

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Maxwell Grant

Table of Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| <u>THE MASK OF MEPHISTO</u> | 1 |
| Maxwell Grant..... | 1 |
| <u>CHAPTER I</u> | 1 |
| <u>CHAPTER II</u> | 4 |
| <u>CHAPTER III</u> | 8 |
| <u>CHAPTER IV</u> | 11 |
| <u>CHAPTER V</u> | 14 |
| <u>CHAPTER VI</u> | 16 |
| <u>CHAPTER VII</u> | 20 |
| <u>CHAPTER VIII</u> | 24 |
| <u>CHAPTER IX</u> | 27 |
| <u>CHAPTER X</u> | 30 |
| <u>CHAPTER XI</u> | 34 |
| <u>CHAPTER XII</u> | 37 |
| <u>CHAPTER XIII</u> | 40 |
| <u>CHAPTER XIV</u> | 43 |
| <u>CHAPTER XV</u> | 46 |
| <u>CHAPTER XVI</u> | 50 |
| <u>CHAPTER XVII</u> | 53 |
| <u>CHAPTER XVIII</u> | 56 |
| <u>CHAPTER XIX</u> | 58 |
| <u>CHAPTER XX</u> | 61 |

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Maxwell Grant

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [CHAPTER I](#)
 - [CHAPTER II](#)
 - [CHAPTER III](#)
 - [CHAPTER IV](#)
 - [CHAPTER V](#)
 - [CHAPTER VI](#)
 - [CHAPTER VII](#)
 - [CHAPTER VIII](#)
 - [CHAPTER IX](#)
 - [CHAPTER X](#)
 - [CHAPTER XI](#)
 - [CHAPTER XII](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIII](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIV](#)
 - [CHAPTER XV](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVI](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVII](#)
 - [CHAPTER XVIII](#)
 - [CHAPTER XIX](#)
 - [CHAPTER XX](#)
-

CHAPTER I

IT was Mardi Gras night and New Orleans was lush with light, mellow with music, bizarre with costumery. Everybody cared except Ken Langdon.

Reluctantly Ken was forced to admit that he wasn't entirely sad. Mardi Gras Day presented the last and biggest in a long procession of days filled with noise and revelry.

Tomorrow – or specifically at midnight tonight – Carnival would be over and quiet would again be in order. Ken's headaches would be ended and Wingless Victory would be finished.

Wingless Victory was the statue that Ken was molding in his upstairs studio in the patio off Dumaine Street, if anybody cared to know. The trouble was that the people who cared didn't know. As a result, Ken was four months behind on his rent, which was bad business in the French Quarter where everybody else was only three. But this was Carnival time and Ken's landlord, whoever he was, had probably gone amasking with the rest of New Orleans.

Revelry was drifting up through the arched entry to the patio and filtering its way into the room that Ken

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

called a studio. Into that medley shrilled a familiar sound that Ken recognized, the ring of the telephone bell in the downstairs renting office.

Usually Ken paused breathless at that sound, hoping that some patron was summoning him to accept a fabulous offer for Wingless Victory when completed. Those phone calls always proved to be for someone else, but tonight Ken wasn't taking chances.

Ken hurried out through the door and scurried down the outdoor steps to the courtyard which he crossed at a speed the neighborhood rats would have envied. Breathless, Ken unhooked the telephone.

The voice came thickly:

"Mr. Kenneth Langdon? Could I speak to him?"

"This is Langdon." Ken couldn't believe that it had happened. "What can I do for you?"

"Would you like to make some money?"

"Why, yes. Of course the statue isn't finished –"

"One hundred dollars?"

Ken tried to answer but couldn't find words. The toil of six months was heavy on his hands and this insult was too much. What Ken might have said would have been plenty if the voice hadn't intervened:

"One hundred dollars for one hour's work."

It was foolish, but so was Mardi Gras with its weeks of revelry, pageantry and idiocy. Ken gulped aloud that he would listen and the voice proceeded, its phrases still thick but disjointed.

"The costume," it said. "In the box – in your studio – wear it, you understand?"

How Ken would wear a costume that didn't exist was something of a question, but he didn't argue it. He just said, "Yes."

"Follow the schedule," the voice continued. "You will find it with the box. You understand?"

This was clearing the situation somewhat.

"Half payment in advance," the thick voice promised, "and the remainder later. If you agree, dial this number."

The voice gave a number, the receiver clicked and the call was over, leaving Ken wondering if it were all a joke. However, Ken decided to dial the number that the voice had given him.

The number didn't answer in the three times Ken tried it, so he decided to go back up to the studio and lay some more clay on Wingless Victory.

The usual lights in the courtyard were missing. But between the glow from the little office and Ken's upstairs studio, the archway was reasonably visible.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

As he started back Ken could have sworn that there was something in that archway, a solid something that slid away hastily as he approached. By the time Ken reached the arch and looked through, there was nothing to see except Dumaine Street and the passing show of masqueraders who were turning Frenchtown into anything but a haven for harassed sculptors like Ken Langdon.

Still wondering who had sneaked out through the arch, Ken reached his studio and climbed the ladder that brought him on a line with Wingless Victory's chin. On the top step of the ladder was a package neatly tied and thoroughly delivered just as somebody on the telephone had promised it would be.

Ken opened the package.

It was hard to swallow Mardi Gras, tough to admit that the Carnival could breed artistic merit. But Ken's eye was stirred by the contents of that large, square package.

The costume proper was a mass of crimson sheen, a cape as gorgeous in texture as it was ample in proportions. The black ruffle around the neck was obviously intended for a contrast and Ken saw why when he studied the remaining contents. Out from the box peered a devil's head so realistic in its ruddy features that Ken wished he could do as good a facial with Wingless Victory.

A Mask of Mephisto and a masterpiece!

From the costume fluttered an envelope which Ken plucked promptly from the floor. Within it was a sheet of paper with a typewritten schedule telling the places where he was to be at given times. And that wasn't all; the envelope also contained fifty percent of Ken's wages in the form of a hundred dollar bill torn in half.

This Mephisto proposition was devilishly clever.

The sponsor had certainly invested his whole hundred, but Ken would be an equal loser unless he followed the trail to its completion, an equal loser both of the trail and the hundred dollar bill.

Ken caped himself in the crimson robe, picked up the Mephisto head and set it down over his own. Peering down through the ample nostrils of the nose, he read the time sheet and found that he was due to be parading along Canal Street in exactly ten minutes. He set forth, wearing what the well-dressed Satan should wear.

Frenchtown struck Ken as a strange world on this last night of Carnival. The narrow streets with their overhanging balconies and lattice ironwork were the same, but the people looked different. True, they were in costume, but that hardly accounted for their odd behavior, for the way they stopped and stared.

Ken Langdon was stopping these maskers in their tracks!

If His Mephistophelean Majesty had popped up in person from the antiquated paving of the French Quarter, he couldn't have riveted the passers-by in any better style.

But why?

Somewhere along Royal Street, the answer filtered through. It wasn't the horror of his costume that impressed them; it was the magnificence.

Whoever had squandered too much on this Satanic outfit had done it well. Never had a more resplendent Mephistopheles stalked the by-ways of New Orleans during Mardi Gras. As the murmurs of appreciation reached Ken, he began to feel a pride, even though the costume wasn't his own idea.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Ken found himself liking Mardi Gras until he reached Iberville Street. There something happened that wasn't listed on his schedule sheet. The admiring eyes that trailed the magnificent Mephisto opened wider as they saw a rival for the title of the Carnival's outstanding masker.

They came face to face, Mephisto and The Shadow!

Cloaked in black, his features lost beneath the downturned brim of a slouch hat, the masquerader who confronted Ken immediately stole the show. Until a moment before, this black-clad personage had been inconspicuous in the general parade, but in contrast to the flaming crimson of Mephisto's regalia, The Shadow's somber garb literally leaped into prominence.

It was as if some impossible challenger had risen to meet an equally fabulous foe, and the prominence that The Shadow gained so suddenly gave a startling realism to the Mephisto who confronted him.

Then, as the eager crowd jostled forward to witness what seemed an actual crisis, the masqueraders were separated by the swirl. Through design more than chance, The Shadow blotted himself into the patchy darkness where the street lights were few, while Mephisto, with all his gorgeous shimmer, was forgotten by the eyes that stared after the cloaked figure that disappeared so suddenly.

And Ken Langdon, swirled along toward Canal Street, was looking back, wondering what had become of the cloaked Nemesis who had disturbed the triumphal parade. Again, however, Ken's majestic trappings were attracting attention from new observers who hadn't seen The Shadow's brief eclipse of the brilliant Satanic grandeur.

This singular encounter was a mere incident amid the masked revelers who were celebrating the end of Carnival's reign, but it had all the semblance of an omen, The Shadow's crossing of Mephisto's path!

CHAPTER II

AROUND a corner where no one would have expected him to reappear, the masker who wore the black cloak and hat stepped suddenly from a doorway. With a few short strides he reached a masked girl who was wearing a short-skirted Columbine costume and literally plucked her from the crowd.

Next they were sweeping through the door of a little cafe where a sleepy waiter was eyeing a stretch of empty tables. Taking a table in a subdued corner, the man in black removed his hat and dropped back his cloak, while Miss Columbine discarded her domino mask.

The girl spoke first with a slight laugh of relief.

"I knew this would happen," she said. "You just can't do it, Lamont."

"Do what, Margo?"

The man's query had an even tone that went with his calm face. Both were habits with Lamont Cranston. Being used to them, Margo Lane suspected that Cranston knew exactly what was in her mind, but she didn't say so. Instead:

"You can't put on a black coat and hat and expect people not to notice it," Margo declared. "That is not if you let them see you, not even during Mardi Gras."

"You're positive?"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Absolutely positive."

"Then why talk in negatives?" queried Cranston with a slight smile. "That's all you've been using, Margo, and all that backs your argument was my chance meeting with that chap in the Mephisto outfit."

Margo had to admit that Cranston was right. Among all the quaint characters represented by the merrymakers, The Shadow had been the least noticed until the Red Devil had popped up to meet him. Still, Margo was wondering why Cranston had chosen his Shadow costume and that brought up the question of why he had come to New Orleans at all.

"I was perfectly happy at Miami Beach," sighed Margo, ruefully, "until I received your wire telling me to fly to New Orleans for Mardi Gras Day. I suppose you've been here all along, enjoying the preliminary features of the Carnival?"

Cranston shook his head.

"No, Margo. I just arrived from New York today."

"Just to see the parades?" queried Margo. "Well, I suppose they're worth it. The Rex parade was wonderful and I really can't wait to see the night parade of Comus."

"Except that you aren't going to see it, Margo."

A flash of indignation sparked Margo's dark eyes; then smiling it away, the girl treated the subject as a jest.

"So I won't see Miss Muffet and her tuffet," declared Margo, "Jack and his bean-stalk, or the rest of them. The floats are all supposed to represent Mother Goose stories, you know. I just delight in Mother Goose."

"You'd better read up on it then. You won't find Jack's bean-stalk in among those yarns."

"Anyway, I wouldn't miss the parade for a thousand dollars!"

"Not for a hundred thousand, Margo?"

There was something so steady in Cranston's tone that Margo knew he meant it. In reply to Margo's questioning eyes, Cranston passed a small, thin-paper certificate across the table. The official look of the paper impressed Margo and as she read its title, she exclaimed:

"Why, it's a ticket for the Louisiana Lottery!"

"A winning ticket, Margo. Worth a hundred thousand if it draws the grand and only prize."

"But I thought the Louisiana Lottery was banned!"

"So was horse racing," reminded Cranston, "and recently. Certain ways had to be designed for people to stake money, and the Louisiana Lottery was one of them. It always had a solid reputation in gaming circles. Therefore its revival won immediate confidence."

"But how does the lottery pay off – and where?"

Cranston answered that with a question of his own.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Did you ever hear of the Krewe of the Mystic Knights of Hades?"

Margo shook her head, then said brightly:

"It sounds like one of these New Orleans Carnival associations."

"It is," stated Cranston, "but the Knights of Hades are strictly secret and do not parade. They hold a Ball of Death in what they term the Devil's Den and all the guests are strangers."

"Why strangers?"

"Because New Orleans is full of them, all fighting to get invitations from the dozen or more organizations that are unable to fill all requests."

"But how is anyone invited to the Ball of Death?"

"By lot." Cranston emphasized the words. "Names are picked from hotel registers or other sources and the invitations sent."

"And what goes on at the Ball of Death?"

"Some curious ceremony with a Wheel of Fate in which the winner is called the loser and is banished from the Realm Below, with some slight gift so he won't feel too unhappy. Only this year, the gift may be different."

The point dawned slowly on Margo. Then:

"You mean that the Krewe of Hades is the front for the Louisiana Lottery!"

As Cranston nodded, he tossed an engraved card across the table.

"Your surmise is correct, Margo, and there is the proof."

Reading the card Margo saw that it was an invitation to the Grand Ball of Death, to be held in the Devil's Den, otherwise known as the Hoodoo House, under auspices of the Scribe, the Seneschal and the Messenger, the official representatives of his Satanic Majesty, Mephistopheles the Faust.

Margo frowned. "There's no name on the invitation."

"Nor on the lottery ticket," reminded Cranston. "One simply went to the holder of the other."

"But how did you get them, Lamont?"

"I bought the ticket for a thousand dollars. It cost a dollar originally but it turned out to be one of the lucky fifty that qualify for the grand drawing of one hundred thousand dollars. It has a potential value of two thousand dollars and its owner was willing to settle for half."

"And he gave you the invitation card too?"

"That's right, Margo. Just as I am giving both to you."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Really startling, this offer which explained in part why Cranston had summoned Margo to New Orleans; yet the girl couldn't quite understand why she was needed to serve as proxy.

"It wouldn't hurt if either of us drew the lucky number, Lamont –"

"But it might if someone else did," interposed Cranston, "and the chances are fifty to one that someone else will. I wouldn't care to be immobilized as a guest at the Ball of Death."

"Why not? It sounds interesting."

"Then you can have it, Margo. I want to see what happens to the prize-winner when he leaves the Devil's Den."

The possible complications sprang to Margo's mind.

"You mean somebody might try to grab the prize money!"

"There are rumors, Margo," said Cranston, with a smile, "that somebody does intend to acquire that bundle of cash. Also it has been stated, in fact stipulated, that the sponsors of the lottery will guarantee complete protection to the winner. However –"

"However you're not sure which will happen?"

"On the contrary I am sure. I intend to see that the winner does not become a victim and that the prize money does not disappear. Whatever personal effort may be required should prove worth it."

Knowing Cranston's penchant for adventure, Margo could quite understand. Too, it was now plain why he had chosen the panoply of The Shadow instead of some gayer costume for the particular part that he was to play in the affairs of Mardi Gras.

Time was evidently short, for Cranston immediately suggested that they start from the cafe and as they reached the streets where lights seemed brighter than ever in the much-thickened dusk, Margo realized that it must be almost seven o'clock, the hour when the grand parade of Comus started and the hour also, that the Knights of Hades, disdainful of the parade that was regarded as the big event of Mardi Gras, had set for their reception in the Devil's Den.

It was then that an afterthought struck Margo.

"The Masked Mephisto!" she exclaimed. "The man in the gorgeous costume that everybody noticed until you came along! Could he be the Satanic Majesty of the Krewe of Hades?"

"He probably was," returned Cranston. "As head of the Knights of Hades, King Satan makes the rounds of other functions to pay his respects – or disrespects. Since it wasn't time to meet him officially, it was better to avoid him."

Those were the last words that Margo heard from Cranston, for he had become his other self, The Shadow. On the gloomy street that they had reached it seemed that slender Columbine was walking all alone, for the shrouded figure that stalked beside her was like a shade of night itself.

Yet despite The Shadow's presence, Margo Lane shuddered. Somehow her recollection of the crimson-clad Mephisto with his leering, insidious mask, was a fearful thing that boded further ill!

CHAPTER III

AT an alleyway a few blocks deeper in the French Quarter, Margo Lane paused suddenly as a gloved hand clutched her arm. At that moment Margo was forgetful of her qualms for she was interested in what little of the Comus parade she might expect to see.

Down the street was a float mounted on a flat car some twenty feet by eight, with four bedecked mules hitched patiently in front of it. The float had a crew of several men, all in fancy costumes, but Margo was more interested in the grotesque decorations that topped the cart. The theme was Humpty Dumpty, represented by an enormous egg supporting a squatty dummy figure, the combination rising to a height of eighteen feet.

Then, as the gloved hand turned her toward the alley, Margo heard The Shadow's whispered parting:

"Hoodoo House. Have your invitation ready."

Wishing she'd never come to New Orleans, Margo tripped along the cobbled paving of the alley, hoping only that The Shadow's eyes were watching her venture into what seemed oblivion. As she reached the door of the grim stone house that blocked the alley, it opened, gushing a mass of welcome light. Handing her invitation card to the costumed attendant Margo Lane entered the Devil's Den.

Other guests were coming to that same alley. The Shadow saw them as he glided further along the street, to the darker vantage of a deep doorway. Satisfied that all was proceeding normally where the Ball of Death was concerned, The Shadow turned his attention elsewhere.

What interested The Shadow was the single float which by now should be on its way to join the Comus parade which was forming at St. Charles Avenue and Calliope Street. Just why Humpty Dumpty should be so far out of line was something that called for investigation.

The same applied to the two slinking figures that were working their way along the front of an opposite building. They were men in dark clothes, barely visible in the last vestiges of twilight. Sensing their menace, The Shadow drew a brace of automatics from beneath his cloak and began to glide across the narrow street.

The skulkers acted before The Shadow reached them. Switching from their sneaky tactics, they bore with one accord upon the mummers who were standing around the float. To a man, the entire float crew found themselves with guns planted in the middle of their backs.

As docile as the harnessed mules, the costumed men allowed themselves to be marched across the street and into a deserted building that adjoined the little alley.

The Shadow followed, ready to intervene in case the situation showed violence, but the gaudy prisoners were thoroughly subdued. They allowed themselves to be bound in a room where their captors locked them, while The Shadow watched from the darkness of the outer doorway. Then the captors stripped off their baggy outer-garments and emerged in trappings quite as fancy as those worn by the prisoners.

One crew was simply replacing the other and The Shadow could well understand why. His whispered laugh denoted that understanding as he moved out to the street, there to await the next developments.

Those developments were under way in the Devil's Den, where Margo Lane was finding that the Knights of Hades were far more convivial hosts than their sinister title indicated.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

The Den consisted of a large, square room, with a platform accommodating an orchestra beneath a quaint old stairway that turned at a landing and angled its way to the floor above. The orchestra was playing an old and merry tune called "The Devil's Ball" while the presiding officials greeted the numerous guests.

These officials wore badges which identified them. One was the Scribe, who had a set of whiskers that would have suited Father Time. Another was the Messenger, clad in a skeleton outfit with a skull painted on its hood. The third was the Seneschal who wore a military uniform of the zouave type with red trousers and blue coat.

Attending the masked Seneschal were four guards attired in similar but less imposing uniforms, their whole regalia being a simple blue. They were busy serving drinks in mugs that were fashioned like miniature skulls. Since none of the other guests had qualms, Margo accepted one of the mugs and looked around at her fellow-visitors.

Nearly all the delegates were men and through their various masks they were admiring Margo's Columbine costume with its short skirt and sleeveless jacket. The costume was the sort that would have made Margo's legs appear too long if they hadn't been so shapely, and they were commanding generous attention until the music stopped.

Then came a sonorous announcement from the bearded Scribe that brought all eyes about.

"I, Scribe, salute you!" With folded arms the speaker surveyed the group. "I cannot say that I welcome you, because soon one of our members will be gone, back to the drab life that dwells outside this Nether Region."

Unfolding his arms, the Scribe gestured to the Seneschal who in turn commanded the guards to unveil a bulky object that was standing in the corner. Its covering lifted, the object proved to be a lottery wheel which was brought to the center of the room.

"It is your turn, Messenger." The Scribe bowed to the man who wore the skeleton costume. "Your sad duty will be to banish some unfortunate who will no longer share our happy misery."

The Messenger took over while the guests waited breathless. They watched his skeleton hand sift the wadded papers that rested within the lower rim of the broad wheel. The situation grew more tense when the Seneschal approached, bringing a scaled box that looked like a jewel case. Imperiously, the Scribe demanded:

"What do you bring Seneschal?"

"A gift from the fortunate dead," returned the Seneschal, "that our unfortunate friend may carry when he returns to the unhappy land of the living."

A thick, oblong case, shaped like an oversized wallet, real meat for hungry eyes!

The utter silence told that all were acquainted with the true contents of that packet: one hundred thousand dollars to be delivered by the famous Louisiana Lottery, famous because in all its history it had never defaulted. This clandestine delivery was being managed under the mummery of the Knights of Hades, whose pretence of ill-luck would be the best luck of some person's lifetime!

"A mere token," spoke the Scribe, "but it would please His Mephistophelean Majesty, who believes that all should receive all that they deserve. I shall deliver the gift, Seneschal."

The Seneschal handed over the oblong box and retired with a profound bow. Then the Scribe ordered:

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Come, Messenger! Whirl the Wheel of Fate and let us be rid of the fool who will not share our torments! He must be gone before our great King Satan joins us!"

The silence was broken by the clatter of the wheel with the tight pellets jouncing within it. Running his hand into the flow, the Messenger brought out the winning wad and opened it. The hushed guests were clutching the numbered envelopes that contained the similarly numbered invitations and the lottery tickets that they represented.

Opening the number, the Messenger showed it to the Scribe, who announced it:

"Eighteen!"

A happy cry stabbed the disappointed murmur and a frail man in a Harlequin costume pressed forward waving the winning envelope and all that went with it. He was nervous this winner, until his numbers were checked; when the box was placed in his hands, he began to gulp thanks that the Messenger promptly abbreviated.

"Begone!" The Messenger pointed a skeleton hand toward the door. "The Seneschal will show you to your carriage, fool who prefers life to death!"

Looking around, Margo saw the uniformed Seneschal standing at the outer door. It dawned on her that the carriage could only be the Humpty Dumpty float that was waiting in the street. Then with a regretful sigh that marked the passing of a hundred thousand dollars, Margo decided to enjoy what fun, if any, the coming festivities might provide.

Much was to happen, though not under the head of fun. The first person to realize that was the winning Harlequin after the Seneschal bowed him out into the alley and closed the door.

Anxious to reach the waiting float, the frail man took a few quick paces, only to stop warily and look back toward a little side gate that flanked the doorway of Hoodoo House. The Harlequin fancied that he had heard a slight clink from that iron gate.

Imagination, probably, but it quickened his pace and that in turn made him stumble. Then, from the blackness came part of it that lived, unseen hands that clutched the faltering Harlequin, stifled his startled cry and whirled him into the doorway of a deserted house, a side door, just within the mouth of the blind alley.

More happened swiftly.

Dazed by his spin, the Harlequin was bound and gagged by frills ripped from his own costume. They weren't the sort of bonds that would survive a healthy struggle, but they would last long enough for the unseen personage to travel far with the box that he had plucked from Harlequin's failing grasp.

All that the captive Harlequin heard next was the closing of a door, but there were others who were treated to some of The Shadow's rapid tactics. In the big room where the mummies from the float were sitting bound and gagged, The Shadow paused long enough in the darkness to loosen one prisoner's bonds.

Neat, this, to start the release of those prisoners while he dealt with the men who had trapped them, but The Shadow's mode of dealing with the imposters on the float was rather unusual too.

Doubling around through the alley, The Shadow arrived openly in the glare of torches that had been lighted by the phony float crew. His appearance started consternation that threatened violence, judging by the way

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

hands went for their guns.

Only The Shadow himself was gunless. All he carried was an oblong box that he waved quite joyously and the gang that had taken over the float remembered that this was Mardi Gras where anybody might masquerade in any character – even that of The Shadow.

Quite a coincidence that the lottery winner should have chosen such a costume, but that merely added to the irony of it. They were smirking beneath their masks, these thuggish imposters, as they politely opened the Humpty Dumpty egg and bowed The Shadow indoors.

The egg clanked shut with the sound of steel, not the dull thud of papier mache, the usual material used in Carnival float construction. Then the false mummers were on board and the mules were lumbering ahead, inspired by the flames that the torch bearers waved in their faces.

From within the hollow egg came an unheard laugh, the sardonic mirth of The Shadow, foretelling that this Mardi Gras would witness the unscheduled excitement of frustrated crime.

The Shadow intended to take a personal hand in that frustration, although he had planned it so his services would not be too badly needed. Indeed, The Shadow wouldn't have come along if he'd known of something more important to be settled.

Which proved that The Shadow's present calculations didn't include an analysis of what was going on behind the Mask of Mephisto!

CHAPTER IV

THE gloom that followed the departure of the lottery winner was not dispelled when the Seneschal returned into the Devil's Den, clicked his heels and saluted first the Scribe and then the Messenger.

Even Margo shared the general envy of the lucky Harlequin whose luck already was undergoing a rapid change that none of them knew about, although that change was to prove for the better. Glumly, the guests accepted skull mugs that the guards passed around, while the Seneschal remained at the outer door and the Scribe stood with folded arms. It was the Messenger who furnished the index to the next event.

The man with the skull hood was staring toward the stairs as though expecting someone who had so far purposely refrained from joining this scene where merriment was lacking.

One thought was general: The Krewe of the Knights of Hades would have to furnish something startling in the way of entertainment if they hoped to enliven these guests, whose interest at least had gone very, very dead.

The silence gripped even the orchestra, which remained idle on its platform, and through the hush came the muffled beat of mule hoofs that faded from the front street. A dozen seconds later, the watchful eye of the Messenger detected a stir from the stairs and he raised a skeleton hand in signal.

A cymbal crashed from the orchestra platform. A drum began a rattle that ended in an even louder smash and with it, a descending huddle of crimson spread suddenly upon the landing in the shape of the awaited master of the coming ceremonies, His Satanic Majesty.

Though Margo had seen such resplendence earlier, she felt the same chill as the other guests. It was highly dramatic, this entry of Mephistopheles into his own Devil's Den. The lights were arranged to accentuate the

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

crimson of the costume that shimmered from the landing and the man who wore the Mask of Mephisto was an actor who could play his part.

Even to the trousers that showed below his knee-length cape, King Satan was complete in ruddy dye, as though he had gathered the flames from his favorite fire-pit and used them to permanently tint his costume.

King Satan was wearing gauntlets, long red ones, of some material that had the same sheen as his spreading cape, and with each forward step that he took down from the landing, the fingers of those hands writhed, as though seeking something suitable for their scarlet touch.

Instinctively, the guests drew back and away, forming an awed semicircle, while the Scribe, as if in their behalf, stepped cautiously forward with a cringing bow. The Scribe's voice came plaintive:

"If it please your Devilish Highness –"

Interrupting with a majestic sweep of his shimmering arm, Mephistopheles pressed the Scribe aside.

"But these guests are of the dead." The Scribe tapped a record sheet to prove it. "We have found the lone scapegoat who belonged among the living."

King Satan turned to the Messenger as though demanding that he prove it. The living skeleton bowed and made a gesture toward the lottery wheel.

"His number was called and he was unchosen." The Messenger reared back his skull-face and spread his painted arms. "Oh, Ruler of these Nether Regions, you may strike me living if I speak not true."

The lines that the Messenger recited were so stilted that Margo decided it would be a favor to strike him dead instead of living. So did the man in the Mask of Mephisto.

Without a word, the impersonator of King Satan drew a revolver from his carmine cape and fired three shots into the body of the skeleton-clad Messenger.

People stared as though they expected a rattle of bones when the Messenger struck the floor. What he did was thud and roll over.

It was somewhat ludicrous the way the Messenger sprawled. What proved it wasn't all in fun was the way the white-painted bones on his costume began to take on splotches of color that were too much like the sheen of Satan's cape.

This was murder, committed in the presence of half a hundred witnesses!

It was the bearded Scribe who started the hue and cry. Wildly, he pointed to the doorway toward which the murderer had started only to be blocked by the uniformed Seneschal. He was raising his smoking gun, this Satan who was living the part, when he saw that the Seneschal wasn't to be cowed. Turning, the man with the Mephisto Mask dashed for the stairs, took them with long strides and was around the turn of the landing by the time people began to follow.

The bearded Scribe led the rush in that direction, while the bold Seneschal, seeing the route was crowded, dashed across the floor and beckoned the guests to a rear stairway that offered a chance to cut off Mephisto's flight.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Completely lost in the rush, Margo didn't have time to philosophize how brave people could become after someone else showed them how. Practically everybody had chased upstairs, by one route or the other, and the Seneschal, back at the outer door, was waving to bring back the few who had fled in that direction. Who those few were, Margo didn't know, because so many had preferred to pursue the Satanic murderer.

It was something of Margo's business to check on facts, since Cranston wasn't here. Besides, she wasn't anxious to stay around with nobody but the dead Messenger for company.

The stairs were long and by the time Margo reached the top, results had been gained. The Scribe's crowd were smashing at a door which gave suddenly to pitch them into a room where a door on the other side was cracking to admit another valiant horde that included the Seneschal.

This room was scarcely more than a hall where the front and back stairs joined; it had a window through which the murderer might have pushed the Mephisto head, but certainly couldn't have squeezed himself after it. The Seneschal was quick to recognize that fact, for he was doing more than beckon now. He was shouting for the rest to follow him up the joined stairway to the third floor front.

There, the only handy window opened above the alley, but there was a sheer drop of thirty feet and nothing in the way of a hanging rope or other device by which the murderous Mephisto could have made it. There was a ladder leading to a cupola atop the house, while bolted doors offered access to windows that led out to the side roofs of adjoining buildings. His fugitive Majesty could have taken any of those routes after barring the way behind him, so people began to climb the ladder and bang down doors in order to overtake him.

By then, Margo was on her way downstairs. From the second floor she could hear the sound of a car pulling away along a rear street but she was sure the murderer couldn't have reached the ground that soon. In fact it was all so puzzling that Margo felt there was only one person who could crack the riddle, if he happened to be still around.

That person was The Shadow.

Margo went out through the front alley to hunt for the cloaked figure that she should have realized could not be found in darkness, when she ran into an old friend – or enemy, providing how you felt about somebody who had outdrawn you in a trifling matter of one hundred thousand dollars.

Margo felt friendly enough when she saw the fellow's plight. He was the Harlequin who had won and lost. His costume was tattered and his mask was gone, revealing a drawn, long-jawed face that suited his frail figure.

The frantic Harlequin gasped his story to Margo.

"I've been robbed!" he panted. "I've been robbed and it's terrible! I wouldn't think it could have happened!"

"Look in there." Margo steered the Harlequin into the Hoodoo House, straight toward the Messenger's body. "You'll see somebody who's been murdered and that's even more terrible. He didn't think it could happen either!"

Rushing out to the street, Margo heard shouts from roof tops, delivered by searchers who thought she was Mephisto in full flight. Heedless of those calls Margo looked for the mule-drawn float, but wasn't surprised to find it was gone. There still was a chance that The Shadow might have followed it.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

The streets were clear now, for all the maskers had gone to Canal Street and other points from which they could view the Comus procession, which Margo was going to see after all. Yet all she hoped was that she could find The Shadow and tell him what she knew of murder.

It was a long chance, longer than the odds against winning the Louisiana Lottery, this hope of finding The Shadow out of all the costumed spectators who were watching the big event of Mardi Gras. Still, there was an element that favored Margo's quest.

If you saw trouble, you could probe into the thick of it and generally find The Shadow. Such trouble was due along the path of the Comus parade.

The Shadow had done more than ask for it!

CHAPTER V

THERE were twenty-one floats in the Comus parade instead of the advertised twenty, but comparatively few of the spectators checked that difference. The first float in the parade was the title car, listing the names of the eighteen that were following the king's car, and by the time the last float passed, most people had forgotten some of the titles.

The squatty Humpty Dumpty, perched upon his mammoth egg, was so in keeping with the theme of Mother Goose that it brought huge rounds of applause. Indeed, the only fault with this topic was that it was too good, and the fake maskers who had taken over the spurious float were quite aware of it.

They were arguing that point as they flung good luck trinkets to the crowd.

"It's time we were mooching out of this," one masker said. "Like we mooched into it. When we get to the review stand, they'll know we're phoney."

"Only we ain't going past the review stand," returned another. "We're keeping right ahead the next time this caravan turns."

"Yeah, but what's the crowd going to think?"

"Nothing. There's always a chance that a float is going to fall out of line. That's why a repair truck rides along with the coppers up front of the parade."

"Then they'll be sending the truck back to help us out –"

"Yeah, only when it gets back, nobody's going to find us. Listen, we ain't any phonier than the phonies we took over from and we know how they had it figured."

The figuring was easy.

This float had joined the parade simply to lose itself, or rather cover its own trail. The revivers of the Louisiana Lottery had planned it as a special service for the winner of their illicit game, something which they could well afford, since they had sold more than double the number of tickets needed to pay off the grand and only prize.

By easing into the parade, then out again, the fake float was supposed to reach some unknown destination where the occupant of the boiler-plate egg could depart in peace and security with his precious box of funds.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Such was the original plan and in forestalling it, the present occupants of the float were simply adapting it to their own purposes.

They too intended to ride to some unstated place with their charge, but when or if they sent him on his way, he would go without the money. The fact that the prize winner was masquerading as The Shadow had jarred this faction only briefly; indeed they were possibly less worried than their predecessors might have been. The Lottery racket was illegal from the start!

There didn't seem much that The Shadow could do to remedy his present situation, considering that he was clamped in a metal container and if he tried to pry his way out, he would give his identity away. These maskers who had taken over weren't going to give The Shadow a chance to start anything.

So they thought, not realizing that The Shadow had already started all that was needed.

Just as the parade was turning a corner, about the time when the middle of the procession had made the swing, the thing happened.

A group of maskers who looked like fugitives from a Comus float came hustling through the crowd that thronged the corner. They were using the old New Orleans system which the younger set thought was sport; they were coming as a human chain, hands locked as they whip-lashed through the crowd.

Once such a string got under way, its own momentum carried it. If the head of the chain struck too tight a cluster of people, the backwash cleared it. This sort of horse-play was annoying and quite unseemly during the grand parade of Comus, but it served its purpose.

The crowd suddenly parted and the lined maskers plunged through, practically into the parade itself. Torch bearers scattered, the horses of the Comus Knights reared madly and the general confusion might have ruined the parade if the roisterers hadn't veered away and gone barging back to the rear of the cart-wheeled flotilla. So it all looked like a happy ending until they reached Humpty Dumpty.

There these madcaps turned into a veritable pirate crew that swarmed on board the egg exhibit with intent to capture it. So far, maskers on the other floats had repelled these trouble-makers with fistfuls of thrown trinkets, but the Humpty Dumpty guardians were better equipped.

They drew guns, as did the attackers and in a trice the whole float was a riot of slugging and shooting. One tough crew was seeking revenge on the other. They were canceling each other out, due to The Shadow's foresight!

Somebody lashed the mules and away they went, past the last float that was clearing the corner. Things were jammed long enough for the crowd to open a path so the mules could rocket straight ahead, taking the float battle out of circulation. Quite a spectacle in itself, the fugitive float drew a mad rush of spectators after it and they saw the climax of the furious fray.

Muffled shots went unheard within the pill-box that was shaped like an egg, but the smoke from a gun muzzle curled out through the cracks. The Shadow had broken the lock with those shots; now, a human instrument of double vengeance, he was springing out to settle the balance of the battle to the misfortune of both sides.

The trailing populace saw this cloaked avenger clout down fighters impartially until the float was strewn with dazed maskers; then, seizing the discarded reins, The Shadow lashed the mules and fired a few shots past the pair on the right. The stampeded steeds veered left, around a narrow corner. The float couldn't make its turn

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

and Humpty Dumpty took his great fall, egg, float, and all, flinging the battle-weary maskers to the flagstones.

All the crowd had to do was pick them up and turn them over to the police, a task that The Shadow seemed to indicate by a parting, sweeping gesture, as he sprang lightly from the crashing float and disappeared along the narrow street leading into Frenchtown.

Only one person followed The Shadow. She was a Columbine whose trim legs were built for speed as well as looks. Hearing shooting, Margo Lane had gone to look for The Shadow and found him.

Suddenly blocking the Columbine's path, he halted her with a whispered laugh and again was piloting Margo among the narrow streets.

Margo was too breathless to talk until she found herself in an upstairs cafe on Exchange Place, that single block where the night spots were so popular that they were forced to double-deck themselves. There, his slouch hat removed, his black cloak thrown back, Lamont Cranston was again his complacent self.

"Lamont!" Margo panted the name. "I must tell you – something."

"Don't tell me that the grand prize disappeared."

"It did, but that wasn't all." About to go into the news of murder, Margo halted abruptly. "But how did you know about the money?"

From the draped cloak, Cranston brought the sealed box that Margo had last seen in the hands of the prize-winning Harlequin. For the moment, Margo was too astounded to think of anything else, so Cranston took a table-knife, cut open the heavy seals and lifted the lid of the compact treasure chest.

Margo gave a grateful sigh, since one thing at least seemed settled, but that sigh turned to a gasp, accompanied by a stare of amazed alarm.

Mystery was only beginning in New Orleans. Instead of containing a bundle of tight-packed currency, the oblong box was empty, lacking even a trifling souvenir from the Krewe of the Knights of Hades!

CHAPTER VI

POLICE CAPTAIN SELBERT listened in stolid style to the excited testimony that he was hearing in the midst of Hoodoo House. Jim Selbert missed seeing the Comus parade, but he'd been expecting something to happen here in the French Quarter where he was in charge.

Something always happened in the Vieux Carre on Mardi Gras Night and Selbert couldn't have looked forward to a more bizarre setting than this old Hoodoo House which had once been the temporary residence of the famous Dominique You, a lieutenant of that once-renowned pirate, Jean Lafitte.

And right now, Jim Selbert was getting the inside story on the Krewe of the Knights of Hades, whose ways were known but whose identities until now had never been revealed.

The Scribe, deprived of his Druid gown and whiskers, was none other than Tourville Talbot who pronounced his name with a round "O" and an absence of the final "T." Older than he looked, Talbot was known to everyone as Tourville because he'd refused to grow up. Selbert wasn't surprised to find Tourville as Scribe of the Knights of Hades. The old boy simply couldn't wait for Mardi Gras to come around each year and he'd

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

grown jaded attending the functions put on by Comus, Rex, Aparomest, Mithras, Oberon, and all the rest of them.

The Seneschal in real life was Hubert Aldion, a rugged but rather handsome young chap who had probably done much to finance the Hades Krewe, since like Tourville, Aldion had inherited some money but hadn't found time to sink it in sucker investments. In contrast to Tourville, who was shaky and distressed, Aldion was grim and determined. Tourville could only talk about the murderer's flight, while Aldion was chiding himself for his own failure to overtake the killer.

In death, the Messenger proved to be Louis Chardelle, a middle-aged gentleman of very checkered history. Some people had said that Chardelle had his ups-and-downs; others termed them his ins-and-outs. It was all one and the same, because definitely Chardelle was now down and out, to stay that way.

The skull hood, peeled back, disclosed Chardelle's dead face as a wan one, its eyes still carrying the look of a schemer in their glassy bulge, the lips opened wide in a grimace of surprise which Chardelle had evidently felt when he saw King Satan bring out the gun that delivered those fatal blasts.

The uniformed guards were unimportant in the opinion of Jim Selbert, but he intended to check them just the same. He knew their names when he heard them; they belonged to some of the older families of New Orleans, by marriage at least, and they were just the sort of young chaps who would join up with an outfit like the Krewe of Hades on the chance that it would some day develop into an outstanding Carnival society.

As for the guests, Selbert had simply blocked them in the corner of the room where he intended to question them later. Right now, Jim wanted to know who King Satan was, so he put the question bluntly.

The guards looked at Aldion, who looked at Tourville, and the elderly Scribe decided that his Oath of Hades could be waived at the demand of the law.

"You've heard of Frederick Ferrand," said Tourville. "He was supposed to play King Satan."

Selbert turned to Aldion, who nodded, as did the guards. Then in hard tone, Selbert demanded:

"What do you mean supposed to play King Satan?"

"It was Ferrand's office," explained Tourville. "He was the head of the Krewe of Hades. But I couldn't swear that it was Ferrand who murdered Chardelle."

Selbert wheeled on Aldion.

"Could you?"

Aldion shook his head, as did the guards.

"Why not?" snapped Selbert. "Granted that he was masked, didn't he go through the proper mummery?"

"More or less," conceded Aldion, "but I can't understand why he would have murdered Chardelle. I didn't see the actual shooting" – Aldion thumbed across the room – "because I was over by the outer door, and there were too many people in between. But it was all very crazy."

"Perhaps not," grunted Selbert. "Any of you might have murdered Chardelle on account of the Lottery."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Aldion stared blankly.

"What lottery?"

Bluntly, Selbert gestured toward the wheel and Aldion's face, frowning in new surprise, gradually relaxed into a deprecating smile.

"Why that was just part of the flubdubbery," declared Aldion. "We always banish one of our guests with some souvenir. This year we were giving a pen and pencil set, weren't we, Scribe?"

With his question, Aldion turned to Tourville, who nodded. As for Selbert, he wouldn't have credited Aldion's ignorance if Tourville hadn't corroborated it. Even yet, Selbert doubted.

"You mean you don't know what was happening here tonight?" demanded the police captain. "You didn't know that you were fronting for the Louisiana Lottery?"

Old Tourville stared; then cackled:

"It's been years since that Lottery was held, Captain!"

Checking the faces of the guards, Selbert found them as puzzled as those of Tourville and Aldion. Swinging to the unmasked guests, Selbert demanded why they had come here and a chorus answered that they had come to participate in a prize drawing of one hundred thousand dollars.

To emphasize that feature, Selbert brought forward a dapper man in tattered harlequin attire who answered to the name of Howard Shorke and asked why he had come all the way from Buffalo.

"I wanted to win the big money," declared Shorke plaintively, "and I did. Only somebody took it away from me –"

"We'll get to that," interrupted Selbert. "Meanwhile" – he swung back to the group that represented the Krewe of Hades – "I want to know why you're all so ignorant."

As Scribe, old Tourville was looking over the list of guests and he couldn't find Shorke's name on it. When Tourville said so, Selbert took the list and called off the other names. None of them tallied with the persons present, a point which impressed Selbert.

"Who prepared this list?"

"I did," replied Tourville, "and I gave it to the Messenger so he could deliver the invitations."

Over the list, Selbert stared down at Chardelle's rigid body.

"So it was your racket, Chardelle," mused Selbert as though speaking to someone who could still hear. "I might have known it, considering some of the deals you were mixed in. But it still doesn't add up."

Wheeling to the living members of the Krewe, Selbert snapped a fresh challenge.

"Chardelle was dealing with some really big shots," asserted Selbert. "He couldn't have risked letting them down and he must have known it. His only way to be safe was to cut you fellows in on the deal!"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Except that we wouldn't have listened," expressed Aldion, indignantly. "As Seneschal, I'd have voted against such a thing!"

"As Seneschal, you would have no vote," reminded old Tourville, "nor would I as Scribe." Producing a scroll, Tourville passed it to Selbert. "Read by-law 5-A, Captain, and you will see that King Satan has complete say on all matters of policy concerning the Krewe of Hades."

"But this would be different," argued Aldion. "It doesn't come under the head of policy –"

"All lotteries are policy," interrupted Selbert, "and without intending to be funny, I'd say that Scribe Tourville is right. All that Chardelle had to do was take it up with King Satan, which meant Ferrand. You fellows didn't count. The most you could do was quit."

Tucking the scroll in his pocket, Selbert went into another tack.

"When did any of you last see Ferrand?"

Tourville shook his head and Aldion shrugged. Then Aldion stated:

"We haven't seen Ferrand for some time. He's been moping, you know, over girl trouble."

Selbert raised his eyebrows to show he didn't know.

"Ferrand was going down to the bayou country, the last we heard," added Tourville. "I instructed Chardelle to find out if Ferrand would be back in time, and Chardelle assured me that he would."

Another idea was growing in Seibert's mind.

"You gave a lot of orders to Chardelle, didn't you, Tourville?"

"As Scribe of the Krewe of the Knights of Hades," returned Tourville, with dignity, "I am special deputy to His Majesty, King Satan. It is my prerogative to assign certain tasks to the Seneschal, and lesser details to the Messenger."

"We'll take over your duties," asserted Seibert, a trifle sarcastically, "and it would please us, Scribe, if you would tell us where His Murderous Majesty might happen to have gone at present?"

"King Satan is answerable to no one but himself." Tourville was still taking his mummery seriously. "But it is his wont on Mardi Gras night to appear but briefly at the functions of the other Krewes."

"Good," decided Seibert, "we'll start a man-hunt or a devil-hunt, just in case he's showing nerve enough to go through with the old routine."

Turning to instruct the few police who were present with him, Seibert was pleased when the door opened and more arrived, including a few plain clothes men who were dressed as masqueraders since Carnival costumes were the equivalent of plain clothes on this final evening of Mardi Gras.

These arrivals were bringing news of massed battle on a Humpty Dumpty float, and by questioning survivors they had learned that it traced back to the Hoodoo House that operated as the Devil's Den. Paramount was the account of a cloaked masker who had cracked loose from within a steel egg and gone his way into the night.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Somebody masking as The Shadow –"

Before the informing detective could go further, the man named Shorke made an excited interruption.

"He must be the one who took the prize money!" Shorke's plea was addressed to Seibert. "I couldn't see him in the dark so he answers the description."

Waving for silence, Seibert inquired:

"Any reports on The Shadow?"

"He was seen earlier," informed a detective, "when he ran into a man with a Mephisto Mask up toward Canal Street."

Seibert's eyes narrowed.

"Go on."

"And there was a girl with him," added the detective. "She was wearing a Columbine costume. Short skirts and long legs –"

"She's the one who was here!" broke in Shorke. "When I told her I'd been robbed, she didn't wait around!"

"Any further reports?" queried Selbert, briskly. "I mean on the Devil, The Shadow, or Miss Columbine?"

The detective nodded.

"Somebody saw the girl over at Exchange Place."

"Then what are we waiting for?" demanded Selbert. Turning to his own squad, he waved for them to take charge; then to the rest, he ordered: "Come on!"

The hunt had started and which it produced first, The Shadow or King Satan, Jim Selbert didn't seem to care!

CHAPTER VII

ITEM by item, Lamont Cranston had connected the details that Margo Lane remembered from her grueling experience in the Devil's Den. On the table-cloth, Cranston had drawn a complete plan of the neighborhood around Hoodoo House as well as the interior of the building itself, the latter copied from Margo's descriptions.

Carefully, Cranston was marking crosses and dotted lines to represent various participants and their courses, when the sound of a police siren reached him. They just couldn't seem to get along without sirens, even in New Orleans.

So rapidly that Margo wondered what it was all about, Cranston came up from his chair and whisked her behind an open door.

"Stay there," he warned, "until after they all come through. Then go out the front way, because they'll have forgotten all about it. Here" – Cranston whipped away the table-cloth with its penciled evidence – "throw this over your head and shoulders and masquerade as a ghost until you get back to your hotel. Then get out of

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

that Columbine costume and hide it!"

Footsteps were pounding up the stairs while Margo was enveloping herself in the white drape and Cranston similarly was robing himself in black as he resumed the costume of The Shadow. Instead of looking for some place of concealment, he started for the door, showed himself in full light, and wheeled in the opposite direction.

Shouts from arriving police were drowned by the crash of a window. Next, the officers were storming through the deserted cafe on the trail of someone who was making as remarkable a flight as the one that Margo had attributed to King Satan.

Almost as remarkable but not quite.

No one had caught a glimpse of the crimson-clad Devil who had flown from Hoodoo House, but there were plenty of fleeting glimpses of The Shadow, despite his black attire.

That in a sense made The Shadow's trail more remarkable.

The Shadow intended to draw pursuers after him. He was spotted when he dropped from a low roof to the street; seen again when he cut diagonally to another sidewalk. Through a narrow alley which had once been a rendezvous for fencing masters, The Shadow showed a suitable technique by parrying the police clubs that swung at him.

Once through the alley, The Shadow evaporated. He had drawn the whole man-hunt, including Captain Selbert, along his own course, leaving nobody to witness the departure of an improvised ghost from the upstairs cafe back in Exchange Place.

The man-hunt then switched to terms of King Satan, though the man who wore the Mephisto Mask didn't realize it. Ken Langdon, bedecked in flowing crimson, was completing the tour as indicated on the typewritten time-sheet.

He'd paid his respects – or disrespects – to Comus, Rex, the Druids and the Zulus, though it was hardly more than a token courtesy – or discourtesy – considering that the evening parties thrown by those Carnival associations had been hardly under way when Ken called by as Mephisto.

At least people could testify that he'd been there and now, to give the Devil his real due, Ken was making his final stop at the Borneau Mansion where the Greater Carnival Association was holding a reception.

This was a new group whose aim was to encourage a bigger and better Mardi Gras in keeping with educational standards. New Orleans already boasted a school children's parade which went under the title of the Krewe of Nor, and the Greater Carnival Association felt that this should be the standard for future adult Krewes. Obviously the Association was diametrically opposed to any secret and unsavory groups like the Krewe of Hades, no matter how prominent their members might be.

Which was probably why King Satan was to include the Borneau Mansion on his calling list, and knowing nothing about any of it, Ken Langdon stalked right into the sacred preserves of the city's most stodgy aggregation of ultra-conservative stuffed shirts.

The Association members were in costume, but unmasked, since they were strictly interpreting the rule that all masks should be off by sunset, an ordinance which the populace had been ignoring of late years. So the entry of a full-fledged Mephisto, clad cap-a-pie in crimson, devil's head and all, was something that should

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

have created consternation.

There was a girl who foresaw this, a vivacious blonde who was wearing a Dutch costume. She clattered forward in her wooden shoes, clutched Ken's shimmering sleeve and stopped his Mephistophelean stalk with the ardent protest:

"Fred! You shouldn't have come here!"

Tilting back his head, Ken looked down the Mephisto nose and turned to resume his stride. Then, something that even his obstructed vision had observed caused him to pause and reconsider the girl's plea.

She was really worried, this girl was, and the flash in her violet eyes carried something soulful that Ken wished was meant for him instead of somebody named Fred.

"It isn't right, Fred!" The girl's protest was heartfelt. "You know how these people are trying to improve the Mardi Gras. They didn't send the police to raid that secret Krewe of yours, so why should you impose upon them?"

Apparently the girl didn't know that the police had taken over the Krewe of Hades with all its Mystic Knights, but neither did Ken, so that made it mutual. Ken muttered something that might have passed as Fred's voice in the hollow depths of the Mephisto Mask, but it only complicated the situation.

"I'll call Rolfe," the girl said. "He'll see that you get home all right. He won't tell anybody who you are and I'm sure he'll be reasonable when he finds out that you're connected with the Krewe of Hades. You know that Rolfe doesn't approve of such organizations –"

Ken interrupted with a mutter consigning Rolfe, whoever he was, to the particular realm belonging to the character that Ken was impersonating instead of Fred. Meeting a girl like this was something Ken didn't want spoiled by anybody named Rolfe and since Fred was being blamed for staging the Mephisto act, Ken didn't care about him either.

What Ken chiefly wanted was to conclude this imposture within an imposture and collect for services as rendered. He turned away and strode in Mephistophelean majesty straight through the middle of the reception, leaving a rooted flock of astonished conservatives in his wake.

Such behavior was just too much for the blonde. Turning away, she started fleeing, only to run into a young man who was wearing a Colonial costume with fancy knee-breeches.

"What's happened, Joan?"

"It's Fred," the girl choked. "You must stop him, Rolfe, before he unmask. If they ever find out who he is –"

"Why, he's Fred Ferrand," returned the Colonial gentleman, "and I'm Rolfe Trenhue, his best friend. Or didn't you know?"

"You still can't understand, Rolfe!"

"But I do understand. Why shouldn't Fred Ferrand come to a reception to meet Joan Marcy? Everyone knows that you two are engaged, so where one is invited, the other ought to be."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"But Fred was sent here by the Krewe of Hades as an insult. He's wearing a Mephisto Mask and he's probably been flaunting it all over town."

"Calm yourself, Joan." Rolfe Trenhue steadied the girl and helped her out through the door to a garden bench. "It can't be Fred. He's gone down to my hunting cabin among the bayous. He told me he intended to stay there."

"But he didn't tell you about the Krewe of Hades?"

Trenhue shook his head and his dark, round face showed a puzzled expression.

"What is the Krewe of Hades, Joan?"

"Of course Fred wouldn't tell you," returned Joan, "knowing you don't approve of secret clubs. Go find Fred and ask him. Get him away before he makes fools of us as well as himself. You'll find him in the Devil's own costume."

The girl buried her face in her hands and Trenhue, disturbed by her sobs, decided to go and learn what the Mephisto menace was all about.

Meanwhile, the menace had disposed of itself. Ken hadn't unmasked because his time sheet didn't call for it. He strode out through a far door and found the most convenient street for the finish of his tour.

It was very simple from now on. The last stop was to be Moubillard's, back in the French Quarter and about a dozen blocks from the Borneau Mansion. At Moubillard's, Ken would leave the costume and go on his way.

Everybody knew Moubillard's, including Ken, although he'd never patronized the place. Henri Moubillard specialized in all sorts of fancy costumes and his business was big during Mardi Gras – so big that Moubillard always celebrated Mardi Gras Night himself. By then all his costumes were out and there was no use staying open.

Always, too, Moubillard left his shop wide open on this night of nights. He boasted that he did this to prove that he had rented all his costumes; that if anyone entered the shop they'd find nothing to steal. But rumor had it that Moubillard left the door open because he wouldn't be able to unlock it even if he didn't lose his key, which he was likely to do, considering how thoroughly he celebrated on this annual splurge.

Ken knew therefore that Moubillard's would be open and he was glad of it. As he strode along the streets, Ken could hear the wail of police sirens and if there was trouble in the neighborhood, he didn't want any part of it. If any maskers had become too riotous, the police were likely to blame the first they found, so Ken gave the sound of sirens a wide berth.

Moubillard's at last.

The shop was deep beneath an ancient balcony and true to custom the door was wide open. As usual there wasn't anything to be stolen, the show window so generally filled with the peering faces of grotesque masks, now being entirely empty.

Nevertheless it wouldn't do to just fling the Mephisto costume and forget it. Since Moubillard was keeping open house, even when absent, it would be better form for Ken to leave the costume in the office where the proprietor would surely find it. Besides, there was a chance that this might be the place where Ken was to pick up the other half of the hundred dollar bill.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Taking off the big Mephisto head, Ken Langdon saw his way through the gloom and reached the office. There he set the mask on a chair beside the desk and started to remove the gaudy crimson cape. Even in the faint light, the material had an intriguing shimmer, but Ken no longer cared about fancy costumes.

Striking a match, Ken looked around the desk to see if the half-bill had been left there. Then, as the match flame neared his finger tips, Ken extinguished it with a shake. It might be all right to be here in Moubillard's office, and again it might not be.

The thing that caused Ken to consider the latter prospect was the sound of footsteps entering the shop. Whoever the arrival was, Ken didn't want to meet him. What Ken wanted was a way out and a quick one.

If Ken Langdon had guessed all that was coming, he'd have wanted an exit that was double quick!

CHAPTER VIII

It was strange, the sense of menace that moment of silence could produce when they served as prelude to new sounds which could not be identified.

Ken Langdon felt this as he waited in Moubillard's tiny pitch-black office, wishing he was back in his own studio on the other side of the Vieux Carre which was the natives' name for French Quarter.

Small wonder that Ken should be thinking in fancy terms considering the aura of phantasy that he had spread around New Orleans while stalking majestically as King Satan. Maybe some of the Devil's own faults were catching up with him right now!

The sounds that came were creeping footsteps, yet so irregular, so uncertain that Ken could not define them. Somehow, they seemed like echoes of Ken's own footfalls that had brought him through the shop to this box-like office that formed a hollow, windowless cell.

Maybe this was a trap, planned as a conclusion to the bizarre but senseless mission which Ken had so foolishly accepted for a sum that now seemed a pittance!

If Ken Langdon had known of the Krewe of Hades and what had happened in the Devil's Den, he would have realized that the web was tighter, more purposeful than anything he could imagine. Yet though his impressions were vague, Ken was almost sensing the truth behind it, as he crouched there in the tiny office, awaiting the unknown.

Footsteps here, footsteps there – occasionally quick, then hesitant, or blundering. Ken's own footsteps creaked as he worked toward the door, hoping better to define the sounds from the shop proper. It struck him then that the sounds might represent two people, one baiting the other. Perhaps the place was haunted by the spirits of the grotesque masks that Moubillard had rented out – a thing which Ken was almost ready to believe!

At moments Ken thought he could trace fleeting forms against the dim window or the black shape of the door. Then suddenly he realized that footsteps were very close, almost creaking the floor boards on which he himself stood. And from outdoors came sounds that so far Ken had only taken as a background; the whines of halting police sirens, the brief shrills of whistles.

They were very close, too. Across his turning shoulder, Ken thought he could see the outer doorway obliterate itself with blackness as though something had completely filled it!

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Then Ken was at the desk, reaching for the Mephisto Mask, hoping to add it to the cape which he had half removed from his shoulders. If people were playing a game called "Scare Me" as a variant of hide-and-seek, Ken felt he still had a chance to prove that he was "It."

The chance vanished with a click.

Flooded instantly with light, the room revealed a crouched man with a quick eye and wizened face, old Henri Moubillard. He'd come back earlier than expected and he hadn't celebrated too heavily, otherwise he wouldn't have handled the situation so smartly.

With his first glance, Moubillard proved that he didn't rate Ken as an ordinary thief, nor even as some prankster who was literally interpreting the policy of the open door. Suspicion, understanding, and finally denunciation registered themselves in almost instantaneous procession across Moubillard's crafty crab-apple features.

And the reasons were plain.

Moubillard saw the Mask of Mephisto and recognized it, along with the cape of crimson sheen. He also saw Ken and didn't recognize him, which to Moubillard meant something more. Moubillard himself was costumed in an old Spanish garb with ruffled collar and to Ken, the wizened man seemed to represent some inquisition, so thoroughly accusing was his stare.

If he'd trapped an actual King Satan, Moubillard couldn't have been happier, and now he was conniving some way to hold his prisoner. While Ken stood rooted, Moubillard moved backward, intending to hop through the door, slam it, and clamp it from the other side.

Before that could happen, Ken saw a red gauntlet snake through the doorway from the darkness beyond. With it came a mass of flowing crimson that might have been the reflection of Ken's own costume. Red fingers reached the light switch and clicked it off.

In the darkness, Ken heard Moubillard's excited snarl as the old costumer wheeled. Ken too was on the lunge, realizing that here was a new menace that might convert Moubillard into an ally instead of an enemy. Ken's guess was right but his action came too late.

Muffled shots greeted Ken's arrival in the doorway. Until he reached there, Ken didn't know that the stabs had been aimed straight his way. The thing that had muffled them also stopped them.

That thing was Moubillard.

Tripping over the costumer's sagging body, Ken locked grips with someone who for all he knew, might really be the Devil, here to wreak vengeance on those who had collaborated in his impersonation. Then, as they grappled, Ken found that his opponent wasn't so formidable, for in snatching at the gun, Ken gained it.

Only that was a mistake.

Jogging Ken's gun arm upward, his foe took him by the throat and began to choke him. Writhing, Ken heard a laugh, fierce, challenging, but low, which he thought came from the man who harried him.

The challenge was voiced by an invisible arrival who wasn't even hazily outlined in the blackness of the costume shop. The Shadow was here to settle this case impartially and his laugh was set to an obligato of police whistles that were converging upon Moubillard's, attracted there by the shots.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Ken's present antagonist was speedy and lucky in meeting The Shadow's challenge.

The fists that choked Ken flung him with a twist and with the departure of those gripping gauntlets, Ken was whirled squarely against The Shadow, stopping the cloaked combatant's drive. Thinking that both adversaries were one and the same, Ken slugged valiantly with the captured gun and after landing a glancing blow, tried to punch a bullet home, as fair due to a murderer.

That error was anticipated by The Shadow. His sweeping arm sent Ken's gun—hand upward; the bullets merely nicked some of Moubillard's empty shelves. A jab from The Shadow's other elbow clipped Ken's chin and flipped him back over Moubillard's body into the office.

It was too late though for The Shadow to go after the missing Mephisto. Outside Moubillard's, police saw a man in red mask and cape dash out, then double back through a narrow alley that led to the rear of the costume shop, clanging an iron gate as he went by. Others spied him from the rear street and saw the crimson figure dart back through the alley. Coming through from both directions, those from the front pried open the alley gate while the others were discovering an open window into Moubillard's.

All this aided The Shadow. He had stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. Turning on the light, he bolted the door and studied Moubillard's body, with Ken Langdon sitting dazed beyond it.

The Mask of Mephisto was resting on the desk. The shimmering cape had dropped from Ken's shoulders. The red gauntlets included in his costume was drooping from his hands and beside the right lay the empty gun with which a murderer had finished Moubillard and with which Ken had failed to shoot The Shadow.

Footsteps were pounding from the shop. Looking upward, The Shadow saw a heavily clamped trap door in the ceiling of the office. Seizing the desk, he turned it on end, dumping the Mephisto Mask. The heavy jounce of the desk was echoed by a hammering at the office door, along with a shouted command that had something to do with the law.

The gauntlets dropped from Ken's hands as The Shadow brought him to his feet and started him climbing a chair to the elevated desk end. Realizing that a friend had found him, Ken cooperated groggily. The Shadow clicked off the light and followed Ken to the desk perch; there, restraining Ken's sway with one hand, The Shadow used an automatic with the other, to blast the clamps from the trap door.

The ripping creak of the lifting trap was drowned by the battering—ram smashes that drove through the panel of the office door. A dozen seconds later, the door itself was smashed, but at that moment the ceiling trap was settling in place.

No longer costumed, Ken Langdon was feeling somewhat himself again, as the sweep of night air revived him. The Shadow was steering him across a roof top to reach an adjacent balcony. From there, they worked through an empty house, down to an alley, and finally to a corner where Ken read the name Dauphine Street.

There, Ken heard a parting laugh from a cloaked friend who seemed to fade with the remnants of the breeze and with the tone, he could have sworn that it called him by name, gave his address, and told him to go back there.

That was the last seen of The Shadow on this Night of Mardi Gras. Having nowhere else to go as his cloaked self, he skirted Moubillard's neighborhood with its deluge of police, and headed for a place where costumes were optional and masks taboo.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

This was the reception at the Borneau Mansion, conducted by people who advocated a tamer Mardi Gras as a better Mardi Gras. Arriving there as Cranston, The Shadow found the setting so delightfully conservative, that he decided to call Margo Lane and have her come there in an evening gown instead of her Columbine costume.

During his phone call, Cranston missed an incident that had some bearing on the case in hand.

A serious-faced young man in Colonial costume was meeting a Dutch blonde who was coming into the mansion from the garden door. The anxiety on the face of Rolfe Trenhue brought a similar reflection from the violet eyes of Joan Marcy.

"I couldn't find Fred anywhere," reported Trenhue, "so he must have gone out while I was looking around. Anyway, he didn't unmask."

"You're sure, Rolfe?"

"Positive. I asked people who the Devil was and nobody knew." Trenhue relaxed with a smile. "Most of them said he could go to himself for all they cared."

"He may be doing just that," said Joan, uneasily. "I haven't been able to understand Fred lately, Rolfe."

Trenhue gave a sympathetic nod. Then:

"I went out to my car intending to drive around and look for him, but the police seemed to be stopping everybody, so it wasn't any use."

New anxiety flashed from Joan's eyes.

"They couldn't have been looking for Fred?"

Rolfe Trenhue gave a heartfelt laugh that banished the girl's qualms. After all, Joan had to agree that whatever the faults of Frederick Ferrand, he wasn't the sort to run afoul of the law.

Maybe The Shadow would have held a different opinion, had he heard of a young man named Frederick Ferrand.

CHAPTER IX

IT was the day after Mardi Gras and New Orleans had taken on a mill-stream quiet. In fact, somebody once said that the reason the Crescent City lay deep below the level of the diked Mississippi was because it settled a foot after every Carnival.

Certainly the crowds had done enough tramping to wear down the city somewhat and the existing calm was like a sober regret for too much merriment. And this was one time when merriment wasn't all to be regretted.

For one thing, the police were getting right to the bottom of the Louisiana Lottery.

Too many things had happened on too many beats patrolled by too many individual cops. Such wasn't right in New Orleans, where, to some degree, police officers were like little lords in their own domain instead of being mere underlings who might be shifted willy-nilly.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

The individual police had been tolerant of Lottery gossip until now; therefore they were able to gather a lot of facts. Brought to the higher-up officials, this had led to the summoning of a bulky gentleman of political ambitions named Elfreth Queed, along with a suave, sallow character of the water-front known as Kip Tarlan.

Captain Jim Selbert was present at the hearing, as were members of the Greater Carnival Association. Along with the latter came a man named Lamont Cranston, who was in a position to supply some information.

Big Queed, as he was known to his small-time faction, sat sullen while the municipal authorities reviewed his case; then suddenly, he burst into a tirade that contorted his fat face.

"Sure I was behind the Lottery," asserted Queed, "and why not? Everybody in New Orleans wants it and always did. Why in the old days some of the biggest men in the city took the Annual Policy and the state took its share of the receipts. I brought it back and I intended to run it on the square, the way it always was."

Nobody offering an objection, Big Queed resumed.

"That's why I talked to Louis Chardelle," Queed declared. "I knew he was tied up with the Krewe of Hades and that they had the right sort of people in their group. Chardelle told me he'd take it up with them, and later he said he had. They liked it, Chardelle said."

Waiting for comments, Big Queed received a question from Jim Selbert.

"How much did you pay Chardelle?"

"Five grand," replied Queed. "That was for his whole crowd. I thought it was enough for one night's work."

"And you gave Chardelle the hundred thousand?"

"That's right. How else could it be handed to the winner?"

"Maybe it wasn't handed to the winner."

Selbert's comment was sound, as one witness could have testified. The calm-faced Mr. Cranston studied the police captain with well-concealed approval. That empty box which The Shadow had so kindly borrowed to relieve Howard Shorke from responsibilities, fitted perfectly with a theory that was growing in Selbert's mind.

"You mean Chardelle was a double-crosser?" Big Queed came heavily to his big feet. "Say – if I thought he was –"

"Just what would you have done?" queried Selbert, as Queed paused, fuming. "Gone in for murder?"

That question deflated Queed. He sank back so hard his chair creaked; then shook his head.

"Talk to Kip Tarlan," suggested Queed. "Murder is in his line, not mine."

"Yeah?" snarled Tarlan, without waiting to be prompted. "What gives you that idea, Fat Guy? You hired a lot of lugs to fake a carnival float and come around to take away the winner, only when you found you could get other boys cheaper, you took them instead."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"The first guys squawked to me and I figured they were right. The job was theirs, so I told them to take it. Maybe we would have asked this fellow Shorke for a nice hunk of his winnings, but why not? The way you'd squeezed profits from the Lottery, you could have afforded to pay him back."

From then on, Queed and Tarlan took the floor together and the committee let them have it. Queed had played the big shot and Tarlan was the muscler who had tried to nick the racket, so the more they argued, the more the facts. It developed that both were right, in that neither had wanted to go in for violence.

Tarlan's gang had managed Queed's hirelings quietly, but when the latter had been released, they were in a mood for revenge, not discretion. That accounted for the battle on the Humpty Dumpty float, though Queed tried to condone the behavior of his men by saying that they had been hired as private bodyguards and were therefore performing a public duty in going after Tarlan's high-jackers.

This cleared the local angles where the Lottery ring was concerned, but it meant that Queed and Tarlan would be turned over to the Federal authorities. Along with them went an affidavit signed by Lamont Cranston, who had checked on the sale of lottery tickets in New York and who had come to New Orleans to learn if the sponsors of the illegal business really intended to go through with it.

Being so well acquainted with the lottery situation, Cranston automatically was invited to a discussion of the murder case which Captain Selbert was investigating. They went to Selbert's office, where along with several detectives, Jim reviewed Chardelle's death in detail.

On Selbert's desk were diagrams as exact as those which Cranston had drawn on a table-cloth that had later vanished along with a Columbine costume. As witnesses, Selbert had Shorke present, along with some of the guests who had gone to the Ball of Death.

"Big Queed is a rat," was Selbert's preamble, "but when a rat squeals, you can take his word. We know that Queed only talked to Chardelle. If Chardelle had wanted to grab the prize money, he wouldn't have stayed in New Orleans. So it wasn't Chardelle who pulled the double-cross."

"How do you know there was any double-cross?" put in Shorke, plaintively. "They gave me the box with the prize money and somebody took it —"

"And that somebody was The Shadow," interrupted Selbert. "You've heard of him, haven't you?"

Shorke nodded. Then:

"Maybe it was just somebody masquerading as The Shadow. Have you thought of that, Captain?"

"I have," returned Selbert, "and I'm telling you right now that nobody but The Shadow could have staged what he did. And from all I've heard of The Shadow, if the cash was in that box, he'd have shipped it right here to my office, tied in ribbons with a thank-you note."

Selbert looked straight at Cranston, feeling he'd get a corroboration from this gentleman whose intelligence had already been acknowledged. Cranston didn't nod, but his calm reception of the statement seemed to certify it.

"Anyway, Chardelle was the link," continued Selbert, emphatically. "If that money turned up missing, he'd have to answer for it. Only Chardelle is dead, so he can't talk and we all know he was murdered by someone wearing a Mask of Mephisto."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"That brings us to another murder, done by the same killer. Henri Moubillard was slain probably because he knew who was wearing that costume. We saw the murderer double back toward the shop and we found the costume in the office. The killer cracked a trap door and went out by the roof."

It was so good a summary that Cranston didn't raise the objections that he could have. The fact that Ken Langdon, and not the murderer, had discarded the costume which the police found in Moubillard's office, was something for future consideration. Ken's costume was at present hanging in a corner of Selbert's own office, so the police captain gestured to it dramatically.

"And the man who wore that costume," announced Selbert, "was Frederick Ferrand, the King Satan of the Krewe of Hades! Frederick Ferrand is a double murderer!"

The door was flinging open as Selbert voiced that denunciation, and on the threshold stood a man in hunting costume whose glaring eyes were wilder than his unshaved face was woolly. With a bellow loud enough to be heard back among the bayous from which he had come, this arrival roared:

"That's a lie, Selbert, and I'm here to prove it!"

CHAPTER X

THEY were much alike, Fred Ferrand and Jim Selbert, although they differed on a question of murder. Specifically they differed on who had murdered whom, not who might want to murder whom.

For Ferrand was exhibiting the very inclinations that Selbert had attributed to him. Back from the bayou country, Ferrand had brought his shot-gun with him and in rough and ready style, he was shoving the double muzzles in Selbert's direction, with possible intent to let him have both barrels.

As for Selbert, he was drawing a police revolver, indicating that he meant to settle with a murderer and consider the evidence later. The police captain came up from the desk, faster than Ferrand could follow him with the shot-gun.

Shaking only a trifle of his complacency, Cranston intervened by blocking Selbert's aim and gesturing the revolver aside. Before Jim could start an angry protest, he saw Cranston's reason. Already two friends had followed through the doorway after Ferrand and were tugging his shot-gun upward.

One was Rolfe Trenhue, the other Joan Marcy. Trenhue had been at the previous hearing and had evidently met Joan afterward to bring her here. Their arrival in Ferrand's wake was therefore quite timely.

Ferrand could have flung off a pair of men like Trenhue, for the latter, though wiry, was mild of brawn compared to the big boy of the bayous. However, Joan was supplying more than the needed share because Ferrand was reluctant to become too rough with her. The net result was a clatter of the shot-gun and Ferrand, sullen rather than enraged, was letting his arms stay gripped as he still glared at Selbert.

With a nod of thanks to Cranston and the others, Selbert put his revolver away. Then:

"All right, Ferrand," said Selbert. "Tell your story. I'll listen."

"I don't have a story," gruffed Ferrand. "I just didn't get back to town for Mardi Gras, that's all."

"Why not? Your friends were expecting you, weren't they?"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"I tried to reach them," returned Ferrand. "Only they were all out when I phoned."

"Where did you phone from?"

Ferrand hesitated at answering the question, and finally said:

"From a place down near Yscloskey."

"Not very far away," commented Selbert. "Less than fifteen miles, Yscloskey."

Ferrand let that estimate ride.

"What were you hunting, Ferrand?"

About to reply, Ferrand decided on silence.

"Let's keep it to New Orleans then," decided Selbert. "Our records show" – Jim was referring to a little book – "that you ordered a special costume with a Mask of Mephisto, from Moubillard's Costume Shop."

"Suppose I did?" queried Ferrand. "I wasn't here to wear it. Besides, why couldn't somebody else have gotten a costume and played the Devil?"

"Because you were the only person who could have known about the Louisiana Lottery money. Chardelle would have told you."

"Only Chardelle didn't. Why should he?"

"Because you had full say in the affairs of the Krewe of Hades."

"As long as I reigned as King Satan, yes," conceded Ferrand, "but when I wasn't around – and I wasn't – the Scribe had charge. So it was up to Tourville."

Shaking his head, Selbert brought a scroll from the desk drawer and unrolled it.

"Evidently you don't know your own by-laws," Selbert told Ferrand. "It says here that in the absence of King Satan, or during his inability to rule, the majority vote of the other officers shall be needed to appoint a substitute or successor."

By the other officers, Selbert specifically meant Tourville, Aldion, and the defunct Chardelle, who as Scribe, Seneschal and Messenger were recognized officials of the Krewe. Not having Chardelle's body handy to confront Ferrand with it, Selbert did the next best thing.

The police captain pressed a buzzer; a door opened and both Tourville and Aldion were ushered in from another room where they had been kept in temporary custody. But if Selbert expected this surprise to produce results, he was guessing very badly. Tourville and Aldion nodded amiably but warily to Ferrand who returned the greeting in his usual abrupt style, then turned to Selbert and demanded:

"What do they have to say?"

"Only that they knew nothing about Chardelle's deal with the Lottery," returned Selbert. He paused, to add casually: "I'm rather inclined to believe them."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Then why not believe me?"

"Because Tourville and Aldion were accounted for at the time of Chardelle's death," declared Selbert. He tapped a diagram with his pencil. "Tourville was here beside the orchestra platform and Aldion was at the outer door."

Ferrand stared at a big letter "M" which marked the beginning of a curved line that trickled into a row of dots.

"I suppose the 'M' stands for Mephisto and is supposed to mean me."

"It might," said Selbert drily, "and we'd know for sure if you traced the rest of the line for us. We're sure you must have gone as far as the third floor, but where you went after that, we don't know."

"Suppose I couldn't tell you?"

"Do you mean couldn't or wouldn't, Ferrand?"

"Both," retorted Ferrand, "since you want to be obstinate about it. You seem to think that I was lurking upstairs in the Mephisto costume, that I came down, shot Chardelle, fled upstairs again, jumped on a saddle-pigeon and flew back to Bayou Yscloskey."

Ignoring Ferrand's humor, Selbert studied the diagram.

"You couldn't have dropped to the front alley," Selbert decided, "but you might have doubled around through there after coming down from a side roof. There's a passage around Hoodoo House, leading through a gate into the alley. Doubling back seems to be your specialty, Ferrand."

"You doubled back through Moubillard's shop" – Selbert's eyes lifted and fixed steadily on Ferrand – "although you could have taken a side alley to another street. There's a gate alongside of Moubillard's too. Maybe you're forming bad habits, Ferrand."

Of the many eyes that were on Ferrand, the steadiest were Cranston's. He wanted to get the bearded man's reactions and with good reason. Cranston knew that Selbert was playing a wrong hunch in talking about doubling back. That trail at Moubillard's hadn't been reversed by the man who murdered the old costumer.

Whatever Ferrand knew, he didn't betray it. Instead, he seemed inclined to keep Selbert guessing and did so. There were other eyes that gazed questioningly at Ferrand, a violet pair belonging to Joan Marcy. Then, rather than stare too long, the girl let her gaze drift, and she noted how closely Cranston was watching Ferrand.

Joan's chance observation stirred a curious recollection that was to produce immediate results.

"Don't tell us you couldn't have gone to Moubillard's," Selbert was saying to Ferrand. "You were seen at the Borneau Mansion earlier and we checked the time. It gave you just the right number of minutes to get over to the costume shop –"

"I was seen at the Borneau Mansion?" interrupted Ferrand. "Why, I wasn't within miles of the place. Who says they saw me there?"

"Miss Marcy, for one."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Ferrand wheeled so savagely toward Joan that she stepped back quickly past Trenhue's protecting arm. Before Ferrand could question Joan, Selbert did it for him.

"Tell us, Miss Marcy," said Selbert. "Didn't you see somebody in a Mephisto Mask at the Mansion?"

"Why, yes," admitted Joan. "Only –"

"Only what?"

"Only I'm not sure it was Fred."

"Didn't you speak to him?"

"Yes, I did."

"And he answered, didn't he?"

"In a way, yes," Joan conceded, "but I couldn't swear it was Fred's voice."

"Trying to disguise it, was he?"

"I don't know." Joan frowned, then brightened suddenly. "Yes, frankly I think the voice was disguised. In fact I have an idea who might –"

The last words were lost, drowned by the ugly snarl that Ferrand hurled Joan's way. Fred was calling the girl a double-crosser, but he spent a while getting to the term, due to a supply of preliminary adjectives. This time, however, Ferrand was reckoning rightly with Captain Selbert.

Coming around from his desk, Selbert caught Ferrand off guard and by the shoulders, spinning him with a twisty shove that landed Ferrand in a chair that broke and deposited him in its wreckage. Facing Joan, Selbert demanded abruptly:

"All right. Are you sure or aren't you as to the person in that mask?"

Joan's reply was to Selbert, but her eyes were elsewhere. The girl was looking straight at Cranston when she said:

"I am not sure."

Old Tourville and young Aldion were helping Ferrand to his feet, promising him their moral support as well as physical, but Ferrand wanted none of it. Delivering a contemptuous snarl in Joan's direction, Ferrand faced Selbert in challenging style.

"Since I need an alibi," declared Ferrand, "I'll give you one. Come down to the bayous with me and talk to the people there. We'll find somebody who will remember seeing me some time last night."

"I'll make the arrangements," agreed Selbert, tactfully. "Meanwhile everyone else is free to leave. Only I'd like you all to be on call, particularly you two."

By "you two" Selbert meant Tourville and Aldion, as he indicated. A pair of detectives took custody of Ferrand while the rest of the group filed out, Cranston included. There were two persons, however, who

paused outside the door of Selbert's office.

Cranston noted them: Joan Marcy and Rolfe Trenhue. But it wouldn't have been good policy to have stayed and eavesdropped on their conversation.

Besides, Cranston had a good idea what it was all about and the accuracy of his surmise was to prove itself quite soon. His whispered laugh, unheard as he departed, was more than vaguely reminiscent of The Shadow's.

CHAPTER XI

OYSTERS ROCKEFELLER formed a tasty dish that delighted Margo Lane, particularly the kind that were served in a certain French restaurant just within the borders of the Vieux Carre. At present however, Margo was neglecting this specialty to furnish Lamont Cranston a bit of tidy news.

"Don't look now," undertoned Margo, "but there's an old friend of mine who doesn't know me when he sees me. He must think he's going to collect some prize money that he didn't get or he wouldn't be so interested in local blondes."

Cranston looked, by way of a restaurant mirror, and gave Margo a nod.

"I know who you mean," said Cranston. "Howard Shorke."

Margo stared, a bit puzzled.

"You've met Shorke?"

Cranston had, but he didn't say so. Instead, he replied:

"I've met the blonde."

Such a revelation would have put Margo in a fighting mood, if it hadn't occurred to her who the blonde in question was. Margo recalled her as a girl in Dutch costume that had made her look considerably different.

"But what does Joan Marcy see in Shorke?" queried Margo.

"Nothing," replied Cranston. "It's what she wants to hear from him."

"You mean details about last night's fiasco?"

"The police called it murder, Margo, and they've put the blame on Ferrand. Joan probably wants to clear him."

"And why? I understood they weren't clubby any more, and from the way you said Ferrand acted –"

"Ferrand's actions are Joan's main reason," interposed Cranston. "She wants to clear the book. Trenhue stayed at headquarters, probably just to tell Ferrand that Joan was doing all she could for him."

"And is she?"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"I think so." His tone extremely confidential, Cranston explained why. "Joan has listed her own candidate for Suspect Number One in the Mephisto murders."

"Do you know who he is?"

"You're looking right at him, Margo."

Since she was looking right at Cranston, Margo continued to stare, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"It was rather odd that I should show up at the Borneau Mansion," reminded Cranston. "If Mr. Mephisto had time to get from there to Moubillard's and toss off a murder, I for one had time to get back to the Mansion. Besides, nobody has asked me where I was at the time Chardelle was killed."

"But Lamont! Of all the nerve!"

"That's a mere side issue, Margo. I think I'll go the rounds and maybe run into Tourville or Aldion, to hear their opinions. When you're clear, you might phone young Langdon and tell him that it would be advisable for the missing Mephisto to stay under cover a while longer."

With that, Cranston passed Margo an envelope which had dropped from Ken's pocket during last night's trip across Moubillard's roof. It bore Ken's name and address to which Cranston had thoughtfully added a pencilled phone number.

From the corner of her eye, Margo watched Joan follow Lamont's departure. If she hadn't learned the truth, Margo would have classed the blonde's gaze as a designing one. But then Margo was over-suspicious of blondes, just as she underestimated the intelligence of such milk-toast gentry as Howard Shorke.

While Margo was watching Joan, Shorke was watching Margo. Turned slightly from the table, Margo was resting one knee upon the other and Shorke, who had an eye for mirrors too, was catching the reflection of some very sightly legs that reminded him of the trim limbs of a Columbine.

When Shorke leaned over to say something to Joan, Margo supposed it referred to Lamont instead of herself. She finished the last of the fancy oysters and sauntered from the restaurant, planning to do a little shopping and then to phone Ken.

Right then, a phone call wouldn't have found Ken Langdon at home. Behind his outward manner, Ken was a much more jittery person than even The Shadow supposed. With afternoon waning, Ken had decided on a course that was utterly foolish.

Ken had decided to go to police headquarters and talk to Captain Jim Selbert.

How far Ken had taken matters into his own hands, he didn't fully realize. Certainly The Shadow wouldn't have approved this notion, and Ken himself would have later cause to rue it. Nevertheless, Ken's folly in seeking Selbert was counteracted by the luck he had in not finding him.

Not wanting to be disturbed, Selbert had left word to send up the names of any visitors before admitting them to his office. So a detective came in reading Ken's card and announced:

"There's a guy named Kenneth Langdon wanting to see you, Captain –"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

That was as far as the detective got. Answering a phone call with his other ear, Selbert wheeled to Trenhue, who was sitting in the office.

"It's about Ferrand!" Selbert stormed. "He's pulled a fast one! He's slipped the officers who went along with him and headed off into the bayou country!"

Trouble clouded Trenhue's rather bland face.

"Do you think he can get out of the state, Captain?"

"Get out!" retorted Selbert. "We'll have more work finding him if he stays in! Why a man could hide for weeks among the marshes. There's one chance, though" – appeal strengthened Selbert's tone – "and that's if you could locate Ferrand for us."

Slowly, Trenhue shook his head.

"You wouldn't be going back on a friend," argued Selbert. "Anyway, Ferrand went back on you, mixing in with that Hades Krewe although he knew you were opposed to such organizations."

"I'm not so sure," debated Trenhue. "Every man has a right to his own opinion, and should guide his actions by it."

"Suppose Ferrand is innocent," suggested Selbert. "It will be all the worse if he is hounded and hunted. He'd need a friend to assure him that we'll give him a fair trial. You're coming with me, Trenhue."

"All right," decided Trenhue, "but I'll have to call my house, so they'll know where I've gone. Maybe if we stop by there we can pick up some of those bayou maps."

"Bayou maps?"

"Yes, old ones that particularly interested Ferrand. I thought once he was going to buy up property down there; that's why I was really surprised when I learned he had sunk money in the Krewe of Hades –"

"Forget the Krewe of Hades," broke in Selbert. "Do your phoning while I'm arranging for a car."

Trenhue had made his phone call by the time Selbert returned. The car was ready, but Jim took time out to see that the office was in order, something that he always did. He noted that the Mephisto costume was hanging in its proper corner, with the grotesque Mask above it. Then Selbert and Trenhue were on their way, with only one slight delaying incident.

Just outside the office door, Selbert ran into a rather haggard young man who had the look of an artist. Whoever he was, Selbert hadn't time to talk to him. All Jim said was:

"We'll be back late. Better come around tomorrow. If it's too important to wait, tell it to somebody else."

Good advice if there had been any one else to hear the story. But Selbert's men were going along with him, so Ken Langdon was stranded in the vacant corridor outside the office door that Selbert hadn't locked. Dusk was filling police headquarters which meant that it was getting late, and Ken had a fairly long trip ahead to the Vieux Carre.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

So long that Margo Lane reached Ken's studio ahead of him. The reason she went there was because the telephone didn't answer. When she called information to check on Ken's number, she found he didn't have any. Of course Margo had been calling the number in the little renting office across the patio from Ken's studio, but she didn't know anything about that arrangement.

Thus Margo found herself looking into a tall but not too sizeable studio that contained an imposing statue, towering almost to the ceiling. It was a strange statue, representing a curious, forceful creature with bedraggled hair and tattered robe, tilting forward and staring straight ahead with determination written all over its plaster face.

Wondering what the subject of the statue was, Margo became more intrigued by the problem of how it could be gotten out of the studio. Looking from door to statue and back again, she tried to compare the dimension. Still dubious, Margo gauged the statue again, and then turned to the door,

Immediately, the problem changed.

It wasn't a question whether the statue could be safely removed from the studio. It was a question whether Margo Lane would be able to remove herself!

CHAPTER XII

BLUE-COLD was the revolver muzzle that covered Margo and the violet eyes behind it had acquired something of the same hard cobalt glint. The gun wasn't very big, but it was just the right size for Joan Marcy, the girl who owned the gun and looked as though she knew how to use it.

In miniature, Joan's expression resembled that of the bulky statue. It spelled determination plus.

The door was swinging shut from a flip of Joan's free hand. As it slammed, the blonde stepped forward, warily keeping enough range to hold Margo entirely helpless. Then, in a calm, decisive contralto, Joan spoke her piece.

"Coincidences just don't happen twice," declared Joan. "That goes for a certain Mr. Cranston and yourself. Or should I call you Mephistopheles and Columbine?"

"You might," returned Margo, "but you'd be wrong."

"Just how wrong?" quizzed Joan. "Half?"

Margo didn't answer that one.

"Half then," Joan summed. "But which half?"

The answer seemed to hang in Margo's mind. It wasn't the difference between truth and falsehood, because such didn't matter when somebody demanded one or the other and used a gun to back the request. The important thing was to nullify the gun threat.

Still, that wasn't the full answer.

Presuming that whatever Margo said would be used against her, the thing to say was whatever would hurt less. On that basis, truth was preferable.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Cranston hadn't played the part of King Satan; therefore it would complicate matters to say that he had. Whereas if Margo admitted she had been Columbine, she would only be revealing something that might be found out anyway. So Margo admitted:

"I was Columbine."

To Joan's credit she accepted it very nicely which briefly changed Margo's opinion regarding blondes. Being frustrated on the Cranston theory, Joan popped a new one.

"Now I understand," declared Joan, sagely. "You were working with Kenneth Langdon, the man who has this studio. He was masquerading as Mephisto."

In fitting a half truth, Joan had struck upon a whole one, so far as the masquerade was concerned, but she was very far from accurate on a question of murder. However the proposition had now reached a state where Margo could no longer dispute it without getting in deeper.

A buzzer sounded, postponing an answer. Someone had pressed a button on the board down in the archway, where Ken's name was listed.

Gesturing her gun at Margo, Joan said:

"Answer it."

Now there was no door down in the archway and therefore no reason why anyone should ring for admittance. Probably the proper response was simply to step out to the railed balcony and call down to the courtyard. Not knowing the New Orleans custom, Margo was quite at loss, but there was still Joan's gun to be considered.

Margo compromised by stepping to the studio door and turning the knob very gingerly, just so Joan would see she didn't intend to make a sudden dash. It couldn't be Ken Langdon, ringing to inform someone that he was coming back to his own studio, more logically it would be Lamont Cranston, letting Margo know that he had arrived.

There was also a chance that it might be The Shadow, for darkness had settled by this time and it would be like Lamont to switch to his black garb. Margo hoped so, at least, because she wanted to surprise Joan. So it wasn't until she felt the knob turning from the other side that Margo let the door come open.

It was indeed a surprise for Joan and Margo shared it. In through the doorway stepped a crimson-clad Mephisto, mask and all!

Out of the hideous hush that followed, the silent night itself seemed to deliver the horrendous cry:

"Murder!"

It could mean nothing else, this new manifestation of the masked Mephistopheles. Mardi Gras was over and to stalk the New Orleans street in costume was the most conspicuous act possible. Of course this intruder could have put on his costume in the secluded archway, but why should he risk such a course at all?

Of all possible maskers who might still be celebrating Carnival, anyone who wore the Mask of Mephisto would be an utter fool.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

If Margo had known that Fred Ferrand had slipped the guards who had taken him on the bayou trip, she might have understood this foolery, since Ferrand was wanted anyway. Her only other conclusion was that Ken Langdon had deceived The Shadow as well as others, and was really the King Satan who dealt in murder.

Whichever the case, Margo wasn't on the spot, at least not yet. The crazy tilt of the Mephisto Mask was an index to the gaze of the eyes behind it. The man in red was here to find Joan Marcy and to prove it, he whipped out a gun and sidled it past Margo in order to aim at the startled blonde who was back by the big statue.

Whether Margo took the right course or the wrong one was a question, but it proved to her advantage. By right, she should have tried to dodge past the man in the Mephisto Mask and let him blaze away at Joan, but that wouldn't have been sporting. Besides, it didn't seem good sense to take chances with a gun behind you, so Margo wanted to discourage Joan's fire.

The best way was to take sides with Joan against Mephisto, so Margo did, hoping to win the blonde's confidence.

Grabbing at Mephisto's gun, Margo was rewarded with a swing that flung her half across the studio, but the man in red didn't fire. All he did was snarl, or its equivalent, the hollow head making the tone sound like a bellow. That gave Joan a chance to fire a few shots, but they were wide despite the cramped surroundings. The reason was that Joan was trying to dodge behind the statue while she used her gun, and the two plans didn't mix.

Angered by the shots, the masked man spurted a few in return but the only toll they took was plaster from the statue. By then, Margo was on her feet, grabbing for the man's gun, shouting for Joan to rally to the cause. Maybe that was where Margo was really wrong, for she was inviting Joan out into the open, but it no longer mattered.

As suddenly as he had entered, the man in red wheeled and sprang out through the doorway to the balcony. People were peering from other doorways and they saw him dash down the stairs to the archway. Just to discourage Joan's fire, Mephisto wheeled from the stairs to send a few shots back, and by then Margo was in again.

Right in where she shouldn't be, in a line with the murder's aim! And the venom that this killer had shown toward Joan was something that he was now quite willing to transfer to a meddler named Margo.

Halting too late at the top of the steps, Margo tripped forward straight toward the looming gun muzzle, only to see blackness rise en masse and lift a clump of crimson regalia into a somersault, mask and all.

Maybe other witnesses thought that Mephisto merely tripped, but not Margo. Nobody could trip with a bound that carried them six feet upward. Looking down the steps, Margo saw exactly what happened, and knew why. That blackness was The Shadow, coming up just in time to meet Mephisto on the way down.

As the crimson menace landed by the arch, The Shadow was busy halting Margo's sprawl. By rights, Mephisto should have been there when The Shadow turned to aim at him, but the Devil's own luck was still with the impersonator. He had landed like a cat and he was away like one, out through the arch.

Clutching the curved rail by the steps, Margo thought her eyes were fooling her. She saw blackness streak along Mephisto's trail, but peculiarly gun-shots sounded from beneath the darkened arch before its blackness swallowed The Shadow's form. Either there were two Shadows, or the only one was gone before Margo saw him leave, and neither of those theories seemed credible.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

True, The Shadow often dealt in the incredible, but this was too much of it.

Then, jogged along by Joan who was coming down the stairs, Margo reached the archway and saw two figures there, one helping the other to his feet. There was enough light from the street to recognize them: Lamont Cranston and Ken Langdon.

Since one was The Shadow, the other would have to be Mephisto, but the latter didn't hold.

Grabbing Cranston's arm, Ken gestured to the street and urged this friend to come along.

"I nearly stopped him!" Ken voiced hoarsely. "Anyway, he didn't clip me with those shots of his! Come on, we've still got time to overtake him!"

There wasn't time. King Satan had made good his escape. What with alleys, overhanging balconies, deserted houses and other peculiarities of this narrow street in the Vieux Carre, there wasn't a sign of Mephisto, hide nor hook, when they looked for him out front.

Again a murderer had vanished, but this time death was absent from his trail.

CHAPTER XIII

ONE mind at least was still fraught with suspicion and that mind belonged to Joan Marcy. Joan's ways were firm when it came to making up that mind of hers, but to her credit she could also change it.

First, in regard to Lamont Cranston.

Being a friend of Margo, who had already taken Joan's part, Cranston no longer rated as a possible Mephisto.

Next, Ken Langdon.

Never having met him, at least not to her knowledge, Joan could only regard him as another victim of circumstance like herself.

Furthermore, since neither of these men had a sign of a Mephisto costume between them, both were cleared. Certainly one would not have been so tolerant of the other, if either had been doubtful.

There was a costume that Joan didn't notice, a black cloak and hat that were bundled on a narrow ornamental ledge inside the arch. Cranston had perched them there when he assumed his present personality. Too late to overtake the fugitive Mephisto, Cranston had dropped The Shadow role in order to help Ken, who had arrived back just in time to tackle Mephisto and miss.

Cranston's real help was a sort that Ken didn't quite yet recognize. He was really giving Ken an alibi; that point came out after Ken had chatted a bit with his neighbors and heard their version of the gunfire and Mephisto's flight. That done, Ken went with Cranston and the girls to one of Frenchtown's quiet restaurants and there began this serious summary:

"It was lucky I came along when I did." Ken felt quite proud about it. "If I hadn't, nobody would have believed anything you people told them. Since they took you for friends of mine, everything was squared. But if I'd only gone after that fellow in red!"

"You would have," put in Cranston, calmly, "if I hadn't held you back."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Ken stared narrowly at this complacent friend of his. There was something of anger in that look, emphasized by the thrust of Ken's square chin.

"You did just that," recalled Ken. Then, deciding that Cranston must have had a reason, Ken let his feeling subside. "All right, I like riddles. Answer that one."

"Somebody was trying to frame you again," explained Cranston. "You were lucky during Mardi Gras, getting rid of that Mephisto Mask before the police found you in it. They might have caught up with you at the Borneau Mansion, you know."

There was a slight gasp from Joan as she leaned forward to study Ken's face, which was rather laughable since all she'd seen of him was the Mephisto Mask. Looking into Joan's eyes, Ken saw appeal in their violet tint; they seemed to be asking for the truth and hoping it wouldn't be too bad.

"Yes, I was a fall guy," admitted Ken. Then to Joan, he said: "I met you at the reception when I was rigged out as the Devil, but I hope you'll believe me when I say I'm not the man the police are after. I'd never heard of the Krewe of Hades and as for the Louisiana Lottery, I was working for a lot less than it paid off."

Tossing the torn half of a hundred dollar bill on the table, Ken added the typewritten schedule and leaned back with a shrug.

"There's what I got," he said, "and there's what I did. I'm still wondering who has the other half of that bank note."

While Joan and Margo were studying the trophies, Ken turned to Cranston.

"Getting back to what you just said. How was I being framed tonight?"

"Your neighbors heard the shooting in your studio," replied Cranston. "They saw somebody dash out in that Mephisto costume. The next step would have been to hunt you up, wouldn't it?"

"Of course."

"And what would you have said?"

"Why, that I hadn't been around. In fact, I might have shown up while people were still looking for me. Maybe a few of them would have been foolish enough to think I was the man in costume –"

With that, Ken caught himself. His eyes opened in a reflective stare.

"Say!" Ken exclaimed. "They'd have asked me about last night, wouldn't they?"

Cranston nodded.

"I couldn't have told them I'd played Mephisto," mused Ken, "because they wouldn't take my version of it, the way you did. If I didn't account for last night, I'd be without an alibi."

"This evening," reminded Cranston, "you have an alibi. You came in too soon after Mephisto went out. You wouldn't have had time to shed the red regalia."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"But if I'd chased Mephisto," acknowledged Ken, "none of my neighbors would have known that I was back. No wonder that character was in a hurry. He was really out to pin it on me!"

By this time, Joan's interest was more than roused. She was remembering a score of her own.

"Maybe I know too much," affirmed Joan, "or maybe I've talked too much. Anyway, Mephisto was trying to add another murder to his list, and I was the intended victim. There's only one man vindictive enough to feel that way about me and that's Frederick Ferrand!"

There was a defiant sparkle in Joan's eyes; it softened, only to regain its fire, and the girl's next words explained the changing of her moods.

"I once thought Fred cared for me," Joan said, "until I learned that my money was my main attraction where he was concerned. Fred let it slip; then he tried to reconcile the two: love and money. He said we'd have to have money to be happy together, so why did it matter whose money it was?"

Looking around, Joan waited a few moments and then answered her own question.

"It didn't matter," she declared. "It was just the way Fred put it. Finally he said he'd find a way to make his own fortune and that I could go to the devil for all he cared." Joan's eyes suddenly became startled. "Odd, wasn't it, that Fred should say that? But those were his exact words."

"How long ago was that?" queried Cranston.

"A month or more," replied Joan. "After he'd been down among the bayous."

"Where he is now," put in Ken, "and a hard time they'll have finding him."

"I don't suppose Ferrand will lose himself," remarked Cranston. "Not with a pair of deputies handcuffed to him."

At that, Ken snapped his fingers.

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "You couldn't have heard! Ferrand slipped those depts somewhere along the way to Bayou Yscloskey. Selbert and Trenhue were starting out to hunt for him when I was over at headquarters."

Startled exclamations resulted from Joan and Margo who began exchanging glances that had a mutual thought behind them; namely, that Ferrand might have been the Masked Mephisto who had invaded Ken's studio. But Cranston was more interested in something concerning Ken.

"You went to headquarters, Langdon?"

"Why, yes." Ken became apologetic. "You see, I was getting jittery there in the studio. I couldn't take an interest in Wingless Victory –"

"You came directly back?" interrupted Cranston. "No stops anywhere?"

"Straight back."

Calculating where he had been during Ken's journey of perhaps a quarter hour, Cranston tallied a few facts.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"I stopped in to see Hubert Aldion," stated Cranston. "At his office, just off Canal Street. That must have been just about the time you were leaving headquarters, Langdon. It's only five minutes' walk from Aldion's to your studio, but I went around past the Talleyrand Club, to see if Tourville Talbot was there. He was, but I didn't want to disturb his chess game."

On a pad, Cranston drew a long line, representing Ken's trip back from police headquarters to the Vieux Carre. Near the end that represented Ken's studio, Cranston tagged another pair of x's to represent Aldion's office and Tourville's club.

"Did you talk to Selbert, Langdon?"

A head-shake from Ken.

"Very good," decided Cranston. "But was there anyone in his office after he left?"

"I wasn't in Selbert's office."

"Then you wouldn't have seen what was hanging there, even if nobody had borrowed it."

"What was that?"

"A very fancy red costume," announced Cranston, "complete to the Mask of Mephisto."

Leaving Ken gaping, Cranston went to the telephone and called headquarters. Returning, Cranston stated:

"They are all three back in Selbert's office."

"Selbert and Trenhue are two," tallied Ken, "so I take it they caught Ferrand, since he must be the third."

"Not Ferrand," declared Cranston cryptically. "By the third, I mean the Mask of Mephisto!"

CHAPTER XIV

NEW ORLEANS was noted for its men of mystery and now the long and time-mellowed list was boasting a new member. His name was Frederick Ferrand and whether he was in town or not, he belonged to New Orleans.

In fact, most men of Ferrand's present classification had been famous because they were away from the city when anybody wanted them. For Ferrand now rated with the celebrated pirate Jean Lafitte and others of the ilk, who also favored the bayou region as the place to spend their spare time.

The hunt had been on for nearly a week and was still getting nowhere. Jim Selbert had about reached the state of waiting for the murderer to return to the scene of his crime, for Jim was seen quite often in the vicinity of the Hoodoo House. On this particular night, Selbert was just coming from the alley when he ran into a visitor who was still in New Orleans.

Jim Selbert was rather glad to see Lamont Cranston. The police captain suggested a stroll in the direction of Jackson Square.

On the way, Cranston inquired: "What luck?"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"None," was Selbert's verdict. "I've been through that Hoodoo House from top to bottom, so often that I probably know it better than Dominique You ever did, if he lived there long enough to count."

They were passing a large and antiquated house to which Selbert gestured by way of contrast.

"That place, for instance," Jim stated. "It was actually owned by Rene Beluche, captain of a smuggling ship called The Spy. And around the corner here are a couple of other places, the Cafe des Refugees and the Hotel de la Marine. They were really pirate hangouts."

Selbert pointed out the buildings as they passed; then returned to the theme of the Hoodoo House.

"No trap doors," he muttered, "no panels, not even any secret fireplaces. I've done everything except roll up the old cement floor in that room the Hades Krewe called the Devil's Den."

Cranston's slight smile was unnoticed in the dark.

"You don't like to miss a detail, do you, Jim?"

"Not me," coincided Selbert. "It's easy enough to figure how Ferrand got in there in the first place, without benefit of hidden passages. Being the bigwig of the Hades Krewe he might have been there waiting. He said he was floating around on a bayou, but we don't believe that."

No comment coming from Cranston, Selbert continued.

"That upstairs hall is the stickler," Jim confided. "Ferrand bolted both doors and that gave him a little time. Aldion busted through one and hauled open the other –"

"Which one?" interposed Cranston. "And which other?"

"It doesn't specially matter," returned Selbert. "Aldion was quick to go after Ferrand, which made me a bit suspicious of old Tourville Talbot. He's the guy who likes his first name better than his last, like Dominique You did in the old days."

Smiling slightly at this historical digression, Cranston decided not to interrupt.

"Only Tourville is an old guy," granted Selbert, "so he couldn't get upstairs as fast as Aldion. Anyway, Tourville wasn't able to either stop or help Ferrand in that murder of Chardelle, so that's that. Particularly because nobody else was around when Ferrand killed off Moubillard, unless –"

The pause was when Selbert glanced at Cranston. Jim had been about to mention The Shadow, in complimentary terms, but decided not to confuse the issue. If at Moubillaid's, The Shadow had certainly done his utmost to block the murder; of that Selbert was sure.

What Selbert wasn't sure about was why he didn't want to talk to Cranston about The Shadow. Maybe it was because the two were much alike in that they were so completely different. Cranston was a man of advice, The Shadow a person of action. You could always find Cranston when you needed him; The Shadow always found you, when needed.

Those were just a few of the points that made the two personalities as opposite as the poles. What Selbert didn't consider was that since Cranston and The Shadow were so far removed, nobody ever expected to meet them both at once.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"What gets me," resumed Selbert, back on his major theme, "was the nerve Ferrand showed in doubling back to headquarters after I left there with Trenhue. Taking the costume was plenty; bringing it back, even more."

Cranston wanted to check that point.

"You're sure it wasn't gone before you left, Jim?"

"Positive. I came back to the office just after Trenhue finished calling his house. I saw the costume hanging there and Trenhue went out ahead of me. By the way, we ought to be seeing Trenhue around here."

They had reached the old French Market, with its long array of sheds and stalls. At one end, trucks were unloading shrimp and people were watching from the tables beside one of the famous coffee stands. Trenhue was there and with him Aldion; seeing Cranston and Selbert, Trenhue invited them to sit down.

"Wasteful, isn't it?" Trenhue referred to the way the truckers were tramping over loose shrimp, as they shoveled big masses into baskets. "Shoveling shrimp like coal makes men become careless. Let's see –" Trenhue tilted his head to calculate – "at the restaurant figure of five cents a shrimp, those chaps have mangled at least twenty dollars worth. That would be one hundred dollars on a five day week –"

Trenhue paused to laugh lightly, with a nudge at Aldion, whose face was very sunk. Then, sobering his own expression, Trenhue declared:

"I'm glad you came along, Selbert. Have you finished with the Hoodoo House?"

Jim nodded and let the process lift his eyebrows.

"Aldion here put up half the money for it," explained Trenhue, "and Ferrand posted the rest. Only Fred didn't have the money, so he borrowed it from me and Aldion went his note."

"How soon is the note due?" queried Selbert.

"Past due," replied Trenhue, "and for the first time I'm learning why Fred borrowed the money."

"It was a rum trick for Ferrand to play," conceded Aldion, "but I assure you, Trenhue, I didn't know you were so opposed to secret organizations like the Krewe of Hades. Fred never even mentioned it."

"Fred wouldn't," said Trenhue, bluntly, "but we didn't know his true colors – or lack of them – until now."

"Imagine it!" Aldion was protesting glumly to Cranston. "Ferrand using Trenhue to finance the Devil's Den! And now – well, I'm stuck for all of it. I deserve it; the question is, can I pay it."

"That won't be necessary," decided Trenhue, generously. "Since the Krewe of Hades is no more, I am willing to take half ownership of Hoodoo House. But you know, if Ferrand had told me he intended to buy the place, I wouldn't have been surprised."

It was Aldion who was surprised.

"Why not, Trenhue?"

"Because he was interested in anything that concerned the one-time pirate Dominique. That's why Fred visited the bayous so often. They were Dominique's stamping ground."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

From his pocket he brought a sheaf of old papers and handed them to Selbert.

"Some more Dominique data, Captain," stated Trenhue. "Stuff that Ferrand collected. If you piece enough of it together, you may be able to track him among the bayous."

Finishing his coffee, Trenhue shook hands all around and waved away the effusive thanks that Aldion repeated over Trenhue's kindness in taking the half share in the Hoodoo House. The two walked a short way together and as they parted at a corner, Cranston, watching from the coffee stand, commented:

"Nice of Trenhue to see Aldion through on that bad deal of Ferrand's."

"Nice if he can afford it," returned Selbert. "Only Trenhue is no better fixed than Aldion."

"You mean the property will prove a loss?"

"What do you think? Hoodoo will mean hoodoo around the Hoodoo House after that murder that took place there. Still, they may get out what they've sunk in it."

Selbert's final sentence brought a reflective gaze from Cranston, something that Jim didn't notice over his coffee cup.

"This was really nice of Trenhue." Selbert tapped the bundle of papers. "I've about given up on Ferrand coming back to town; soon it's going to be a question of going after him, and the more data that shows how his mind works, the better our chance of finding him."

Lamont Cranston looked as though he hadn't heard a word that Jim Selbert said in reference to Trenhue's documents. To Cranston, the most potent of all Selbert's phrases was one that the police captain had voiced in an off-hand way:

"They may get out what they've sunk in it."

CHAPTER XV

MARGO LANE was getting tired of reading up on a man named Dominique whose name was short for Dominique You. In her opinion, Dominique was the least picturesque of all the Baratarians, those swashbucklers headed by Lafitte and who were termed pirates or smugglers, according to the point of view.

Those bullies of the bayous dated back more than a century. They had reformed long enough to help win the Battle of New Orleans; then they had gone back to their questionable ways. All except Dominique; he'd become a ward politician in New Orleans.

Margo expressed her disappointment to Joan.

"What a tame ending for an adventurous career!"

"You don't know our ward politicians," rejoined Joan, sweetly. "If you're really thinking of tame endings, consider those who left New Orleans and wound up among the bayous." Joan's sweet tone had grown bitter, word by word: "Like Fred Ferrand!"

Margo looked across the courtyard. She and Joan were doing the Dominique research in an empty studio just off Ken's patio. From where they were, they could see Ken working on Wingless Victory, whose bullet

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

wounds had long ago been plastered.

Following Margo's gaze and noting that it contained no envy, Joan queried softly:

"Do you think I'm right?"

"If you mean because you've gone sculptor-minded," returned Margo, "yes."

"Ken is a realist," considered Joan. "Take his Wingless Victory. He decided that Victory needed a head more than wings, so he swapped. I like that."

"Wasn't Fred a realist?"

"If you mean because he bayed around the bayous, I suppose he was. But let's forget Fred."

"What about Rolfe Trenhue?"

Joan shook her head.

"If you must bring up comparisons, Margo, I suppose I'll have to analyze them for you. Let's take the Krewe of Hades as the balance point. Can you think of anything sillier than sponsoring a thing like that?"

"Off-hand," admitted Margo, "I can't."

"Well, I can," retorted Joan. "Starting such stupid organizations is bad enough; trying to stop them is worse. That sums Rolfe."

Margo admitted that it did. Then:

"Tell me, Joan," queried Margo. "What do you think of a man who spends his time looking at old coins but never buying any?"

"If you mean Lamont," returned Joan, "I'd say he's just trying to avoid something worse, like doing research on Dominique."

"I'm not so sure," said Margo. "Old coins are getting scarcer and therefore worth more."

"But Lamont isn't buying any, is he?"

"He isn't and that's the funny part about it. Maybe the business is only booming locally. Still, old coins ought to be a good investment."

Remembering something, Joan went through a batch of clippings and found the ones she wanted.

"Speaking of investments," she said, "Dominique was a bad hand at them. He was practically broke when he died and that's a real mystery."

"I'll tell Lamont," decided Margo. "He likes mystery, though I can't say he's been working at it lately."

Right then, Cranston was really working at it. In a secluded courtyard behind the old Hoodoo House, he was helping Jim Selbert reconstruct a crime, though the police captain didn't know it. In Selbert's opinion, they

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

were merely adding to the intricacies of an existing mystery.

Cranston was standing directly below the tiny window of that little second floor hallway where pursuers had barged in from two directions to find that Mephisto had continued along his way, which could only have been further upstairs.

In the window itself, Selbert's head and shoulders were framed with little space to spare.

"Here's a question," called down Selbert. "Ever hear of a midget who was a contortionist too?"

"Can't say that I have," Cranston called up. "Why do you ask?"

"Because nobody else could have squeezed through this window," Jim decided. "Well, it proves one thing. The murderer must have gone up to the cupola or the roof. Come around to the front door and I'll meet you there."

Coming around to the front door was easy. Cranston simply went around the side of the house, through an adjacent passage, and opened the unlocked iron gate that brought him to the front door of the old stone house. He was there before Selbert had time to come downstairs and since the door was open, Cranston entered.

Men were at work hacking the cement floor of the Devil's Den with pick-axes. When Selbert came down the stairs, Cranston asked:

"What are you doing? Hunting for Ferrand? I thought you said that he wasn't hiding here."

"Not my idea." Selbert shrugged in the direction of the workmen. "Improvements, that's all."

"Who ordered them?"

"Trenhue or Aldion; maybe both. They've got to liquidate this architectural horror in order to get back their investment."

"They're going to tear down the house?"

"No, indeed." Selbert seemed outraged by the suggestion. "That's no longer being done in New Orleans, now that historical landmarks are running out. They'll just remodel the place and rent it out as studios or apartments."

After watching the workmen hack away a while, Selbert decided to go outdoors. From the front alley, he surveyed the Hoodoo House again and gave a puzzled head shake.

"If it had been The Shadow," Selbert said to Cranston, "I could understand it. The disappearing stuff is his specialty. But I can't see how Ferrand dropped out of sight so fast, if he did drop."

With the final comment, Selbert looked up to the roof to make sure that it was as high above the alley as it always was. Satisfied that the mad escape of the Masked Mephisto still rated as a superhuman achievement, Selbert decided to let it rest at that.

"There's something I want to ask Miss Marcy," Selbert told Cranston. "Let's go over to the studio and see her."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Questions from Selbert had become part of Joan's daily dozen, so she wasn't surprised when the police captain arrived in the recently formed bureau of research that was devoting itself to data concerning Dominique.

Nor was Margo surprised when she saw Lamont. He'd said he would stop around to learn how the work had progressed. Nevertheless, Margo was interested in what Selbert was asking Joan, but it turned out to be the usual routine. Selbert wanted to know where Joan had been at every odd minute on Mardi Gras Night and all the persons she had seen. He was still trying to get some trifling fact that would lead to Ferrand.

Joan tried to help, but managed it only in a negative way.

"I've told you I expected to meet Fred," she declared. "Rolfe was looking for him, too. Only I couldn't tell Rolfe that Fred was going to the Hades meeting. Rolfe wouldn't have believed that there was such a thing as the Krewe of Hades."

"Be specific," insisted Selbert. "What happened and at what time?"

"Rolfe left me at seven –"

"That was just when the guests were coming into the Hoodoo House," tallied Selbert. "Since Ferrand was already there, Trenhue couldn't possibly have found him. Nobody could enter the Devil's Den without an invitation and then only as a guest. Go on."

"Well, I couldn't find Fred either," stated Joan. "I was supposed to meet Rolfe at seven fifteen, at the coffee stand in the old French Market."

"Which coffee stand?"

"The one on the side toward the Cabildo, but I went to the other one first, by mistake. You see, I was walking through Frenchtown, while Rolfe was driving out to Fred's apartment and back –"

"But why were you walking through the Quarter?" broke in Selbert. "Be specific, please."

"Because Fred was so often around there," explained Joan, patiently. "He had a favorite drinking place in nearly every block."

"And you looked into all of them?"

"Yes, but no Fred. Anyway, at about seven thirty, Rolfe found me. He'd parked his car at the other end of the Market and had been waiting for me there. Only he had sense enough to decide that I'd gone to the wrong stand. So we drove out to the Borneau Mansion."

"And?"

"And that was all. You've heard the rest a dozen times."

Deciding that he'd heard all that was needed, Selbert went his way and Joan resumed her filing of the Dominique data. It was Cranston who put the next questions and his were addressed to Margo Lane.

"Speaking of time elements," said Cranston, "how soon did you get out in front of Hoodoo House after that Mephisto murder?"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Soon enough," replied Margo. "If Friend Fiend had come that way, I'd have seen him."

"People were still chasing up to the roof?"

"Yes, and to the cupola. You know, Lamont" – Margo's expression became quite wise – "if the murderer could have squeezed through that tiny second floor window, he might have gotten away."

"Only he couldn't make the squeeze," modified Cranston, "but what makes you think he'd have gotten away if he had?"

"Because a car drove away from out back. Now if Ferrand had dropped out that window –"

"He'd have done it in pieces," Cranston interposed, "which he didn't. He was very much together when we saw him later. Ever hear of a midget contortionist, Margo?"

"Why, no!"

"Neither did Jim Selbert. Find one and you'll have a murder suspect. Only he would have to be twins to fill the Mephisto costume. So Selbert is still looking for Ferrand."

Dusk was closing in, the time when Lamont Cranston could become The Shadow and do some expert searching on his own. That was exactly what he planned, for his low laugh, heard only in the archway as he left the patio, marked the advent of another personality cloaked in black.

As Cranston, The Shadow had learned much; far more than anyone else supposed. Selbert's questions to Joan, plus those Cranston had asked Margo, were fitting some important pieces in murder's jigsaw.

Frederick Ferrand was still the man to find and perhaps The Shadow could accomplish it here in New Orleans while others were wasting time in their search of the bayou region.

CHAPTER XVI

THE chronicles of crime teem with instances of murderers who have returned to the scene of their deed, but the purpose behind that folly has been attributed to reasons more foolish than the thing itself.

Some analysts have attributed it to a killer's conscience, as if murderers were commonly burdened with such a handicap. Others claim that some horrible fascination is the cause, bringing the killer back to mope or gloat, according to his peculiar inclination.

Such theories, of course, belong to fiction, something in which The Shadow had never dealt.

To The Shadow, criminals were men whose game was to outwit the law. The best police officers were those who could outwit criminals at their own game. Therefore the test of a good police officer was how well his mind could duplicate the thoughts of the man he hunted. Hence in this case, Selbert's impressions were an index to Ferrand's.

Now it was neither conscience nor fascination that had caused Selbert to haunt Hoodoo House with the tenacity of a pet ghost. It was just that something didn't quite add up around the place and Selbert wanted to find out why not. Should Ferrand be apprehended and Selbert find himself confronting the alleged killer in a courtroom, Jim would have to give answers to everything.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

The same applied to Ferrand. He would have to prove Selbert's figures wrong. Maybe Ferrand had calculated everything beforehand, but that was prior to Selbert's connection with the case.

An exhaustive search of criminal records will produce few, if any, instances of a murderer returning to a scene of crime until after the police have been there. That was the nib in Ferrand's case. Guilty or innocent, he was prey, and like the forest deer, Ferrand would sniff the camp–fire smoke and from the darkness try to view the hunter who would be gunning for him on the morrow.

This evening, Hoodoo House was comparable to a camp–fire. From its windows came a wavery glow, while muffled sounds could be heard within, as though a horde of ghoulish goblins were hard at work.

The night crew that was hacking up the cement floor looked like goblins, too, for they were knee deep in rubble and therefore appeared of dwarfish stature. Taller were the two men who watched the work: Hubert Aldion and Rolfe Trenhue.

They were equally glum. Both were making the best of a bad thing, for Aldion owed no special thanks to Trenhue for having taken up Ferrand's share in this questionable piece of real estate. Aldion couldn't have made good on Ferrand's note and Trenhue knew it, so the deal was purely automatic.

From the open front door, through which the stone dust drifted, The Shadow viewed the hazy interior. His ears were alert for he recognized the advantage of the smoke screen that the dust cloud formed. It would be an excellent lure for Ferrand, should the latter be about. Jim Selbert was missing his best opportunity tonight.

Guarded footsteps proved it.

Those footfalls came from the mouth of the alley, working their way along the friendly side wall. As dust swirled, the approaching sounds halted, then resumed as the cloud gradually thinned.

The Shadow had timed it nicely and managed it neatly. His twist from the enveloping dusk was responsible for the swirl that improved the visibility to just the right degree.

The iron gate neither groaned nor clanged as The Shadow manipulated it. The dim light from the dust–shrouded doorway showed the bars and braces of that gate against a solid background that to all appearances represented a vacant passage. The Shadow had the qualities of a chameleon when it came to blending with such settings.

Into the dimness came a pale, gaunt face, with hard–glaring eyes. It was Ferrand's face, now shaven, and therefore unrecognizable by his latest pictures, all of which were hunting snap–shots. Instead of the hunter's costume, Ferrand was wearing the garb of the New Orleans waterfront, dungarees with a dark blue cap to match.

What Ferrand saw through the dust encouraged him. Aldion and Trenhue had once been friends of his and still might be, with reasonable reservations. Selbert wasn't around, which eliminated the chief hazard. As for the workmen, Ferrand might have been one of them, judged by his attire, and that gave him confidence.

From his vantage spot, Cranston watched Ferrand's face undergo the evolution that transformed the hunted into the hunter. As the gaunt lips formed a taut smile, Ferrand's hand clutched the one thing necessary to bolster his self–assurance, the gun that bulged in his hip pocket.

Simultaneously The Shadow weighed an automatic, urging its muzzle deftly between the gate bars. One false move from Ferrand and The Shadow's gun would clang the gate. Such a touch would bring the gaunt man full

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

about, too late to outspeed The Shadow in a duel.

Fortunately for Ferrand, he made no false move. Instead, he was merely careless.

Men were coming toward the door and like Ferrand, The Shadow could hear their footsteps and their voices.

Ferrand came into even closer range, back first.

The gate's slight clang occurred when Ferrand pressed his back against it, only an inch from The Shadow's withdrawn gun muzzle. As for Ferrand's revolver, The Shadow could have acquired it from the fellow's hip pocket, for Ferrand spread his arms against the gate to flatten himself further in the darkness.

No trouble was due from Ferrand yet.

Two men stepped from the house: Aldion and Trenhue. They stood outside the front door to hold a conversation that the workmen couldn't overhear.

"They'll be done tomorrow midnight," calculated Aldion, "if we keep them working steady. We'd better stay and watch the job right through."

Trenhue grunted an agreement.

"What about those letters?" asked Aldion anxiously. "You didn't give them to Selbert, did you?"

"He wasn't interested," replied Trenhue, "any more than Fred was. Somehow they both have bayous on their mind."

"Then it was just a coincidence, buying this house?"

"In a way, yes," decided Trenhue, "except that Fred went in for anything that had to do with old pirate tradition. Anyway, I took the letters back to Moubillard's. They belonged to him, you know."

"I know. Fred borrowed old documents from everybody."

"At least I saw that they were kept in their proper envelopes," said Trenhue, with a note of finality. "They'll all be returned to their proper owners when Selbert is through with them."

The two men went back into the house, disappearing through the inexhaustible dust that the stone hackers were producing. As Ferrand turned to the gate and opened it to go through, The Shadow swung back with it.

From then on, it wasn't necessary to trail Ferrand closely, for The Shadow knew exactly where the man would go.

To Moubillard's.

The famous old costume shop was locked and temporarily forgotten, until the appraisers would find time to come around and take stock, which could be almost any time between now and next year's Mardi Gras. But there was still a way into the place which Ferrand had heard about, even though he wasn't the person who had used it.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

That way was the trap door through the roof, squarely into Moubillard's office, the place where the now important letters could be found.

Reaching the neighborhood in due course, The Shadow was in time to witness Ferrand's return from Moubillard's preserves. All The Shadow did was pick an observation spot from across the street, one which gave him a view of the space between Moubillard's roof and the hugely ornate balcony next door.

There, The Shadow glimpsed Ferrand's crouchy figure coming back to the balcony, but Ferrand wasn't merely carrying the mail. Or if he was, he was playing parcel postman, for with him he was bringing a light but bulky bundle that formed a double armful.

Letting Ferrand continue his departure unmolested, The Shadow turned and went the opposite direction, his whispered laugh blending like his cloaked figure into the thickness of the night.

Again, The Shadow's restrained mirth carried a prophetic note.

Translated, it meant tomorrow – midnight.

CHAPTER XVII

THE dust in Hoodoo House was thicker but finer and it was becoming so troublesome that the workmen were wearing bandanna handkerchiefs around their faces so they could stand it. They weren't complaining, however, because their employers were paying overtime rates in order to get this annoying job finished.

It was most annoying, too, because Aldion and Trenhue were forced to stay up on the third floor to keep away from the dust. That was where Cranston and Selbert found them late the next afternoon, working over plans for remodeling the house.

Selbert coughed from the dust on the way upstairs and commented:

"It's terrible! Next thing, you chaps will be living in the cupola!"

"We have been," said Trenhue in his dry style. "At least at intervals. When we want fresh air we go up there and get some. Want to try?"

Selbert decided not. However, the cupola trip appealed to Cranston, so he climbed the ladder into the window-walled box above the room that formed the present quarters of Messrs. Aldion and Trenhue.

There, Cranston stayed to watch the Vieux Carre adjust itself to twilight.

Here and there came spots of light, not with the jeweled magnificence that characterized the greater city on the far side of Canal Street, but in a furtive style. The light was mostly a reflected glow, since this cupola by no means predominated the scene. There were buildings though that peeked at it, through spaces among intervening walls, and these interested Cranston most.

Definitely, Cranston was sighting toward a certain sector of the Quarter and he seemed pleased because his view of it was restricted. In brief, if Cranston had looked that direction from a higher elevation, he would have seen too many buildings, but from here he could observe only one.

Even better, his view was restricted to just the top floor of that building which he recognized as an ancient apartment house. And the top story was itself restricted, for it was undersized, as if the builders had grown

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

weary and clamped the roof down a little too soon. Just a few pitiable windows, peering out from under eaves, but when a dim glow suddenly appeared from them, Cranston smiled.

All the while, Cranston had been hearing the conversation from below.

Jim Selbert was making most of it. He'd been comparing the data belonging to Ferrand with the much greater mass gathered by the research laboratory to which Cranston had assigned Margo and Joan.

"Take this fellow Dominique," Selbert was saying. "He spent half his lifetime around New Orleans and you'd spend half of yours trying to keep up with You. I don't mean yourself, I mean You –"

"Just call him Dominique," suggested Trenhue. "It will be easier for you."

"I guess You had a hard time of it," laughed Selbert, "and I mean Dominique. But let's switch to the bayou question. I'm not getting results."

"Maybe Ferrand isn't either," put in Aldion. "Anyway, he's probably having a hard time of it."

"I don't think so," declared Trenhue. "Let me tell you why."

Selbert wanted to hear and so did Cranston, though his arrival from the ladder at that moment simply indicated that he'd had enough fresh air.

"Tell me this," said Trenhue to Selbert. "Why did Ferrand spend so much time down in the bayou country?"

"Simple enough," returned Selbert. "He thinks Dominique stashed a load of treasure down there somewhere, before signing off with Lafitte and Company."

"Any evidence in favor of it?"

"Plenty. Take Vincent Gambi for instance. He played pirate too long. He was asleep on a pile of gold when his playmates busted him apart with a broad-axe. That's all told about in the data I've been reading. Dominique was smarter than Gambi, that's all."

"How much smarter?"

"Smart enough to bury his cash."

"Where somebody else would be waiting around when he dug it up?"

Selbert considered Trenhue's question. Then:

"Maybe you've got something," said Jim. "If you're right, Ferrand may have been wasting his time around a lot of empty diggings."

"Perhaps they're not empty any longer."

Selbert's frown was puzzled.

"What Rolfe means," put in Aldion, "is that you haven't found the cash that went with the Louisiana Lottery."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Impressed, Selbert looked to Cranston, who gave the slightest of nods.

"It would be a good way to bury loot," Cranston decided. "Right on the site of a forgotten treasure trove." He turned from Aldion to Trenhue. "Could you think of any better way?"

"I think Dominique did," returned Trenhue, frankly. "I am confident he buried his share right here in New Orleans."

"What gives you that idea?" asked Selbert.

"Because Dominique stayed here," Trenhue replied. "He made a point of it. Why, when he died in 1830 he was one of the biggest men in town. They hung the flags at half-mast."

"I read about it," nodded Selbert. "In that French newspaper, L'Abeille." He turned to Cranston. "It was in the stuff the girls gathered."

Cranston gave a tired nod. He needed more fresh air so he climbed up into the cupola to get it.

"Getting back to date," said Trenhue to Selbert, "Ferrand may have returned from his bayou trip."

"You mean he's put the Lottery cash where we won't find it?" queried Selbert. "That he figures now he can beat the murder rap for lack of evidence?"

"That's what we both think," blurted Aldion. Then, as Trenhue gestured for him to tone down, he added in a lower voice. "It's why we're digging the cement. To worry Ferrand."

Interested, Selbert wanted to hear more. It was Trenhue who glanced up to the cupola, gave a hush-hush gesture and then whispered so that Cranston wouldn't hear:

"That's only one reason. The other is, we think we may come across Dominique's treasure."

Aldion gave a despairing gesture:

"But, Rolfe –"

"It's all right, Hubert." Trenhue's undertone was calm. "We got our break and Jim is entitled to his." Turning to Selbert, Trenhue explained. "Remember those Dominique letters that were in Moubillard's envelope?"

Selbert nodded. "Political stuff. I didn't read them."

"I did," confided Trenhue. "There was one addressed to the editor of L'Abeille when Dominique rigged out the brig Seraphine to rescue Napoleon from St. Helena."

Selbert shook his head.

"I don't remember it."

"Napoleon died before Dominique could start," continued Trenhue, "so he never sent the letter. But it happened Dominique thought he was the one who might be dead soon, so the letter was written something like a will."

This interested Selbert.

"There were some flowery phrases in it," recalled Trenhue. "One about New Orleans being a land of treasure _"

"And a man's real treasure," quoted Aldion, as Trenhue paused, "being in his home. That was when Dominique lived here."

Eyebrows raised, Selbert gestured downward with his thumb, meaning the sound of pick-axes that kept persisting from below.

"You mean?"

"Just that," undertoned Trenhue. "Come around after the workmen leave at midnight, in case we find some treasure."

"And in case Ferrand finds us," added Aldion, cautiously. "We figure he may."

"Fifty-fifty," agreed Selbert grimly. "You can have the treasure. I'll take Ferrand."

The looks that Aldion exchanged with Trenhue were accompanied by nods, indicating that they were both right in their estimate of Selbert as a man who believed in duty first, last, and all the time.

The acoustics of the cupola were perfect, at least from Cranston's standpoint. It picked up everything that had been said, like a big mechanical ear; hence Cranston had heard all. But that wasn't exactly why Cranston came down from his temporary perch.

What Lamont Cranston had heard, he had already anticipated. What he had just seen was more important.

The lights in those dim windows beneath the distant eaves had turned off.

Lamont Cranston had another appointment, as The Shadow.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE window slid sideward and The Shadow squeezed through. Windows in this room couldn't go upward, or they would raise the roof. This was the tiny, forgotten apartment that The Shadow had spotted from the cupola of the Hoodoo House.

It went back to Joan's statement to Selbert; when she had told the police captain how she had looked for Ferrand in some of his hangouts in the French Quarter. When a man habituated several places in the same neighborhood, it indicated that he was used to living there.

If Joan had known that Ferrand had some hideaway, she would have said so. There were others who might know without stating it. The Shadow had played that chance. Of all the places in the limited area where Ferrand's hideaway might be, this was the only one that could be seen from the cupola, so The Shadow had resolved to try it.

Lights out meant that Ferrand had left, provided these were really his quarters.

They were.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

The Mask of Mephisto said so without words as it stared from a heap of cloth that represented a crimson cape. This was the bundle that Ferrand had brought from Moubillard's shop, following a clandestine visit there. But it wasn't all that showed under the concentrated beam of The Shadow's probing headlight.

Of a stack of letters resting on a battered table, one was open. Its ink was dim, its writing old-fashioned, this letter that bore the signature of Dominique You. Dated May first, 1821, it was addressed to the editor of L'Abeille and was couched in the very phrases described by Rolfe Trenhue, the language, of course, being French.

His brief inspection of Ferrand's hide-out ended, The Shadow left by the conventional stairway route and soon appeared in his more prosaic guise of Lamont Cranston. The evening being young, Cranston still had time to call at some of the old coin shops that were staying open evenings because trade was so good.

Margo Lane was spared that ordeal. She had gone to a show with Joan and Ken. They were to meet Cranston later at the coffee stand and on Joan's account, he'd carefully specified which one. Cranston didn't want to stay waiting at the other end of the French Market, the way Trenhue had before he met Joan on Mardi Gras Night.

Cranston bought some old coins this evening. The dealers were quite surprised because previously he'd been selling items of this sort. He was a meticulous collector, Cranston, making very careful records of every transaction, even when he sold at bargain prices.

Tonight, Cranston was still in the last coin shop when it closed and finding that he had time to spare, he rode over to police headquarters to chat with Captain Selbert. In the midst of writing comprehensive reports, Selbert looked up with a smile of greeting, then switched to a disappointed frown.

"Sorry, Cranston." Selbert spoke in the manner of a man who suddenly remembered something. "I'm very busy. Suppose we have lunch tomorrow so we can talk over new developments. I know you're as interested in this Ferrand case as I am, but look at how I'm swamped!"

Spreading his arms to indicate a desk-load of papers, Selbert promptly burrowed into them. This was Jim's way to let a visitor see for himself that there was plenty of work to do. Cranston evidently took the hint, for when Selbert looked up, his caller was gone. Selbert himself left shortly afterward, locking the office behind him.

A satisfied smile accompanied Jim's turn of the key. He hadn't bothered to look in the corner behind the door where the Mephisto costume hung, but he knew it would still be there, now that he had locked the door.

Chance was playing a hand tonight.

Coming from the theater, Joan Marcy lost her gaiety as she and her companions neared the Hoodoo House. Somehow the mere proximity of the place filled Joan with a sense of horror and she said so. Ken Langdon and Margo Lane agreed they didn't have to pass it on their route, so they took a detour to the old French Market.

That was why Joan saw the beardless man.

Though the weather was warm, his face was muffled as he came from a cafe that Joan remembered. Adjusting his coat collar, he inadvertently let his gaunt face show. Joan remembered that face and too well. She lagged to watch where the man went.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Ken noted Joan's absence at the next corner and was worried.

"You'd better go ahead," Ken told Margo. "I can't imagine what happened to Joan." Uneasily, Ken looked along the building fronts and noted the most likely doorway. "I'll find her, though, and soon."

At the coffee stand, Cranston was waiting when Margo arrived there. Finding that she was worried about Ken as well as Joan, Cranston volunteered to find them both. His departure left Margo wondering, considering that disappearances were in order.

There was a reason for those disappearances.

Joan was the first to learn it when she cautiously put her hand upon the door-knob of a top floor apartment where she was sure Fred Ferrand had gone. All the way up the stairs, Joan had been hearing footsteps creak ahead of her. Right now, she wanted another glimpse of the gaunt man to make certain he was Fred.

The glimpse was easy, but the face was different.

Opening suddenly from the other side the door revealed the red-caped figure of King Satan, the mystery sensation of the recent Mardi Gras!

Joan couldn't cry out. Two red gauntlets grasped her neck in a relentless grip that didn't relax until she sagged weakly to the floor. When Joan opened her eyes, she was bound and gagged in a corner and the triumphant Mephisto was bowing an ironical good-night from the doorway.

Only the great Mephistopheles wasn't so devilishly clever as he thought. Beyond him, about to deliver a hard, vengeful lunge, was Ken Langdon. Joan made a funny face, which would have been a smile if she hadn't been biting a gag. Such as it was, the smile didn't last.

A doorful of blackness took Ken so suddenly and silently that he disappeared as though he had fallen through a trap-door in space. Completely baffled, Joan could only stare at the vacancy behind the Devil Man whose costume hid Fred Ferrand. When King Satan turned and stalked from the room, Ken was still missing.

It took another mystery to explain the first. At the end of a few minutes that seemed twice that many hours, the door opened and Ken came rolling in as tightly bound and gagged as Joan. When it came to taking meddlers out of circulation, King Satan and The Shadow were both efficient, but the score was in The Shadow's favor.

This blackness that lived had staged Ken's capture behind the very back of a crimson clad impostor who hadn't the least notion that The Shadow was even around!

Their official meeting was coming later. The Shadow in his guise of black, could travel directly and rapidly to his goal.

That goal was to be the scene where first the Mask of Mephisto had served to cover murder. The stage was set in the Devil's own Den, where a quest for treasure was a bait to lure men to their doom!

CHAPTER XIX

THE last of the workmen had gone from the Hoodoo House, but one it seemed, had reason to return. He was carrying a pick over his shoulder as a bit of realism that didn't fit. First, the pick was rusty, proving it hadn't been used; again, the men who had left the house hadn't brought their tools with them.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Nevertheless, Jim Selbert's disguise of cap and dungarees was good enough to pass muster. What really bothered him was the delay after he knocked at the door. Aldion and Trenhue must have gone upstairs for it was several minutes before they heard Jim's guarded raps and answered.

Recognizing the returned workman, both nodded approval. Leaving the door ajar, they beckoned Jim to the center of the floor, and suggested that he lend a hand. Emerging from the earth was the end of an old coffer that came up heavily under their combined pull. Borrowing Selbert's pick, Trenhue cracked it open.

As the box tilted, from its interior came a shower of gold and silver coins that rattled across the broken paving. Dropping to hands and knees, Aldion began scooping the wealth like the truckers shoveled shrimp, paying no heed to the odd coins that rolled willy-nilly.

"Dominique's treasure!" shrilled Aldion. "The money he left for us to find! It's ours, Rolfe – ours –"

Gesturing for Aldion to calm himself, Trenhue was none too soon. Above the clatter of the coins came the groan of the front door as it swung inward and with it listeners heard a grated laugh that lost nothing by its muffled quality.

King Satan stood upon the threshold of his former domain.

The scene was much like that strange occasion when these premises had teemed with half-awed merrymakers who had been accepting this Satanic masquerade as travesty until it had proved tragedy. Tonight, however, the situation was in strict reverse; if the man in the Mephisto Mask had begun with shooting and on a wholesale basis, it might well have been in keeping with the circumstances.

However, he did not fire, even though his fisted gauntlet held a gun.

Instead, he simply kept people covered, with special attention to Selbert, whose presence was something of a surprise to the man in red. Toward Aldion and Trenhue, King Satan was somewhat disdainful, for they looked quite pitiful, half-crouched above their tilted treasure chest.

Only His Satanic Majesty was taking no long chances. He preferred to reveal his hand. With a sweep of his free gauntlet, he removed the huge disguising head and let his own come into sight.

Revealed, the face of Frederick Ferrand was as hard-set as the chunks of stone that lay in heaps about the broken floor. His eyes showed a glint that rivaled the ancient coins which were spilled from the treasure chest. Ferrand's tone, too, was metallic.

"I am glad you are here, Selbert," announced Ferrand, with a side flash of his eyes. "Perhaps this evidence of a double-cross will convince you of my innocence. Or perhaps" – the eyes turned on Aldion and Trenhue – "perhaps I should term it double-double."

From somewhere in his cape, Ferrand whipped out a sheet of paper and flipped it toward Selbert. It fell at the police captain's feet.

"Pick it up," ordered Ferrand. "Read it. You will find that is a Dominique letter written to the editor of L'Abeille in the year 1821, but never sent. It covers the matter of this treasure which these friends of mine" – Ferrand's gun gestured toward Aldion and Trenhue – "coveted enough to deal in murder."

Appealing glances from Aldion and Trenhue were directed toward Selbert, who boldly took up their defence.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Nobody had to murder Chardelle to get this treasure," declared Selbert. "The same applied to Moubillard. He didn't even know what was in this Dominique letter and he didn't even have it because it was with the stuff you left with Trenhue."

Ferrand didn't even sneer.

"Go on," he said coldly.

"Chardelle let you in on the Lottery deal," analyzed Selbert, "so you knocked him off and then went after Moubillard, because he knew too much about you."

"No more than anyone else did," put in Ferrand. "I was scheduled to play King Satan, but I told Chardelle not to count on me."

Selbert's eyebrows lifted; then he questioned:

"Why didn't you tell Tourville?"

"Because Chardelle was the Messenger," returned Ferrand, "and it was his business to inform Tourville, who served as scribe. Only I don't think Chardelle did; he was too crooked. Somebody mooched into this game, somebody who played Mephisto in my place, and I'd suggest you talk to a chap named Kenneth Langdon."

Now Selbert had been thinking somewhat along those very lines, but in a trifling way. Knowing how trifles could build up to greater factors, Jim listened.

"Maybe Langdon was just a front," conceded Ferrand, "but he's interested in more things than sculpture, Joan Marcy for one. Understand, I'm not blaming Joan. She and I were quits and most of the fault was mine. But getting back to my own case; after I found this costume at Moubillard's, last night –"

"At Moubillard's!" broke in Selbert, "And last night! Why it was in my office only this evening. The only reason I wasn't surprised to see you walk in wearing it, was because you were smart enough to borrow it from my office once before."

From Ferrand's cold stare it seemed he didn't believe any of this. It took the quick wits of Aldion and Trenhue to supply the simple answer.

"Langdon was fronting all right!" exclaimed Aldion. "He was fronting for Ferrand!"

"In another Mephisto Mask," added Trenhue, "so Fred here would have an alibi."

"Only Fred couldn't wait to kill Chardelle –"

"Maybe he was trying to toss the crime on Langdon. Now we're getting the right answer!"

That theory clicked with Selbert, particularly because it awoke Ferrand's rage. Of course anger was a common thing with Ferrand, but he was a rough man when his temper ruled him. And now, glaring unmasked from the crimson collar of his Mephisto cape, Ferrand's face was demoniac in the lantern light. His rage showed all the venom of a murderer's as he wheeled toward Aldion and Ferrand.

They weren't to be taken by surprise, the way Chardelle had been. They'd provided for this very emergency by dint of their successful treasure hunt. They dropped, not just behind the money coffer, but down into the

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

pit they'd dug it from. Drawing guns, they were set to wither Ferrand from their improvised foxhole.

The complication was Jim Selbert.

With Ferrand's wheel, Selbert lunged. Not wasting time to draw his own gun, Jim was going after Ferrand as the most efficient way to prevent new massacre and at the same time gain a needed weapon.

Before either Aldion or Trenhue could aim at Ferrand, the grappling had begun. Two brawny men were stumbling about the upheaved floor, with Selbert doing right well by himself. So well in fact, that Selbert hoped to take Ferrand alive and therefore was using craft as much as strength.

There was one point, though, that Selbert overlooked. Aldion and Trenhue, half up from their fox-hole were waiting only until Ferrand twisted in their direction, before letting their guns rip. Then the interruption came.

It was a hollow laugh, almost a replica of the Satanic mirth that Ferrand had himself delivered, but it came from the high stairway echoing from the very landing where a crimson murderer had made his first entrance on Mardi Gras Night.

Hearing such defiance, Aldion and Trenhue turned. There stood the living proof of the double Devil game, another King Satan clad in crimson, his features hidden within the ample scope of a duplicate Mask of Mephisto!

Arms folded, crime's new candidate seemed to regard himself the real master of this show, but Aldion and Trenhue were no respecters of persons – or demons. Anyone who wore the crimson garb of murder was entitled to quick death. As guns swung up toward the stairway, the crimson menace seemed to realize it, for he flung himself forward in a titanic dive toward the broken floor below.

Guns blasted the hurtling Satan and amid the hail of bullets, His Hellish Highness disappeared completely in mid-air!

CHAPTER XX

It was the impossible realized.

This new candidate for Satanic honors had lived up to his part.

It seemed that he had plucked aside a curtain in space and let it swallow him. Not only were Aldion and Trenhue nonplussed; Selbert and Ferrand forgot their struggle and froze like a posed movie still.

Out of somewhere came an echoed laugh, no longer hollow. It rose to a chilling taunt and with it, there appeared another figure from the semi-gloom of the stairs. He was cloaked in black, visible when he reached the spot where the flying Satan had evaporated. By then, his guns were visible too, and they were big ones, automatics of .45 caliber.

The Shadow was holding the whole scene static with those looming muzzles. When he reached the bottom of the steps, he kicked something that had wedged from sight between two upturned chunks of cement. Bouncing across the rough floor, the object revealed what it was.

The costume of the vanished King Satan!

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Now for the first time, Jim Selbert was realizing the chief feature of such a costume. The great head was attached to the cape collar, the long gauntlets hooked to the flowing cuffs. The lining of the cape was black, of cheaper stuff than the crimson satin that formed the outside.

A matter of economy, such a lining, but it served another purpose when required.

An upward peel of the cape and the whole thing not only turned inside out, but could gather the Mask of Mephisto within its folds! There was the evidence on the floor, where The Shadow had kicked the bundle apart to let the Mephisto Mask peer from the reversible cape.

More potent still was the thought that drilled through Selbert's mind, as though The Shadow's laugh, as well as his cloaked garb, inspired it.

Because of its ample head and sizable cape, the Devil's costume allowed the wearing of another masquerade beneath! The Shadow had demonstrated it, though his attire was not strictly a masquerade. He'd come down the stairs layered as Mephisto; his whip-fling of the crimson costume had left him as himself. The hurl had turned the red cape inside out, swallowing the Mask inside it.

No wonder the Devil had disappeared amid the flay of bullets! No eyes had followed the downward fall of the black bundle, any more than they had looked up to probe the higher gloom wherein The Shadow had remained.

But The Shadow's laugh told more. Catching the inference, Jim Selbert relaxed as he stared at the half-spread bundle.

"So that's how the Devil went!" exclaimed Jim. "Out through the little window on the second floor! All that had to go was the costume, but somebody else stayed."

Wondering who else, Selbert decided to ask the only person who had been here at the time of Chardelle's death. Jim turned to Hubert Aldion.

"Who was it?"

"– I wouldn't know," stammered Aldion. "I was the Seneschal, you know. I was wearing a blue uniform and I was over by that door." Gesturing toward the outer door, Aldion added suddenly:

"Ask her, she knows."

The person in question was Margo Lane. Tired of hunting everywhere else for the friends who had deserted her, Margo had finally come to the Hoodoo House.

"Yes, the Seneschal was standing over here," acknowledged Margo, slowly, "but his costume wasn't entirely blue. The coat was blue; the trousers were red."

The Shadow's low laugh showed that he appreciated that fuller description. So did Jim Selbert.

"Red to match the Devil's costume!" Releasing Ferrand who stood by with lowered gun, Selbert approached Aldion. "When you chased up to the second floor, which way did you go?"

"Why – the quickest way." Aldion was much confused. "I helped smash one door –"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"And you yanked open the other," put in Selbert. "But which door was which?"

Aldion tried to answer, but hesitancy gripped him. The Shadow's laugh, supplying its same low tone, prompted Selbert to turn his quiz into direct accusation.

"You won't say which," Selbert told Aldion, "because you know the witnesses will disagree when I get around to asking them. They all remember you opening one door, so they think you crashed the other." Looking toward The Shadow, Selbert caught the glint of burning eyes beneath the hat brim. Realizing he was right, Jim drove home the final point. "What you did was peel the Devil's costume and chuck it through that window; then you yanked both doors open. You were the killer in the Mephisto Mask!"

Almost wilting under the accusation, Aldion finally rallied and gestured feebly to Margo.

"She'll tell you I was by the outer door. I was standing there when Chardelle was murdered."

"Somebody was standing there," conceded Margo. "Somebody costumed as the Seneschal. Only I don't know how he got there in the first place; I just remember that he started outside."

"After the murder?" queried Selbert.

"Yes," replied Margo. "Then next, I saw him upstairs. The Seneschal, I mean, or someone in such a costume. I wonder –"

The Shadow wasn't wondering. His laugh supplied the difference and Selbert grasped it.

"Wondering if there were two Seneschal costumes," declared Jim. "Why not? There were two Masks of Mephisto. You've clinched it, Miss Lane. Aldion must have gone upstairs while everybody was watching the Lottery pay off. Another Seneschal took his place inside the door!"

"And later went around through the little gate!" Margo exclaimed. "Why it could have been his car that I heard leave in back!"

Looking straight at The Shadow as she spoke, Margo was recalling Cranston's earlier interest in the matter of that departing car. Another idea struck her, but Selbert was first with it.

"That car was parked under the little window," decided Jim. "The costume and the Mask landed right in it. Whoever drove away took it with him –"

There was a pause, as Selbert's chain of thought continued. This time it was The Shadow who supplied the climax by completing the sentence in a strangely sinister tone:

"– And wore it when he murdered Henri Moubillard, who unfortunately saw Ken Langdon come in with the other costume."

That brought a quick response from Fred Ferrand.

"I get it now! They were using this Langdon chap to put the frame on me! But they were playing it two ways. If my bayou alibi held, they could switch the works on Langdon. Since there were two of them, why not have two of us. Two of them –"

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Pausing with his repetition, Ferrand heard the approving laugh of The Shadow. The term "two of them" held, because Aldion hadn't been at large to murder Moubillard as a follow-up to Chardelle's death.

And if Hubert Aldion was one, Rolfe Trenhue must be the other.

All eyes were on Trenhue as The Shadow spoke the accusation that had grown in every mind.

"You were late in meeting Joan Marcy," stated The Shadow, "because you were needed here, Trenhue, to double as Seneschal. From the Borneau Mansion you drove to the costume shop, murdered Moubillard, and sped back again. Brief though the interim was, you have no alibi to cover it."

Trenhue hadn't and he knew it. He was afraid to argue the point, because he saw mistrust in Aldion's gaze. These partners in murder could each expose the other and both knew it. The best Trenhue could do was voice something that might help them mutually.

"How could we have known about the Lottery money?" demanded Trenhue. "Let's hear someone answer that."

"Chardelle told Aldion," returned The Shadow. "That gave them the majority vote over Tourville, since Ferrand was too busy hunting treasure to play the Devil for the Krewe of Hades. Then Aldion told you, Trenhue."

"I would have been a fool!" broke in Aldion. "What would have made me double-cross Chardelle?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," announced The Shadow. "You took the prize money from the box before you sealed it. You needed a partner to stage what you thought would be a perfect murder. Chardelle's death was necessary to keep the Lottery ring from learning that he took you into his confidence."

Jim Selbert was stepping forward with Ferrand's gun. His feet were clinking loose coins from the treasure coffer as he queried:

"Where did you two stow that prize money?"

The Shadow's low laugh joined the jangle of the coins that were answering for Aldion and Trenhue. Stooping, Selbert picked up some of the loose gold and silver.

"Old coins," spoke The Shadow. "Collectors' coins. Check them at the local shops and many of them will be identified, Selbert. Of course the dates are long enough ago. Aldion and Trenhue wouldn't have overlooked that when they liquidated the Lottery money to turn it into treasure that Dominique never buried.

"Dominique's letter is better evidence, Selbert. It won't take an expert to prove it a clever forgery. Dominique couldn't have addressed it to the editor of the famous L'Abeille, because the newspaper was not founded until six years after the Seraphine was fitted for the cruise she never took."

So impressive were The Shadow's words that Selbert reached for the letter. To get it from his pocket he placed the gun beneath his arm, since his other hand was full of coins. Up from their pit came Aldion and Trenhue; flinging Selbert from their path, they drove for the outer door.

Despite its warning, The Shadow's fierce laugh spurred the fugitives instead of halting them. His gun would have spoken next; he was waiting only until the murderers bottlenecked each other at the door. But at that moment, Ken Langdon made a most untimely arrival, with Joan Marcy right behind him.

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

Seeing guns muzzle—first, Ken flung Joan away from them. Turning to block the fugitives, Ken was grabbed by Aldion, who flung him in Trenhue's path. Unobstructed, Aldion sprang through the door as Trenhue sprawled across the threshold. There, Trenhue heard the taunt of The Shadow's approaching laugh, half—triumphant it seemed, because one murderer had remained within his reach.

Trenhue saw that it wasn't only one.

Coming to his feet Trenhue lunged through the doorway, blasting shots ahead. He'd stop Aldion, the man who had left him to his plight, rather than turn and face The Shadow. Stop Aldion Trenhue did, and a few moments later Trenhue was racing past his floundering partner.

From the cobbles where Trenhue's bullets had dropped him, Aldion raised himself on one elbow and gave the final say in this game of each man for himself. Aldion said it with bullets too and his dying grip did not destroy his aim. As Trenhue telescoped across the curb beyond the alley, Aldion sagged and lay equally still.

They were murderers to the finish, those two Mephistos, even when they were no longer wearers of the Mask. As they had canceled each other, so did they write off themselves, with The Shadow's laugh their death—knell.

The next day, Jim Selbert had a problem for Lamont Cranston when the latter stopped at his office to say good—bye.

"It left me woozy," expressed Jim, "the way that Shadow guy disappeared. He must have taken the Devil's costume that was here in the office and right from under our noses, too. Because we know that Ferrand was wearing the duplicate that Aldion and Trenhue planted in Moubillard's shop, hoping Ferrand would wear it and make himself a goat, which he did.

"But here's the problem. Who took the costume that was hanging here, the day the Masked Mephisto popped into Langdon's studio and tried to murder Joan Marcy? It couldn't have been Trenhue; he went along with me. Aldion wouldn't have had time to get out here from his office and back to Langdon's studio."

Cranston considered the problem briefly. Then:

"It was Aldion," he decided. "Wearing the duplicate costume, he had plenty of time to work it that way."

Selbert smiled wisely.

"I thought you'd say that," he nodded. "But how did Aldion know that Ferrand had slipped the deputies and that Langdon had made a dumb trip out here? Unless he knew, he wouldn't have tried another of those double frames."

"Remember the phone call Trenhue made to his house?" queried Cranston. "Before you started out to look for Ferrand?"

"Why, yes. It was about some papers. I wasn't here —"

Cranston didn't have to interrupt. Selbert did it for himself.

"He called Aldion instead!" exclaimed Jim. "The duplicate costume must have been in Aldion's office, so when Trenhue slipped the dope about Ferrand and Langdon, the rest was a cinch."

THE MASK OF MEPHISTO

"Any other questions, Captain Selbert?"

Jim Selbert had none. He and Lamont Cranston just shook hands and said good-bye. Grinning from two corners of the office were two great empty faces that seemed to enjoy this parting scene.

They were the Masks of Mephisto.

THE END