heed to Margo, Linda stepped to the desk, coolly wrapped the green bundle one-handed and tucked it under her arm. Then, stepping backward, she reached the door and paused.

"Don't try to follow me." Linda's tone was low but sharp. "Those other fools were lucky. They're still looking for me and if they find me" – she gestured with the gun – "they'll get what you'll get if you even budge."

This was meant for Margo as well as Niblo, for both were staring straight at Linda. But Margo from her chair was noting something strange, the curious blackness that actually enveloped Linda's form. For a moment, Margo thought that some one must have turned out the corridor lights; then, involuntarily, Margo gave a glad cry.

There was a savage gesture of Linda's gun, but it was too late. Blackness in the shape of a cloaked arm had encircled her; a gloved fist was tightening around Linda's wrist. Twisted half aside, gun and all, the blonde's lithe form now revealed the human background that had obscured the light.

Linda's captor was The Shadow.

The cloaked invader held no gun. Instead, his other hand was reaching for the green bundle that Linda carried. Only The Shadow's eyes were visible beneath his hat brim, burning eyes that seemed to be judging

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Niblo Klemmet, weighing the man's cause.

From the gape on Niblo's face, the tremble of his lifted hands, it was plain that he feared The Shadow and therewith branded himself a crook. Only a man with an unsavory past could have quivered at the arrival of this cloaked friend who was ready to restore a bundle of stolen wealth.

Nevertheless, The Shadow's scales tipped in Niblo's favor. Margo knew it from the whispered laugh she heard; for the mirth was indulgent, though Niblo didn't recognize it. All the while, The Shadow's clamping arm was suppressing the struggles of a savage but helpless blonde. In The Shadow's expert grip, Linda couldn't budge more than an inch in any direction.

A good lesson for Niblo, this. It was teaching him that crime couldn't pay, not when The Shadow was around. If Niblo's present business happened to be a front for something illegitimate, he would do well to forget it.

So would others, but they didn't.

Before The Shadow could announce his next intention, there were sudden shouts from the doorway of the Petite Room. Bolting straight into the office came Sheff and Hippo, guns looming from their fists. The shouts were from in back of them, furnished by Niblo's tribe of armed stooges who resented this sudden invasion of the office.

But neither Sheff nor Hippo was thinking of those shouts. Not when they saw The Shadow.

Intent upon a show-down with Niblo, these unworthies transferred their attention to The Shadow. It was a chance of a lifetime to make this The Shadow's deathtime. They were equipped for action, this pair of thinly-masked crooks who wouldn't stop at mere murder that promised a clear track for their schemes of future crime.

With a blonde in one hand and a bundle of jewels in the other, The Shadow was definitely short on suitable weapons to meet this surprise attack. He wasn't lacking in speed, however, as he flung both burdens and took a whirling dive to avoid the aiming guns.

Margo saw Linda fly headlong into the corridor, with the green bundle scaling after her, thanks to a vagary of The Shadow's quick spin. Then Linda and the jewels simply didn't count, compared to the pressure of The Shadow's plight.

Guns swung to follow The Shadow's dive, their spurts only a trifle late. Sheff and Hippo weren't the best of marksmen, otherwise The Shadow's case would have been settled in that first volley. As it was, The Shadow was coming up with an unexpected bound, bringing a brace of big automatics from beneath his cloak, ready to show his foemen what chopping down could really mean.

It was Niblo who intervened. He was the same breed as the others, but with a thicker mask. Whipping out a gun of his own, Niblo aimed point blank for The Shadow before Margo could grab his gun-hand. Fortunately, Margo's shriek told all. The Shadow's side-fade came just ahead of Niblo's rapid shots.

"Through the door!" shouted Sheff. "That's where he's going!"

Sheff meant the door through which The Shadow had pitched Linda, though there was no longer any sign of the girl in blue nor the prized green bundle. The quick-thinking blonde hadn't waited to congratulate herself on the luck that had tossed the load of jewels out of circulation with her. With The Shadow otherwise engaged, she had grabbed the wealth that even Niblo had forgotten and was on her way again, this time for

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keeps, which applied to the gems as well as her flight.

The Shadow didn't follow. At Sheff's shout about the door, The Shadow kicked it shut and let his attackers riddle the woodwork with bullets that didn't count. Reversing his course, The Shadow cut across the office to the other door, intending to whirl about and give his enemies a treat of lead pills in large doses.

There, however, The Shadow met new opposition in the form of Niblo's fancy gunners, coming in a flood. Scattering them with hard swings from his automatics, The Shadow emerged from a confusion of spurting guns and sped through the Petite Room.

At the main door he met the contingent belonging to Sheff and Hippo; met them head-on.

Half a dozen guns stabbed simultaneously, all from what seemed point-blank range. How The Shadow could have survived that fusillade was a question no one could ever satisfactorily answer, the cloaked survivor included. Suffice it that The Shadow threw all his uncanny tactics into one composite effort. His spinning lunge into the midst of that aiming crew, the long twisting sweeps of his clouting guns, the sudden upsurge of his black-clad form which gave him the effect of a human billow – all were saving elements.

The Shadow must have driven enough guns aside and avoided enough more to escape the really deadly shots. But he was hit; he showed it as he writhed clear of the murderous pack to reel across the lobby. There, in the really wide spaces, The Shadow had a long way to go, and the howling thugs who sought to overtake him thought the kill was sure. But The Shadow on the eccentric, with both gun-hands intact, was something different than a bargain.

Marble pillars were stopping bullets intended for The Shadow, but his return jabs, though sparing in number were timely in results. He fired only when it counted, using other measures to take out the gunners who crowded him, such as bowling them over with potted palms, tripping them with sliding benches snatched from the ornate furnishings of the overstocked hotel lobby.

As he turned toward a winding stairway leading to a mezzanine, The Shadow fired a shot that missed, but counted for two. He was aiming at one of Niblo's smoothies who in turning to dive away, crowded one of the less polished gunzels belonging to the other mob. Each took it that the other had purposely spoiled his chance to settle The Shadow question.

Two guns blended their knifing flames and a pair of killers hit the tiled floor together. From the stairway came a taunting laugh that carried a weird approval, as though commending a job well done. Chaos followed despite the epithets of Niblo and Sheff who were now upon the scene. Each faction was turning on the other, these gunning fools convinced that the rival pack was working with The Shadow.

Niblo and Sheff rallied their men by firing personally at The Shadow as he raced along the mezzanine. After a few mistaken casualties, both gun gangs were blasting anew at their original target, but The Shadow had reached an angle where the numerous posts of the mezzanine rail deflected any and all shots that came his way.

What encouraged the frustrated gunners was the stagger that The Shadow gave as he disappeared through an archway at the end of the mezzanine. It meant that they had really scored, perhaps more than they realized. Surging for the stairs, they hoped to overtake their cloaked prey; when they reached an open window and saw The Shadow reeling away through an alley outdoors, they didn't hesitate to follow. Their hope now was to make the kill before the police could intervene.

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Then, from everywhere came sirens, splitting the night like a prearranged signal. Halting gunners started to dodge away from brilliant spot-lights that glared suddenly from patrol cars, only to receive encouraging waves from the officers who manned them. An instant later, the full idea struck home.

It was midnight, the deadline that the law had allowed The Shadow. Commissioner Weston had made good his threat to declare The Shadow the city's chief public enemy if Claybourne's stolen goods were not returned.

Finding that impossible, The Shadow had tried the next best thing; he had sought to forestall another crime and take the credit that would square him. Frustrated in the rescue of the jewels, The Shadow had merely stirred up chaos that marked his whereabouts. Now the word was "Get The Shadow!" and that meant regardless of cost.

Well did Commissioner Weston know that minor frays might divert the man-hunt for a marauder in black. So his orders were specific: first bring in The Shadow, alive or dead; then ask questions regarding any and all who had volunteered to aid the law in this quest only.

If human scum came out from hiding, if their guns blazed all over town, so much the better. They could be rounded up and held to accounting later. This would be The Shadow's chance to really serve the law by bowing out and letting the police take over permanently.

It was open season for The Shadow with no licenses required and no restriction as to measures used!

CHAPTER XVI

IT wasn't long until the finish.

In his staggery dash for freedom, The Shadow was into a cab and out again, when he saw that patrol cars blocked the only path. Shrevvy's cab, of course, and The Shadow abandoned it with a whispered order that seemingly dismissed the faithful hackie forever. No use putting others on the spot that was to be The Shadow's.

Through alleys, in doorways, down gratings, up from cellars, The Shadow's mad search for freedom was as amazing as it was futile. Never before had he revealed the limitless ingenuity of his peculiar skill at arriving in the most unexpected places, but this time, escape was invariably blocked by fresh challengers.

There were simply too many other people in this limited neighborhood, and all had loaded guns, whereas The Shadow's were almost empty. Unable to face fire, The Shadow was forced to keep up darting tactics, and though his wounds didn't appear to slow him, he was tiring rapidly. What was more, the cordon had tightened, forcing The Shadow to switch his flight from the horizontal to the vertical.

From a balcony window of the Hotel Regal, Margo Lane saw the tragic ending to it all. Shouts arose from the street as The Shadow plopped suddenly into sight from a fourth floor window of an office building across the way. He landed in sprawly fashion on the flat roof of an old three story house wedged between the office building and a warehouse.

Men were shooting from the street; others sniping from the windows of the Hotel Regal. They worried The Shadow little; his real problem came from the office window from which he had dropped. There, guns spurted toward The Shadow as he came to his feet, to jab back the last shots that his guns contained; one from each weapon. Sidling as he made that last thrust, The Shadow reached an inner corner of the roof, a cut-out space which represented a blind alley extending in from the street in back. There he found his limit.

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Before he could catch himself; even before training guns could find his range, The Shadow tripped and disappeared with a frantic, arm–spreading dive into the depths of the blind alley. He looked like a great bat stretching its wings for a swoop that didn't follow.

Sirens wailed away as police cars, half a dozen of them, started around the block to reach the blind alley and pick up what remained of the thing once called The Shadow.

Other sirens were prolonging that incessant knell when Margo reached Cranston's apartment. They were like the wails of banshees, driving Margo almost insane, those howls telling that the hunt was still on for a victim whose untimely end had probably not yet been reported.

In the apartment, Margo found Johnny, pouring himself a long drink from a bottle containing anything but Sapphire Water. He must have gone out to get the bottle, but Margo didn't ask him where he'd been. She simply didn't care, but Johnny did. The sirens were worrying him worse than Margo.

"They're after Linda!" gulped Johnny, gesturing jerkily toward the window. "That's who they want, Linda Brock."

Vengeful thoughts were stirring Margo and this was enough to render her alert.

"So your memory is back," accused Margo. "Or didn't you ever forget? You admit you know Linda's name!"

"Because she phoned me," returned Johnny, simply. "Called me up right here. I had sense enough to ask her name and she gave it to me."

"Now, wait –" Margo was trying hard to calculate – "just when did that call come in?"

"Before all this started." Again, Johnny gestured to indicate the sirens. "Linda said she wanted me to meet her in back of the Hotel Regal. She said she'd have something for me. I thought it was going to be Claybourne's securities."

"And?"

"It wasn't anything. That is nothing except Linda."

"You mean you really met her?"

Johnny nodded.

"But she must have been carrying something," persisted Margo. "For instance, a green wrap, folded like a bundle."

"A blue wrap," corrected Johnny. "Only it wasn't folded. She dropped it on the step getting into the car."

"What car?"

"The limousine. We saw it pulling away from the hotel right after the shooting started. So we waved and stopped it. Linda dropped me near here and the chauffeur took her home."

It didn't quite make sense to Margo. Still, in a way that made sense in itself. In every episode during this strange run of crime, there had been some tangle of facts that simply wouldn't fit.

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"Listen, Margo." Johnny's tone, though thick, was definitely sincere. "We've got to get Linda away from New York. She's in a bad jam."

"So are you," reminded Margo. "Remember?"

"I know, but it all points to Linda. If I had to admit I gave her those securities, the police would believe me, now that they want Linda for a gem robbery."

"She told you about that?"

"Of course. She admitted everything. She had Claybourne's securities the other night and tonight she started to get Klemmet's gems. But she can't remember what she did with them – either of them."

"How convenient."

Despite the tragedy that gripped her, Margo could rise to sarcasm where Linda was concerned. She was only too anxious for another meeting with the trouble-making blonde whose urge toward kleptomania, whether real or pretended, had sealed The Shadow's fate. Noting that her irony had escaped Johnny, Margo tried another tack.

"Suppose we do get her away," suggested Margo. "She could stay at my apartment until tomorrow –"

"And I'll wait here," put in Johnny. "I'll tell Cranston all about it, when he gets back. He'll help us, too."

That reference brought a wince from Margo but it made her feel better toward Johnny. Then:

"Linda's memory is slipping worse than mine," declared Johnny. "When I met her, she didn't even remember phoning me. She said she'd met you, so she must have done some analytical thinking to guess that your friend Cranston would be looking after me. But why should she have forgotten the phone call?"

"I don't know." Margo spoke slowly as she stared from the window. "But where should we take Linda?"

"To Sapphire Springs," rejoined Johnny, promptly. "I need to go there to get off of this" – he gestured to the bottle – "and I think Linda would go if you came along. She trusts you, Margo."

Margo heard the compliment as if from afar. More important and much closer, so she fancied, was the honking sound from a taxi horn out front. It was Shrevvy's cab and Margo was leaping to the impossible hope that Cranston's familiar figure would step from it.

No one came. Only the horn continued its repeated signal, among the sirens that still wailed through the neighborhood. It suddenly struck Margo that Shrevvy was calling for her.

"I'll see you later, Johnny," said Margo, as she turned from the window. "Don't worry about Linda. We'll find the right way to help her."

Reaching the street, Margo fairly flung herself into the cab and received an encouraging though sober nod from Shrevvy. They wheeled rapidly through the streets and as they reached Park Avenue, Shrevvy leaned back to give the confidential facts.

"I was parked in that blind alley," he told Margo. "That's why the chief chanced it. He grabbed for things like shutters coming down, only they didn't stop him much. I tried to break his fall, only he hit the side of the cab

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too hard. Anyway, I got him in and away ahead of those squad cars."

"And now?"

"He's at Doc Sayre's. How bad he's hurt, I don't know. Anyway here we are."

The cab stopped at the side entrance to the offices of Doctor Rupert Sayre, who like Shrevvy and certain others, was a man who felt a permanent obligation to The Shadow. Such favors as saving a man's life were part and parcel of The Shadow's activities, but there were some recipients who were never willing to forget it, and Sayre was one.

Entering a little room in back of Sayre's office, Margo found the physician beside a cot where a silent figure lay motionless in the dim light. His cloak lying over him, The Shadow wasn't recognizable as anyone else and Margo feared that the worst had happened. But Sayre's warning finger, lifting for quiet, allayed her qualms.

A radio was sounding low from the corner and suddenly, the newscaster's voice was interrupted by a commercial. It was then that Sayre spoke:

"He'll come around. Right now he wants to hear the news, but he's been waiting for your report too. So let's have it, Margo."

Rapidly Margo gave it, emphasizing her own experience with Linda and Johnny's later testimony. How The Shadow could possibly be fitting those befuddled facts, Margo couldn't even guess. He remained so motionless that the fear that he was really dead kept cropping constantly in Margo's mind. This might just be Doctor Sayre's way of breaking the word gently.

"I could talk Linda into going to Sapphire Springs," completed Margo. "If Johnny is right, she wouldn't hesitate if I went along. But it's the first place the police would look for them –"

Sayre interrupted along with the radio. The newscaster was back on the air, bringing the latest flash.

"Official statement from Commissioner Weston," announced the newscaster. "The hunt for the unknown criminal called The Shadow will continue until he is found, alive or dead. Rewards totalling twenty-five thousand dollars have already been offered for the securities and jewels which he has stolen.

"All other persons are now exonerated of these crimes, though they may be sought as material witnesses once The Shadow is found. According to Jerome Claybourne, The Shadow was the real perpetrator of the robbery at his home, just as Niblo Klemmet has testified regarding tonight's jewel seizure. This has been substantiated by two reliable witnesses present on both occasions, Sheffield Gilbin and Artemus Borgand –"

Margo couldn't restrain her interruption.

"Why, those crooks!" she exclaimed to Sayre. "Much though they hate each other, they've ganged up to frame The Shadow, and Claybourne was stupid enough to fall for it!"

Sayre's hand warned for silence, but the news flash was over. Her tone subsiding to normal, Margo added:

"But it does help with Johnny and Linda," conceded Margo. "If they aren't around, the commissioner won't bother looking for them, not yet at least. If I only knew what" – Margo choked momentarily as she gazed toward the silent, shrouded figure on the cot – "what he intended or wanted, I could handle my part of it –"

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Margo halted as she noticed a slight stir from the cot. For the moment she thought it was her strained imagination; then came the token that proved reality.

Just two words, spoken in a sibilant whisper by that shape upon the cot. They were forced, those words, as though even speech was an effort, yet they carried a note of command that made them a general order from The Shadow.

Those whispered words were:

"Sapphire Springs."

CHAPTER XVII

SO this was Sapphire Springs.

A delightful place, with its weave of olive-green pine boughs between the clear azure sky and the deeper blue of the gushing, health-giving spring; delightful for everybody except Margo Lane, though now she was hoping she could at last enjoy the place.

Clad in immaculate summer whites, Margo stepped from the broad veranda, pausing only when she heard the dull but precise voice of Agatha, as it said:

"You still need rest, Miss Lane. Remember your physician's instructions. Don't converse with any of the other guests; it might tire you."

Taking a look at Agatha, Margo nodded. Agatha couldn't be anything but dumb, not with that flat, expressionless face and monotonous, dreary manner. Sapphire Water certainly couldn't improve a person's looks, not if Agatha represented a typical example. To Margo, Agatha's face was like a blank canvas that needed an artist to paint it. Wonders could probably be done with such a basic background.

Strolling down to where the spring gushed, Margo was treated to another start when she saw Kirkwood. As a sheer, dumb flat-face, the man was Agatha's counterpart. In mechanical, zombi fashion, Kirkwood dipped Margo a heaping glass of Sapphire Water and turned away. But as Margo drank the sparkling fluid, a sudden thought rang home.

Agatha and Kirkwood!

Orders or no orders, Margo simply had to talk to Johnny and Linda, who were parked in beach chairs off among the pines. Kirkwood was turned in the other direction; Agatha was no longer on the veranda. Snatching the opportunity, Margo hurried toward the pines and as she reached their seclusion, she slackened her thoughts with her pace.

It wouldn't do to spring the surprise at once. Better to chat a while and then handle the subject casually, to watch reactions. So Margo joined Linda and Johnny calmly and with a mild smile.

"Margo!" exclaimed Linda. "Where have you been the last two days?"

"Resting in bed," returned Margo. "I was put there as soon as I arrived."

Worry immediately gripped Linda. She turned accusingly to Johnny.

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"You said this wasn't a sanitarium," began Linda. "You said we were guests, not patients; that Mr. Elder never gave any orders restricting anyone –"

"I'm not under Mr. Elder's orders," interrupted Margo, testily. "He's only obeying instructions that came from my own physician, Doctor Sayre. If I'd known what was in Sayre's letter when I brought it, I'd have torn it up."

Margo really meant it. She'd come here confident that she could manage matters the way The Shadow wanted, only to find that Sayre had over-ruled her. This was her third day at the Springs and the first that Sayre's rest cure had relaxed.

"Tell me," asked Johnny, curiously, "what did the letter say?"

"That I was suffering from delusions," returned Margo, "and shouldn't talk to anybody. I'm defying restrictions right now. But what difference does it make? Whatever I say, nobody is supposed to believe me."

In light of her recent discovery, Margo should have realized the importance of Sayre's order and the protection it afforded. However, she didn't credit Sayre with having The Shadow's insight into hidden facts. And The Shadow, when Margo had last seen him, didn't seem in any condition to be using insight of his own.

"I've had delusions," declared Johnny, almost proudly. "Sapphire Water cures them. Have a glassload, Margo."

He poured a glass from a pitcher and Margo accepted it. Linda, calm again, was sipping from her own glass.

"It's so much sweeter, fresh from the spring," asserted Linda, referring to the water. "Don't you think so, Johnny?"

"I didn't at first," replied Johnny, "but the stuff did taste stale, sort of bitter, after I'd gone through a few bottles. Maybe though it was the New York air."

"Could be," agreed Linda. "I'll have to ask Mr. Elder. He's really so understanding, isn't he?"

Johnny gave a heart-felt nod at that one and Margo, tiring of Sapphire testimonials, decided to swing the subject to her own trend.

"What about your Cousin Janice?" Margo asked Linda. "Have you heard from her since we arrived here?"

"Not a word," replied Linda. "Do you know, I think Janice must have left, the night we went out together. She probably mistook you for another relative who was taking on the family problem."

"You're no problem, Linda," laughed Johnny. "Sapphire Springs cures everybody and everything. If you don't believe me" – his tone went suddenly solemn – "look."

They looked and saw Kirkwood and two other attendants lifting something from a private ambulance that had just driven into the driveway. The something proved to be a figure on a heavy stretcher, a very bulky figure, since it consisted of a man encased from head to foot in a single plaster cast.

"Must be an airplane victim," decided Johnny. "From that crash a few days ago. Remember, the one we read about when we were on the train?"

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"Does Sapphire Springs heal such patients?" asked Linda, in awe. Then, hastily correcting herself: "Does it help such guests I mean?"

"No one has ever died here," replied Johnny, blandly. "That's why Noble J. Elder calls Sapphire Springs the Fountain of Life."

"So?" queried Margo, testily. "Well, maybe Noble J. Elder has delusions, too –"

"I am sorry, Miss Lane." It was Agatha's drab voice that spoke in back of them. "I told you not to converse with the other guests. You must come with me while I speak to Mr. Elder."

Rebellious for the moment, Margo finally relaxed her fists, and went along with Agatha. As they neared the spring, they were forced to pause as an attendant rolled a special wheel chair toward the life-giving waters. In the chair was the cast-encased victim who had just arrived.

Kirkwood was back at his business of filling glasses and was just proffering one to a stooped man seated in a folding chair. The stooped man gestured that he didn't want it and his hand indicated Margo, so Kirkwood offered her the glass. Just to mollify Agatha, Margo decided to drink the Sapphire Water. but she was interrupted by a moan from the man in the full-length cast. Only his lips were visible, though there were slits in the helmet top, so that his eyes could see out. He was begging for his first taste of Sapphire Water, so Margo extended him the glass, as the attendant pushed the wheel chair forward.

Some jolt of the wheel chair must have been responsible for what happened. Instead of reaching the thirsty lips, the glass struck the chin of the plaster cast and spilled. Falling from Margo's hand, the glass itself broke on the rocky soil beside the spring. Annoyed, Agatha drew Margo away, while Kirkwood dipped a fresh glass of the spring water and personally tendered it to the man in the cast.

When she reached Elder's office, Margo was really ready to kick up a fuss, but she calmed when Elder rose from his desk to meet her. There was something in his quiet voice, the kindly gaze of those clear eyes beneath the shocky gray hair, that put a person in a listening mood before speaking to Noble J. Elder.

"Sit down, Miss Lane," invited Elder. Then, before Agatha could explain matters, he nodded that he understood. "An infraction of rules, I believe. I am sorry, Miss Lane" – he shook his head sadly – "because, you see we have no rules here."

It was as if Elder had taken all the blame upon himself and the sincerity of his manner utterly disarmed Margo.

"You are a guest, like all the others," assured Elder, "but you see Miss Lane, you voluntarily supplied orders from your own physician. It is not our usual practice to accept guests who come as patients, but you were well recommended" – he gestured toward the window – "like the much less fortunate individual who has just arrived."

Elder meant the pitiful human remnant in the plaster cast and Margo felt suddenly abashed that she should be considering a complaint regarding her own lot.

"We shall cure that man," announced Elder, in a tone of powerful conviction. "Like hundreds of others" – he gestured toward an old-fashioned safe in the corner – "whose histories are among our permanent files. Yes, the man in the plaster cast will walk out of here" – Elder's voice rang with prophecy, then became low and solemn, as he looked at Margo – "as you can do right now, if you so desire. Shall I have Kirkwood order the station wagon while you pack?"

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It was a question, but it came like an order of dismissal, given with deep regret. By then, Margo was feeling even more an ingrate for having interrupted Johnny's eulogy of Noble J. Elder. This man of quiet, understanding dignity was entitled to all that Johnny could have said and more. His captivating presence had won Margo completely.

"I'd rather stay," she said, pleadingly. "Only how long a rest will this one have to be?"

"I shall phone Doctor Sayre this evening," promised Elder. "The verdict will be his, not mine."

Ten minutes later, Margo was tucked in bed in her quiet, secluded room, where Agatha had lowered the shade so that the rest cure could begin. More than that, in leaving, Agatha had taken Margo's clothes along, so that the patient couldn't decide to become a guest if the whim so seized her.

Along with her own stupidity, Margo was discrediting Doctor Sayre for these silly orders that had put her out of circulation. It was annoying to think that everyone else, including the plaster cast arrival, could be enjoying the outdoor sunlight and the sparkling rhythm of Sapphire Springs.

Margo wouldn't have thought so if she'd been there at that moment, particularly if she could have overheard the words of the stooped man who had handed her the glass that the man in the plaster cast had later claimed but lost.

The stooped man was wearing big sun glasses that did much to disguise his face. The same was true of a bigger man who was holding down a chair beside him.

"There's one pill wasted," growled the stooped man. "Too bad the Lane dame didn't take that permanent Mickey that I slipped in the glass. She knows too much, Hippo."

"Yeah," returned the big man. "Only it was lucky the guy in one-piece plaster of paris didn't get it, Sheff."

"I don't know." Sheff paused, speculatively. "He's most dead anyway. Only maybe that's a good reason to forget him. Knocking off healthy customers would be better."

"Yeah?" Hippo shifted his ponderous form uneasily. "Why?"

Hippo's query was answered by a grin that appeared beneath Sheff's glasses, a grim merciless smile which alone would have told Margo Lane that the quiet of a dark, secluded room was better far than the sunlit sparkle of lovely Sapphire Springs.

CHAPTER XVIII

SHEFF and Hippo weren't the only crooks at Sapphire Springs. The premises, woods included, were full of them by the next afternoon. In fact the place was like two armed camps, intermingled. One band belonged to Sheff Gilbin; the other to another paying guest named Niblo Klemmet, who for the past few days had been relaxing in a beach chair on the other side of the spring.

"No sign of the Lane dame," said Sheff to Hippo, after a long stare through his sun glasses. "Guess she's still taking the rest cure. That's all right, since she doesn't know we're here."

"What about those other two?" queried Hippo, referred to Johnny and Linda. "Don't they rate a pill treatment?"

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"Be sensible," snorted Sheff. "What they know is something we may want to find out. I'd croak anybody but them; that is, while we need them."

"That's right," acknowledged Hippo. "Yeah, they were in on both jobs, of course. That means they're working for The Shadow."

That brought a snort from Sheff.

"You mean you fell for that stuff, Hippo? All I hope is that The Shadow crawled somewhere and died. He never got those mitts of his on Claybourne's paper or those sparklers at the Hotel Regal."

"Then who –"

"Right over there." Sheff nodded across the burbling expanse of Sapphire Springs. "Niblo Klemmet."

"You mean he robbed himself to cover up?"

"Niblo didn't rob himself. All that flashy hardware at the Regal was borrowed stuff. The folks that owned it were covered with insurance and nobody's blaming Niblo."

"Then why did he duck down here?"

"To contact the pair that worked both jobs; that guy Johnny and his blonde pal Linda. All the while we thought we had them on our side, Niblo was fixing to throw the rap on us."

"And now The Shadow is wanted for it."

"That's using the old noggin, Hippo." Sheff clapped his companion on the shoulders. "You've got it at last. Niblo knows we're here watching for the hand-over; that's why he's playing possum while Johnny and Linda are playing house. If you don't believe me, go over and ask him."

Taking Sheff at his word, Hippo lumbered from his chair and started around the spring, mumbling apologies when he stumbled into the special wheel chair and heard a groan from its plaster-encased occupant. Arriving at Niblo's temporary headquarters, Hippo received a suave greeting:

"Hello, Hip. What has Sheff been selling you?"

"Since you want to know, I'll tell you," rumbled Hippo. "He says you knocked off Claybourne's joint and rigged that jewel frame. He doesn't care if you know."

"He shouldn't," agreed Niblo, "since he's lying in his usual form. I suppose he claims his stooges were working for me."

"His stooges?"

"Certainly. The handsome lad in the slacks and sport shirt; and the blonde cutey in the play suit. What are their names, by the way?"

Hippo looked toward the pine trees, and saw the pair in question.

"You mean Johnny Craver and Linda Brock?"

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"That's right. I never saw them before that night at the Regal and I didn't see Johnny then. He handled the Claybourne job, I understand."

"Well, yes. We let him get underway –"

"By priming the pump with fifty grand," interrupted Niblo. "Was any of that dough Sheff's?"

"Well, no," decided Hippo. "It was mine. Of course Sheff put me wise –"

"To what?" demanded Niblo, his suave tone turning savage. "Go on back and tell Sheff that if he doesn't quit sullyng this primeval wonderland with uncouth characters, I'll have my gentlemen knock them off, and sudden."

"You mean you'll croak Johnny and Linda?"

"Not a chance." Niblo chortled much in Sheff's style. "They know where the boodle is and they'll cough it over when the time comes. The persons to be eliminated under the classification of uncouth are the alleged gunzels that have been checking in here and trying to fraternize with my boys. Tell Sheff I can always recognize one of his sharpshooters. They're all cross-eyed; if you don't believe it, watch them at target practice."

Making another half-circuit of the sapphire pool, Hippo reported back to Sheff.

"Niblo is kind of sore," conceded Hippo, "but he can't be feeling too bad, the way he kidded me."

That wasn't enough for Sheff. He wanted details and Hippo gave them in full. They were more than sufficient to Sheff's way of thinking.

"You call that kidding?" Sheff demanded. "All right, if Niblo wants it that way, he can have it. Knock them off sudden? That's our way, too: sudden and neat. We'll show Niblo a real process of elimination and let Noble J. Elder be the man to worry."

"How does Elder figure?"

"He runs this as a health joint, doesn't he? If customers die, so does the place. Here" – Sheff eased a bottle from his pocket and slid it to Hippo. "Distribute these among the boys. Tell them their new friends will get a real kick from Sapphire Water when it has one of these pills in it."

"I get it, Sheff."

"Only don't give any to Shebley," reminded Sheff. "He's staying off by himself, like I told him, so Linda won't be spotting him. Anyway, I'm not too sure of Shebley. He may belong to Niblo."

Hippo nodded as though he agreed. Sheff's persuasive policy was nullifying Niblo's brief arguments. Looking from across the pool, Niblo was becoming quite convinced of that fact. He raised his hand and waved toward the pool as if to attract Kirkwood's attention and have him bring some Sapphire Water. But there were others who recognized that sign and understood its real meaning.

Later peculiar things began to happen. Certain of the many guests who thronged Sapphire Springs began to stroll about and make new friends. It was odd that those who looked the least like gentlemen should become very courteous about offering glasses of Sapphire Water to others who seemed much more polished. They

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were subtle about it, always proffering drinks to a man who was just about to go indoors.

Not to be outdone, the men of more gentlemanly bearing showed their own brand of courtesy. Those who weren't going indoors suggested walks about the premises, visits to the sunken gardens and beauty spots deep in the pine woods. It was all very nice and lovely, even though it did come under the head of murder.

Noble J. Elder became aware of things at dusk, when the guests were going into dinner. There were vacant chairs this evening, more than there should have been, considering the increase in guests. Looking out from his office window, Elder saw that there was only one person still seated at the spring, the frozen man in the plaster cast, who couldn't come indoors until someone handled his wheel chair.

As the door opened, Elder turned to meet Agatha, who was followed closely by Kirkwood. He motioned for them to close the door; then, in the calmest of tones, Elder asked:

"How many, Agatha?"

"Four." There wasn't a change in the woman's fixed expression. "All in their rooms."

"Good," decided Elder. "We can remove them first. Now, Kirkwood, what about these others?"

"We've found three so far," replied Kirkwood. He, too, was unmoved; his words came in a monotone. "One appears to have stumbled into the pool in the sunken garden; another fell off the big ledge; the third –"

"Never mind," interposed Elder. "Accidents are not supposed to happen at Sapphire Springs. Wherever they are, take the boxes there; then to the bottling works."

Kirkwood nodded that he understood.

Darkness settled over Sapphire Springs; thick gloom, broken only by occasional gleams of flashlights that blinked off furtively and suddenly. They might have been mistaken for fireflies by anyone who saw them.

Above the gushing spring, the pine trees murmured in the breeze and in that setting, the rising wind took on the whisper of what could have been mistaken for a strangely human laugh.

Singular, that tone. It was reminiscent of The Shadow, that weird being who was so often first on hand at scenes of crime, to which classification Sapphire Springs now belonged!

CHAPTER XIX

ONLY one man watched the departure of the morning truck when it left with its shipment of bottled Sapphire Water, for shipment throughout the country. That man was Shebley, the rather furtive guest who was staying strictly aloof from others, the way that Margo should have but hadn't.

What bothered Shebley was the size of the boxes that he saw on board the truck. Usually Sapphire Water was shipped in small open cases; these bottles were large and solid. Nobody else noticed them, with the possible exception of the patient in the plaster cast, whose eyes were turned straight toward the road that the truck took.

All during the day, Shebley worried more and more. He stared nervously at the empty chairs which he saw at lunchtime. He became suspicious whenever guests who were about to start indoors paused to accept a glass of the sapphire elixir. When little groups of men decided to go for a stroll, Shebley sneaked after them; later,

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when he came prowling back, his jitters invariably showed an increase.

By late afternoon, Margo Lane had formed a few conclusions. She was beginning to find the rest cure foolish, so she had raised the window shade and was studying the scenery, ready at any moment to slide back into bed if she heard Agatha's footfalls. From the window, Margo could see the bottling works and she couldn't understand just what was happening at that building.

At odd intervals, men arrived with heavy boxes, sometimes coming from the big guest house itself; yet often approaching from odd paths. Always with those boxes, which weren't the shape of coffins, yet which made Margo think in such terms. Perhaps it was the expressions of the men who carried those boxes for they all reminded Margo of pallbearers, except Kirkwood, who habitually had that look.

Then Margo saw Shebley.

He was peering from the corner of the big building, the man that Margo recognized as Linda's chauffeur, and the horror that distorted his face as he watched a box go into the bottling works, was more graphic than all of Margo's guesses. Suddenly shaky, Margo started back to bed and steadied to pour herself a drink of Sapphire Water from a bottle on the table.

As Margo gripped the bottle, she gained a sudden grip on herself. Pouring what was left of the contents, Margo clutched the bottle by the neck and weighed it in terms of a club, while a sweet smile spread across her features.

It wouldn't be long before Agatha would arrive with Margo's supper on a tray and that tray would be the perfect handicap. From that moment on, Margo could hardly wait.

In his office, Noble J. Elder sat quite unruffled by the reports that the day was bringing. It was almost by chance that he happened to glance from the window and notice a frantic man who was approaching the more respectable guests, to tell them something that seemed to alarm them. Recognizing the man as a doubtful person named Shebley, Elder sprang to his feet and started outdoors.

By the time he reached the spring, Elder found Shebley already there. The fellow was shouting hoarsely and incoherently. At last his voice made sense as he shrieked:

"They're dying, I tell you! Dying like flies! I've seen a dozen of them and more!"

Elder pressed his way through a startled group of guests and addressed Shebley in his firmest tone:

"Who is dying?"

"Your guests!" Shebley was too over-wrought to be impressed by Elder's presence. "Count them if you don't believe me. You've been sending them away in boxes!"

Patently, Elder turned to the others.

"The poor man is deluded," said Elder. "He must rest and be cured, as all are here."

Kirkwood was dipping a glass of Sapphire Water from the spring. He passed it to the nearest person, gesturing to send it along to Shebley. It went from hand to hand, including those of Sheff and Hippo. Receiving the glass, Elder gave it to Shebley.

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"Drink this," said Elder, quietly. "Then tell me what you said before, only please talk calmly. The cure for trouble is to be calm."

The persuasive tone was taking effect. With a nod, Shebley drank the water then laid the glass aside. He became steady, thanks to the understanding faces about him. Then:

"I saw them die, indoors and out," said Shebley. "Maybe you don't understand it either, Mr. Elder, but I've got to know the answer. I tell you, they are dying like flies –"

"Nonsense," interrupted Elder. "No one ever dies at Sapphire Springs."

For answer, Shebley flung his hands to his throat, tossed his head back with a hideous gurgle, and slumped in a heap at Elder's feet, his eyes bulging upward in a horrible stare.

Confusion broke loose among the guests, but Elder was equal to the occasion. He gestured to Kirkwood and another attendant; they gathered up Shebley's body to take it into the building. Meanwhile, Elder, his hands spread wide, was making one of his strong pronouncements.

"The man is merely an epileptic," declared Elder. "I know the symptoms and I know the treatment. Go into the dining room and wait there. I shall soon have this man as well as ever, prepared to testify that all he told you was the sheer product of his imagination."

It wasn't all imagination to Linda, who was standing near, gripping Johnny's arm. As other guests obediently departed at Elder's order, Linda undertoned:

"Johnny – it was Shebley!"

"I know," nodded Johnny. "There's something queer here, Linda. Something we're going to find out about, right now. We're going straight to Elder's office."

Two other persons were speaking in terms of Shebley as they rose from their chairs. Removing his sun glasses, Sheff stared at Hippo in the dusk and queried:

"Did you drop any pills in that load of water, Hippo?"

"Two of them," acknowledged Hippo, "because I wanted quick action. But I didn't know it would be that quick."

"It wouldn't have," returned Sheff, "if I hadn't dropped two pills myself, working along the same idea. Anyway, we've forced a show-down and that may mean a pay-off."

Hippo's big hand was gripping Sheff's arm hard, as Hippo pointed with the other.

"Johnny and Linda!" exclaimed Hippo. "Look, they're going in the other way."

"And there goes Niblo," reminded Sheff, with a side nudge of his hand. "Remember what I told you, Hippo?"

Remembering, Hippo nodded; but still he wasn't sure. This could be a trick of Sheff's, according to Niblo's argument of the day before. Hippo had been thinking all that over and right now, he recognized that Sheff's comment could be taken two ways. If Johnny and Linda had been working with Sheff instead of Niblo, it would still make sense if Niblo tagged after them.

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One thing was certain: Johnny and Linda were bound straight for Elder's office, whereas Sheff and Niblo were making detours to round up members of their respective mobs. For the first time, each of the rival crooks was about to learn of the heavy mortality among his own henchmen, for both had been thinking only in terms of the other side.

It was to be a big surprise for both, but nothing like the one that awaited Johnny and Linda. When they reached Elder's office and knocked there, his quiet voice told them to wait just a few minutes; then, suddenly Elder opened the door and greeted them with his genial smile.

"I was right," declared Elder. "The man's recovery was rapid. Here he stands, with his delusions gone."

With a gesture, Elder indicated Shebley who was standing by the desk. His face looked pale in the light, but he managed a weak smile, as though glad of his return from the dead.

"It's impossible!" exclaimed Johnny. "Why, there wasn't an ounce of life left in him."

"I feel alive enough," spoke Shebley, slowly, "and my mind has cleared completely." He placed his hand to the side of his head. "It must have been something here."

"If you remember everything," remarked Linda, coolly, "where did you go on your last night off?"

For answer, Shebley stared as though his mind had become as clouded as before. Elder immediately took up the cause, explaining that memory lapses were freakish.

"You both should realize that," declared Elder, looking from Johnny to Linda. "Memory has been your worst trouble. I am sure that you have both done much that you can not explain –"

"Can you?"

Those interrupting words were spoken by lips from the doorway. Lips only, for they belonged to the man in the plaster cast, whose other features were totally obscured. Like some monstrous creature from an unknown world he had clumped unaided from the spring and was now the master of the coming show.

He proved that when he gave a gesture of his bulking arms, striking his enormous hands against the sides of the doorway. Plaster broke apart from the wrists down, revealing a pair of gloved fists, human size, each gripping a large automatic.

Then, from the lips within the plaster rims came a chilling laugh that fully identified the occupant of the oversized disguise. That tone was the taunting laugh of The Shadow!

CHAPTER XX

CLUMP – clump – clump –

Slow, ominous were the strides of the massive figure in white that represented The Shadow in his newest and strangest guise. Like a great Golem, he excited awe by his very manner, though always his guns were trained, one upon the staring figure of Elder, the other upon the revived form of Shebley.

If Shebley had just returned from the dead at Elder's behest, the fellow was unwilling to risk another trip to the nether world, for he remained as rigid as the gray-haired healer.

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Only when The Shadow reached an angle where those two were in a direct line did he relax one gun. At that moment, the plaster cast figure was at the door of the only closet in the room. Opening the door with the hand that held his lowered gun, The Shadow clumped aside to let a form come sprawling out.

The thing that toppled was a dead man. As the body struck the floor and rolled stiffly into the light, Johnny and Linda recognized the dead face. Together they exclaimed: "Shebley!"

A grotesquely whimsical laugh came from The Shadow's lips as Johnny and Linda turned their astonished eyes upon the other Shebley who stood by Elder's desk. When checked with the original, the living Shebley showed himself a counterfeit, his make-up good, but too hastily done to stand the comparison.

"Remove your wrong face, Kirkwood." The Shadow's tone carried command. "It worked well before, but now the game is over."

Smearing away the make-up, Kirkwood disclosed his own drab face. Glumly, he stared at Shebley, as though regretful that he hadn't done a better job.

"You were an excellent Johnny," declared The Shadow, "but you had more time to study that part. Besides, you didn't show yourself too often."

Like a flash, Johnny saw the whole answer. Those times when he couldn't account for his own whereabouts were explained. The phone call from Claybourne's that he couldn't remember; the alleged meeting on the corner near Penn Station when Linda had publicly taken him into the limousine; those were cases when Kirkwood, meticulous in manner as well as make-up, had been doubling for Johnny!

That answer struck home to Linda, too, and she suddenly realized that she had been similarly victimized. She hadn't met Johnny near Penn Station, nor could she remember returning to reclaim the jewels at the Hotel Regal after having lost them in her flight.

"Then someone was doubling for me!" Linda exclaimed. "I know – the woman who called herself Cousin Janice. Why that's why I saw myself in mirrors that weren't there. She was looking at me through the frames, checking on her final makeup!"

The Shadow's sibilant laugh certified Linda's discovery. It also inspired Johnny to guess – and correctly – the name of the person responsible for impersonating Linda.

"Agatha!"

The door was opening as Johnny spoke the name. On the threshold stood Agatha in the drab garb that she wore at Sapphire Springs. But her face wasn't the plain, blank-featured visage that could be made into any that she chose. The face that Johnny saw belonged to Margo Lane.

Before Johnny could pounce upon this new arrival, the real Margo spoke.

"I'm my own self," she told Johnny hastily. "I just gave Agatha a slug from a Sapphire bottle and you know the kind of slug I mean. I needed her apparel, such as it is. I tucked her in bed for a nice long rest. Those blue bottles really carry a sock."

Staring past Johnny, Margo was studying The Shadow and realizing that only he would have staged the unique act of arriving in a plaster cast which he probably had needed for a few days after his fall from the Manhattan house-top. She understood now that it must have been his order, not Sayre's, that had so wisely

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put her out of circulation while murder was afoot.

Shebley's body was mute testimony of what might have happened to Margo if she'd drunk the glass of Sapphire Water that had been handed her at the spring. The man in the plaster cast must have seen the pill that Sheff dropped in it and had therefore supplied more than an accidental jolt to dispose of the glass.

But there was something more that Margo wanted to tell. She dished it straight to Kirkwood.

"I recognized you and Agatha when she arrived at Penn Station," announced Margo. "Just after Johnny had seen you off. Remember? Only I didn't know who either of you were until I arrived here.

"As for Agatha playing your part" – this was to Linda – "I should have known it when I saw her coming in the back door of Niblo's office. I thought it was a reflection, only there wasn't any mirror there, no more than at your house Linda."

This brought a nod from Linda, though she looked rather dazed when she tried to recall the events at the Hotel Regal which had resulted in a three way tangle after Agatha – not Linda – had turned off the lights.

Then The Shadow's tone supplied the final word.

"You gave it away yourself, Elder," declared The Shadow, "the time you phoned New York and said that Kirkwood was back, although his train couldn't have arrived that soon. As for your bottled water, you supplied a special brand for Johnny and Linda when you were using them as dupes."

Lips tightened, Elder nodded.

"It was doped," he admitted. "I had Johnny well in hand, with the suggestions I had given him. Linda was an easier proposition, with that trend toward kleptomania which ran in her family.

"I'd had a lot of letters from her relatives, so I decided to prey on her weakness when I learned that others were already trying it. It was easy enough for Agatha to handle when she reached New York. But the dope was mild; I only wanted them to be in a vague condition.

"I'm telling you this" – Elder was trying to put real sincerity in his tone – "to prove that murder had no part in any of my plans."

For answer, The Shadow extended one of his bulky arms and gestured a gun toward Shebley's body.

"This wouldn't stand you well in court," The Shadow told Elder. "Suppose you open your safe, Elder, and show us what your files really are. Perhaps a complete confession will encourage a few witnesses to help you meet the murder charge."

It was Elder's only course, so he took it. Opening the old safe, he stepped back so The Shadow and the others could see its contents. There in neat stacks were Claybourne's securities, brought by Kirkwood; while the stolen jewels, heaped in a great glittering pile, represented Agatha's contribution to the cause of Sapphire Springs.

There were other bundles in the safe and as Elder mopped his forehead, he admitted what they were. Facing the blocky figure in white, Elder told The Shadow:

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"It was my regular game, robbery. Kirkwood and Agatha helped me before. But these were my first large operations. I was a fool to go so far with them. But I swear that I was never a man to deal in murder."

There were other men who did.

They were coming suddenly into Elder's office, Sheff and Niblo, their drawn guns turned toward each other in mutual mistrust. Behind them was Hippo followed by a handful of killers who represented both factions and who were finding out to their mutual surprise how few of their own breed were left.

These were the men who had turned the Fountain of Life into a Fountain of Death, only to have Noble Elder cover up their crimes so that he, the real brain behind large scale crime, could preserve the reputation of Sapphire Springs as the front that made his crooked business possible.

Now Sheff and Niblo, like their followers, were suddenly learning all. They were on the threshold of the very wealth which each suspected the other of having snatched at his own expense. Here, with guns in hand, they had boxed not only Elder but some helpless witnesses to his crimes, all unarmed.

All except one, The Shadow.

The bulky form in white was already tramping toward the doorway to block these murderous entrants. Block them The Shadow did, for his plaster cast shape was broad enough to fill the doorway. But his two guns, coming up slowly, were too delayed to beat his foeman to the first shots.

Heroic of The Shadow, this valiant effort, but the sort that couldn't win. Before his guns could speak, revolvers sounded the first roar of a volley that was intended to blast the clumsy fighter right out of his thick white shroud.

The huge form reeled under the pound of leaden slugs, but his own guns stabbed in answer and didn't stop. The plaster was flying, but all the while two automatics were knifing into the midst of the combined crew that thought they were helping Sheff and Niblo to a final kill.

The Shadow had bullets enough for all. It was with an eye to this final, inevitable fray, that he had let Sheff and Niblo thin each other's ranks since yesterday afternoon. They had chopped their mobs to the proper size for The Shadow to handle both in one treatment, which he was doing now.

It wasn't mere plaster that contained The Shadow. He was wearing the molds about which the stuff was formed, steel tubings, articulated to fit his limbs and body, with an overall helmet of the same metal covering his head. This feature of The Shadow's ingenious garb disclosed itself as the powdery cloud of whiteness dispelled.

There stood The Shadow, bulletproof. He couldn't have afforded too much denting, nor taken too many bullets at the joints of the flexible armor, but the shots that reached him were comparatively few. With his own guns crippling the opposition, much of their fire had gone wild.

Sheff and Niblo had sagged. Hippo and a few others were reeling wounded from the vicinity of this amazing avenger that they couldn't kill. Their guns were falling from their loosening hands, they were staggering in total panic as they heard the triumph of The Shadow's strange, sardonic laugh following them along the echoing hall.

Brought by the sound of shooting, the bolder of Elder's legitimate guests were piling upon the faltering marauders who had braved The Shadow's wrath and found themselves inadequate to cope with it.

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From the doorway of Elder's office came repeated clangs as The Shadow unhooked the catches of the hinged cylinders that encircled him. From a great hulk of white plaster, he had shrunk to a smaller but more formidable creature of steel; now, divested of that modern armor, he seemed to flow into his accustomed shape. His black cloak streaming from his shoulders, the brim of his slouch hat spreading down above his eyes, The Shadow became more formidable, more weird than in any of his rapid changes.

The Shadow's gloved fists planted the pair of automatics in Johnny's hands, as he stated that there were still some shots in them, should Elder or Kirkwood offer trouble, though neither was so inclined. Cowering beyond the desk, that pair were only too ready to give themselves up to the law, now that Elder's great, mad game was known and therefore profitless.

Margo and Linda were watching in awed silence as The Shadow swung wide a broad French window and blended with the deepening darkness of the settling night. The cloaked shape was vaguely visible until it was beyond the veranda; then, amazingly it was gone.

Moments passed, long lingering moments before the arrival of the guests who were to learn the truth about Noble J. Elder and his career of duplicity. Those moments were almost gone when from the murmur of the whispering pines and the gurgle of the ever-flowing spring came back an eerie, untraceable laugh that drowned those other sounds and left them dwindled and forgotten, even when the mirth itself had shivered into silence.

Such was the token of The Shadow's triumph, his farewell to the Fountain of Death!

THE END