

MODEL MURDER

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

PASTORAL as an old painting the mountainside, trees, grass, and motionless cows were the only witnesses as the freight train came curving down from the top of the mountain. Leaving the tunnel behind, the locomotive pulled the endless lines of flat cars and reefers, of coal hoppers and cattle cars around the switch-back and down, twining a serpentine path through the landscape.

Then, above the sound of the trains rattling and puffing, there came a louder sound wheezing as though some ancient nature god were having an attack of asthma.

Following on the heels of this mighty sound came that of a crash which drowned out all the sounds of the train. Then it shuddered away into nothingness and again the only sound was that of the freight train going on about its business.

The final stage was shocking. Near the very tip of the mountain through the black hole that was the mouth of the tunnel, a strange, scrabbling thing made its way from the darkness.

Blocking the entire aperture, the white thing with five mobile extensions stretched out and curled around the track that fed from the tunnel. The white of the object changed slowly to crimson. The tips of the extensions curled up and then went flaccid. Across the tracks, huge and frightening, lay a hand.

The hand dwarfed the tracks. It was wider than the tracks, longer than the locomotive that still chugged its way down to the base of the mountain as though nothing had happened.

The cows standing stock still, the trees unmoved by any breeze, the billboards unmarred by weather, all were silent spectators.

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The freight train speeded up as it hit the straightaway. Gone now were the endless curves. Ahead lay a clear stretch of track with nothing but highballs along the route.

Now Death was the only occupant of the scene.

Walking from exhibit to exhibit, Lamont Cranston's face was relaxed. His mouth curved up in a smile of pleasure. It was a delight to see the ingenuity and handicraft of the members of the Hobby Horse. There were boats three feet long, exquisitely built with steam plants capable of driving them along at the rate of forty and fifty miles an hour. Airplane models with gas engines that whipped the planes through the air were just like their larger brethren of which they were the prototypes. The trains were in a variety of gauges from HO which is minuscule, to standard gauge, each perfect in its own right, each a scaled down replica of real trains.

The man with Cranston, who was named Harry Owen, said, "Like it?"

"Love it." Cranston looked all around him. Right ahead was a layout that paraphrased in miniature the controls of a railroad line. Knobs, dials, rheostats, all controlled a block system that allowed the model railroad to fulfill the functions of a regular railroad. The man at the controls, a good-looking youngster looked up at Owen and spoke. His name was Bruce Bedrick.

"Everything's going along too good. I expect a train to derail or something to happen at any second."

"Relax," Owen said, his broad pleasant face splitting in a smile, "everything's under control."

From the youth of Bruce to the middle years of Owen, Cranston thought, they are one and all bound together by the common thread of their interest in models. It was nice to see such community of interest at work.

About twenty feet away from them, the tiny railroad curved up a scaled replica of a mountain and then the wall was cut open by a tunnel which fed the tracks out of this big room and off into another one. This aroused Cranston's interest.

He asked, "Mr. Owen, where does the Bump and Wiggle R.R. go after it enters that tunnel?"

"Haven't you seen that yet? That's the most impressive part of the set up in my opinion. The next room is completely untenanted by human beings. The train works out all by itself. We've tried to give a complete illusion there that the trains are full size. Come, I think you'll like it."

Following the broad, middle-aged back of Owen, Cranston looked back over his shoulder. In the center of the big exhibit room they were leaving there was a wired enclosure about fifty feet in diameter.

In this wired arena was a post set up in the center. From this post a long wire went down to a model plane that a member was tuning up. Around the floor they had set up a circular ramp from which the tiny models took off. Fastened to the piano wire, the planes took off under their own power, flew madly around the circle to which the wire held them and then when the few drops of gas were exhausted, came down to a perfect three point landing.

Every hour on the hour, a flight was put in progress. The time was due for one now. The plane skimmed around the runway and took off, the motor making almost as much noise in the circumscribed area as though it had been a man-carrying one.

Chattering away, the plane flew around and around making an obligatio to the surface noise of people moving around, talking and making all the other sounds that a mob does. In the smaller room which cut off

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from the main exhibit room, it was suddenly quiet. Cranston looked around appreciatively. Painted on the walls proper, the panorama of scenery was done in exaggerated perspective that was completely eye deceptive. In front of the painted scenery the model scenery picked up so that you could barely tell where the three dimensions took over from the flatness of the two.

From the mountain top the railroad made its way down over a pastoral scene. Then Cranston saw Owen turn color.

The man said, "Cranston... the tunnel... it's clogged..."

Glancing at the mouth of the tunnel, Cranston had to adjust his mind to the size of the hand that blocked all ingress or egress.

Instead of the railroad looking small, the hand seemed gigantic. It was as though a magician had caused an illusion that was slow in being dissipated.

"Cranston, that's blood... that stain on the fingers... isn't it?"

Nodding, Cranston went closer. The fingers were relaxed in that utter flaccidity of death that was completely unmistakable.

On the ring finger of the hand there was a cartouche. Cranston asked, "Is that ring familiar?"

The fat middle aged man nodded. His face looked shrunken. "Yes. It's... it's Dolly Dimples." His mouth curved in nausea. "I mean... oh, I can't think straight. That was what we called Don Darry."

"Is there any way to get under the mountain and get closer?"

"Sure." Owen bent over and released a latch. He pulled up a whole section of the scenery.

Under the mountain, the body was still seated on a soap box. The man's dead body held by the confining quarters sat as though in life. His arm extended down along the tracks so that his hand seemed to be busy with some life of its own.

Protruding out of the center of his back was a chisel.

CHAPTER II

LOOKING closer, Cranston saw a set of initials burnt into the handle of the chisel. They read R.B. Cranston didn't touch anything. Instead he said, "Will you call the Homicide Bureau, Owen?"

Glad to get out of the room, away from the body, Owen almost ran from sight.

Cranston sighed. People were milling all around perhaps fifty members of the model club, plus untold numbers of the general public like him, come to see the annual show. It was going to be tough going.

The blood had barely dried on the extended, scrabbling fingers which might help in setting the time. Silent death. Stabbing would give no clue as to the minute of expiration.

But come to think of it, even if the killer had fired a gun, the model airplanes zooming along would have

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masked the sound. Where to start? That was of the essence.

Here he'd been all set to relax and get some of the kinks out of his nerve endings in the soothing atmosphere of the hobby club. That relaxation which other men got out of making models, out of pitting their office soft muscles against steel and brass, that easing of the mind from the stresses and strains of every day life, Cranston could sometimes get just by being near the off shoots of their skills.

This, he would have sworn, was to have been one of those days. His life recently had been too hectic even for his iron frame. He had wanted to get away if only for a couple of hours from that strange life which he had made his own when he had assumed the peculiar double personality that was his and The Shadow's.

And here, in these premises, dedicated to what the psychiatrists would call manual therapy, he had come face to face with sudden death. It was a little hard to take. He shrugged, took a deep breath, swore at the fates for dealing him a low card and went to work.

Going to work meant standing stock still and taking a good look all around him. His eyes cold and set. The easy, relaxed man who such a short time before had been enjoying all the exhibits at the hobby show was gone, and in his stead was a master man hunter.

He looked around the room. Not much to be learned from it a room with a dead body in it, a room where a chisel had punctured the heart of a man.

Hearing the noise of feet, Cranston looked around. It was the young man, Bruce Bedrick who had been at the block system. Bruce said, "What goes? I just saw Owen run out of here like the devil was tapping him on the shoulder."

He stopped talking as he saw what Cranston was examining.

Cranston said, "Know him?"

"Sure, that's Dolly..." He stopped as he realized the inappropriateness of the nickname. "It's Don."

For want of something better to do, Cranston said, "Will you do me a favor?"

The young man nodded eagerly. "If it'll help any, sure. Don was a good friend of mine."

"Don't say anything about this, but round up what members of the club you can and send them here. By the way, how'd you get away from the control panel?"

"My time was up. We stagger the duties there." Bruce, anxious to help, left the room.

When the first one came in, Cranston was almost sorry he had asked for them. The man who came huffing and puffing in was the most pompous little pouter pigeon you could imagine. He said, "Here now, what is all this? How dare you lift the scen..." His irate high pitched voice petered off into silence as he saw the corpse.

But he recovered fast. He clipped, "I see. Murder. Well then, I still want to know by what right you are in there! Speak up man!"

"My name's Lamont Cranston. What's yours?"

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"Richard Brodder. I'm the chairman of this organization and as such I would still like to know by whose delegation you are interfering!"

Owen returned to the room. He said, "Don't be such an ass, Dick. This is Cranston. The noted criminologist. I can't think of a better man to be right where he is than Lamont."

"How dare you speak to me that way, Owen? How dare..." Brodder spluttered as neither man paid him any attention.

Cranston asked, "Get the Homicide boys?"

Owen nodded. "They'll be right here. Anything we can do in the meantime?"

"Not a thing." Cranston watched as still a third man came in, did a double take at the corpse, looked at him and said, "Why did Bruce send me in here? He said there was a short in the tracks."

"There is," said Owen. "Don's hand made the short circuit. Oh, Cranston, this is our club treasurer, Smitty."

"Hal P. Smith." Smitty said indignantly.

"Know anything about all this, Smitty?" Cranston asked.

"No." Smitty was surly.

"After full and complete consideration, I don't see that you have any right to ask any further impertinent questions," Richard Brodder said.

"Really?" Cranston was amused at the little man's obvious Napoleonic leanings. Chest stuck out, hand in vest pocket, he was like a caricature of pomposity.

Before the air in the room could get any more strained, a man looked in through the door. He said, "Hi, Cranston," and then elbowed his way past the irate chairman and treasurer of the club.

"Farrell! Long time no see." Cranston was pleased. This was one of the best men on Homicide.

Lamont Cranston was not one of those fools, one of those criminologists, who sneer at the regular police. Cranston knew and knew full well that there are many functions which only the police can fulfill.

Let the most brilliant amateur try to take over any of those functions and that amateur would become a fool. It just can't be done. Despite the number and intelligence of The Shadow's assistants, they could never have the all encompassing abilities of the police.

The scientific branches of the department are superb. For blood analysis, for spectroscopic analysis, fingerprint identification and the like, Cranston never hesitated to call on friends in uniform for aid.

Farrell, for example, as a homicide man was beyond reproach but within limits. After a few years on the force a detective inevitably becomes molded into the grooves of the men around him. He gains certain abilities by this, but also loses some. The lost abilities were those which Cranston had and used so superbly.

Cranston could see that Farrell was not his usual self. Something was on his mind above and beyond the murder case at hand. Wondering what was up, Cranston waited for Farrell to work his way to his side.

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Bending down next to Cranston looking at the body, Farrell whispered in Cranston's ear, "What's the deal here? The commissioner almost had a hemorrhage when he heard there was a killing down here."

"I don't know why. Is Weston coming here himself?"

"Sure... and you know that means trouble." Farrell didn't look happy.

Getting up, puzzled, Cranston walked away and left Farrell with his duties.

"It may help if we all get out of here." Shepherding them in front of him, Cranston made them by sheer force of will leave the room. Of course Brodder was the last to leave. He was apoplectic looking. He said, "The commissioner will hear about this, never fear! I'm a good friend of his. We'll see about these dictatorial tactics."

Bruce said, "Look at who's squawking about dictatorial anything."

"That was uncalled for, Bruce." Brodder turned on the young man. "You know very, well that I have fought for democratic methods in the running of the club."

"Yeah, very democratic as long as your steam roller gets you what you want!"

Cranston noticed all this and became aware that for people with a community of interest there was certainly a lot of bad feeling in the membership of the club. This would warrant some investigation.

Out in the main exhibit room, the men made a tight little knot in the center of the people who milled around the various sights.

They seemed held together by the knowledge that they shared. Suddenly Brodder snapped his fingers. He said, "Of course, I have it!"

"What? Leprosy?" Bruce asked.

"I'll disregard that. I know who the killer is!"

They all looked at him curiously.

"Don't you see? The one who's been stealing the models! I'll bet Don found whoever is guilty and they had to kill him to prevent him from telling the police!"

"That's nice. Good going." Bruce's voice was sarcastic. "We don't even have the slightest idea whose been stealing us blind, but if we did, then he's also the killer. Cute."

"What's all this?" Cranston asked.

"Some sneak thief has been coming in here and going away with some of our most valuable models. You may not know of it, Lamont," Owen said, "but there are individual models that are worth from five to ten thousand dollars."

Thinking of the years of effort that went into making some of the models, Cranston could understand that.

Bruce said, "Take the 6-6-o John F. Murray bought. It was a steal, at eleven thousand."

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Murray! That did it. That accounted for Weston, the Police Commissioner getting upset. John F. Murray, the name was one with Huntingdon and all the other railroad magnates. Murray owned so many different kinds of industries that it was sometimes hard for the newspapers to decide on a name for him. What sense in calling him a rail magnate when he owned enough steamers to be a ship magnate. Real estate, factories were all one to the Murray kingdom.

Cranston asked, knowing the answer before it came, "Is Murray a member of this club?"

All three nodded. Bruce said, "Sure, we couldn't get along without him. He underwrites us just as he does so many other things. Nice guy though, with all his dower. Not like some others I know."

Brodder glowered at Bruce, but said nothing. It was obvious that he was meant.

While the police went about their many duties with the precision of years of practice, Cranston drew Bruce aside. He said, keeping his voice low, "How about a cup of coffee?"

"Sure. There's a coffee shoppe right on this floor."

They were practically unnoticed as they made their way through the crowd that still was in ignorance of the dreadful thing that had happened.

About two doors down the hall from the office that the model makers had converted into a model set-up, there was a sandwich place: It was handy for people who worked in the building.

There was an air of camaraderie about the little shop. It was clear that everyone knew everyone well. The waitresses smiled at Bruce as he and Cranston were seated.

The prettiest of the waitresses came over. "Hi."

"Hello, Marie. May my friend and I have a cup of that which cheers but never inebriates?"

She grinned and said, "That's a change for you."

While waiting for the coffee Cranston asked, "How come there's so much subterranean rigamajig going on in your club?"

"How come there's always a struggle in any group of human beings to see who'll be the boss? Because some of the idiots get some kind of ego maximation from being at the head, from holding the reins of power. Take Dick Brodder. Although he exasperates me, I understand him. His wife is a wealthy woman and dominates him by holding the purse strings.

"It's easy to see that he tries to be the big heap boss around here to make up for the beating he takes at home. But even understanding him he's pretty hard to take." Bruce put some sugar in his coffee.

"So there are cliques and power struggles right under the surface of a club which is supposed to be dedicated to relaxation. That's fine. If I had joined the club to get my mind off the things I see every day, I'd wind up in a fight with the powers that be." Cranston made a face.

"It sounds bad when you put it that way. I don't know how many organizations you belong to, but everyone I have ever been in has had the same problem. The ones that are in power," Bruce went on, "have to try to continue to stay on the top of the heap. The others are hacking away all the time, trying to get up to the top.

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"But that's not the worst. Besides the power struggles for policy between the ins and the outs, there are other internecine struggles. For instance, the railroad men think there's too much accent on the boat members. Of course, the men who are interested in boats think there's much too much about railroad hobbyists.

"Then, as if that wasn't enough, there are pitched battles between the railroad men who use electricity and those who claim that the only decent models are those that are powered by steam."

"Whew..." Cranston whistled.

"That's not the worst. In the ranks of the electric railroad fans there are battles about different gauges. For instance, the standard gauge men think that HO gauge is a preposterous one and talk disrespectfully of toys when they mention HO."

"But," Cranston said, "HO is just smaller than standard. There's no difference other than that, is there?"

"Not a bit. Nevertheless, there are arguments that have been going on for ten or fifteen years about just that difference. If you want real madness there are arguments between the HO men and the OO men!"

"There's all of a sixteenth of an inch difference between those gauges isn't there?" asked Cranston with a wry grin.

"Oh, easily." Bruce Bedrick made a mock toasting gesture with his coffee. "Bottoms up."

"Here's cheers." Cranston returned the toast. He drained off his coffee. "We'd better get back before the police think we've beat it."

"Sure." Bruce threw a quarter to the waitress who smiled at him. "See you later, beautiful," he said.

Cranston and Bedrick left the coffee shoppe and there was no way they could know that ten feet away from them, inside the premises of the model show a man was dying as no man had ever died before. Dying despite the fact that the whole place was staked out by police. Dying in a manner that Cranston was to call the most viciously ingenious in all his experience!

CHAPTER III

THE girl who took the tickets at the door reached for a ticket with an automatic reflex, until she recognized Bruce and Cranston. She smiled and said, "Hello, Bruce, long time between drinks, isn't it?"

"We can do something about that," he said.

Harry Owen spotted them and walked towards them away from a couple of policemen to whom he had been explaining some fine points about models. One of the cops was saying, "Awright, so they're models. To me they look like toys, do me somethin'."

The other cop said, "Mahoney, don't be such a creep. Shut up."

Then they all shut up as the scream, high and inhuman, lanced through the manifold sounds of the room. It was much too high to have come from a human throat, and yet it did.

Stopped in their tracks, each person froze. It was too much. It just could not be happening and yet it was. Like

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some primitive yell, it wrenched and tore at all their consciousnesses.

Only because he was more used to violence than the others, Cranston responded as the sound was repeated. A sound that could not be was sounded again.

Cranston ran across the floor towards a door at the back of the main exhibits. It was a door he had wondered about earlier. It was the only closed door in all the space devoted to men's hobbies.

Close on his tracks Bruce came and then following like lambs to the slaughter came the police. Cranston wrenched the door open and looked inside the room.

At the far end of the room a lathe still turned away at the work which had been entrusted to it. Forgotten by its operator, it continued to eat away pieces of metal from the stock that rotated in the jaws of the machine.

Across the room diagonally there was another machine. Bigger than all the others it would have dominated the workshop in any event, but now with a victim clenched in its jaws like Moloch of old, it held all eyes.

It was a band saw. Chattering away madly even though it had completed its task of severing a man's head from his body, the saw went on about its business, with a fine disregard for human sensibilities.

Even as they watched, the stasis was broken. A round object the size of a child's basketball rolled off the table of the band saw. Then, a split second later, the body of the man fell to the floor. First came the sound of a cantaloupe landing on concrete, then the slumping sound of potatoes in a sack.

Making the dead man seem somehow more horrible, there was, behind the band saw, a pipe. It lay on its side as though the black bit had just fallen from between clenched teeth.

It seemed desolate and lonely. Because of the clouds of sawdust in the room one couldn't tell if there was still smoke coming from the bowl of the pipe or not.

The high lights in the room cut down with cruel clarity outlining things too clearly. Cranston looked around. There were the regular tools that one would expect in such a machine shop. Merely those and nothing more.

Or... what was that black box? Looking away from it, Cranston saw that there were some windows in the back of the shop. Outside of them and the door through which they had entered in answer to the scream of the dying man there was no other means of ingress or egress.

Cranston saw that Bruce was being affected by the sight of the decapitated man. He walked over to the youngster and stood near him.

"Not very pretty, is it?" Cranston asked.

Bruce shook his head. His face was white. He looked around desperately. He didn't like to give up so easily, but he had to get out of the room.

Cranston stood behind him in case he fainted. It would not be the first time that a healthy, strong man had passed out at the sight of violence.

Retching at the sight of the carmine that pumped from the decapitated body, Bruce staggered away from the door. The cops didn't do much better. Only Cranston, eyes narrowed in thought, watched.

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Out in the other room, Bruce brushed against Owen. "Bruce, what's wrong, man? You look like death warmed over."

"Gimme a drink."

"Sure, take it easy, son. Here. You know where my cache is." Owen lead Bruce to a locker. He reached in and handed over a nearly full bottle.

Bruce sucked greedily at the mouth of the bottle. The liquid went down about to the halfway mark before he lowered the bottle from his mouth.

"Feel better" Owen asked as he put the bottle away.

"A little."

Owen and Bruce watched as Farrell, the homicide man, elbowed his way through the crowd that clogged the path to the death room. He was swearing under his breath. As he passed them they heard him say, "What now? That was a death scream or I've wasted twenty years on the force. But who'd be nutty enough to kill with the joint lousy with cops?"

The uniformed policeman who was at Farrell's rear said, "Chee, I dunno."

"Who's talkin' to you?" Farrell snapped irately.

"But you was sayin'..."

"I was talkin' to myself."

Farrell and the cop disappeared into the machine shop.

"Feel well enough to tell me what's up?" Owen asked.

"I guess so. Ira Downs had an argument with a band saw and lost."

"You mean that scream... was Ira! He's dead?"

Bruce nodded.

"But good God, how could he be so stupid as to go near a band saw?"

"It's a little late to ask him."

"Oh... I don't mean that the way it sounded. But of all machines you have to treat with respect..."

"I know what you mean. And Ira was too good a machinist to forget that a band saw will bite the hand that feeds it."

"And yet... he's dead!"

"What I can't get is why or how he could put his neck near the blade. It almost seems like suicide," Bruce said.

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"What would he have to..." Owen's head swiveled as he and Bruce turned and looked at the room at the far end of the main room. Inside, a man had been murdered and left under a model mountain.... Could...?"

"I wonder..." Bruce said.

"You mean, maybe Ira killed Dolly Dim I mean Don Darry. It might add up that way. Don't you think so, Lamont?"

Bruce jumped. He had not even seen Cranston walk up to them.

"What do you think?" Owen asked again.

"It might. It might just be a killing and a suicide. But... it's a little early for guessing."

Cranston thought of something he had put to one side for the nonce. He asked, "Anyone else but the little Napoleon in the club have the initials R.B.?"

"Why?" Owen scowled with thought.

"Can't think of anyone else," Bruce said. "Why?"

"The chisel that killed Don Darry had those initials on it."

The three of them turned as one man and looked across the room at Brodder, the owner of the initials in question. Thoughts may or may not have weight, or perhaps the man in question had something on his conscience; in any event, as they stared at the back of his head he turned around slowly, till he was full face to them. His face was calm. He returned the glares.

"Come, come," said Cranston. "This won't do." He grinned at the other two. "You'd think we were vigilantes all set to string up a man with no trial."

Owen shook himself and said, "Of course this is idiotic. But he's such an easy man to hate."

"It's a pleasure to hate him," Bruce agreed.

The front door opened and a man came in. He had some kind of an argument with the ticket seller. The girl was insistent, until the irate man called a cop over. The cop agreed with him and the girl looked a trifle nonplused as they walked into the room.

Cranston grinned, for the man was Weston, the police commissioner. It amused Cranston to think the girl had tried to charge him admission to a murder.

"What are you grinning like an ape about?" Weston demanded as he approached.

"Not a thing, Commissioner. Not a thing in the wide world." Cranston could see that his friend was all set to blow up.

"Commissioner Weston, allow me to introduce Harry Owen, a prominent toy manufacturer, and Bruce Bedrick."

"A prominent nobody," Bruce said.

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"I see." Weston glared at them. "What's been going on here?"

"Would you like it all at once; or in dribs and drabs?" Cranston asked.

"Please, Lamont, I beg of you. There are reasons behind all this that I have to..."

Knowing the reasons, knowing of the man of wealth who would be interested in anything that happened to his club, Cranston could see that Weston would be upset. He was sure the magnate, John F. Murray, carried plenty of weight with the police and the papers.

"There's an extra out on the stands already," Weston went on. "The papers are making capital of the circumstances. They're calling it, 'The Model Murder.'"

It would have features that would appeal to the press, Cranston thought. He had barely noticed when the press photographers fanned in and out.

"Briefly," Cranston said, "a man was stabbed with a chisel. Shortly after that another man was found dead. He had been killed in what looks like an accident with a band saw."

"Another?" Weston wilted.

"Oh, that's right, you wouldn't have heard of it yet."

"Is that what's going on in there?" Weston asked.

Cranston nodded. Weston paced into the machine shop. Looking around Cranston could see that the feeling of horror had finally pressed down, on all the spectators. They stood around in little clumps. White faced and silent, they were deprived of any individuality by the unanimity of their feelings.

"Good grief," Bruce spoke involuntarily as something occurred to him.

"HMMMM?" Cranston grunted.

"Suppose, just suppose, that Ira didn't do it, and that the killer isn't someone in the club. Suppose it's some stranger, someone of that mob. Someone from the outside."

"That dawned on me a while back," Cranston said. "I've given orders that no one is to leave. We'll have the police check on everyone here."

"They'll just love that," Owen said. "The police won't like the extra work and the people won't like the intimation that they are involved in murder."

"That's just too bad about them," said Weston joining them again. He was a little white-faced instead of his usual boiled lobster color. But outside of that he seemed normal.

"Messy, isn't it?" Bruce said referring to the body in the machine shop.

"Very," Weston agreed. "But if it stacks up the way it looks; if this Ira character killed Don Darry, then the whole case is sewed up right now."

"Don't bet on it," Cranston said. He left them on that and went back into the machine shop.

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"What does he mean by that?" Weston asked helplessly. Some times he wished Cranston would mind his own business. This was one of the times. It would all be so simple if it was suicide and murder.

But it wasn't. It was murder and murder.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE door there was another altercation. The girl was demanding money from a man who bustled in. He was as indignant as Weston had been.

"Watcha mean. I gotta pay? Looka this, babe," he said flashing a badge at her.

"Another cop? How many of you are there?" the girl asked.

"Plenty. Huh... what do you, mean another? I'm the only one on the safe and loft squad that's been assigned to this." The detective's face changed as he looked around and saw the commissioner and the surfeit of detectives and policemen in the place.

Weston gestured with his index finger. The detective gulped and walked over to his superior. "Yes, sir?"

"What department are you from?"

The detective looked around and said, "Safe and loft, sir. Can I speak to you alone?"

Owen and Bruce looked at each other as the two walked away to the comparative privacy of an untended booth.

"More complications," Bruce said.

Snapping his fingers, Owen said, "I have it. The sneak thief who's been stealing us blind. I'll bet that detective is on that!"

"Of course. In police parlance this club room of ours would be considered a loft, I suppose. I wonder if there can be any connection between the theft of those trains and this imbroglio."

"What theft?" Cranston was back and his stern face was even more set than usual.

"I don't know why, but I assumed you knew about it," Owen answered. "You see, when we have these annual exhibitions we open our doors to anyone who has the fifty cents to buy a ticket. This year for the first time in our twenty-year history, there have been some thefts.

"I have no idea how you'd go about stealing a locomotive, but our thief has been doing just that. He has stolen five of them... and what makes it a bit insulting, is he steals them one at a time."

"That's nothing. I've known shoplifters who stole little odds and ends like chairs," Cranston said.

He left Bruce and Owen, passing Dick Brodder en route who started a tirade. "Now look here, I know my constitutional rights and I demand..."

Cranston paid no heed and brushed past the little man on his way to talk to Weston. The commissioner had

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his head together with the detective from the safe and loft squad.

Cranston heard Weston say, "Curious..."

"What's curious?"

"Huh... Oh, it's you, Lamont. Mr. Cranston, this is Dockerty. He's been on a case. Speak up, man."

"Well, I was called in on this toy stealing and I been boxing around getting nowhere all week. Today I got a lead. But I don't see where it's got any connection with all the blood spillin' that's been goin' on in this joint."

"Let me worry about that. What did you find out?"

"This joint is only about five blocks from Times Square."

"Indubitably. You, have quite a knack for saying the obvious," Weston said nastily.

"Well..." the detective was thrown off his stride. He got back by saying, "Down in the subway they got those checking lockers. You know, you put a dime in one of them and you get a key. You stash your junk there and can pick it up any time in the next twenty-four hours."

"We know all that," Weston said.

"Then you know too, that lotsa crooks use them there lockers for a cooling off spot. That's what the crooks been up to in this case, I think."

"Is this just a guess?" Weston asked.

"Yare, more or less. Doncha see, I ain't got no lead on this here thing."

"No lead? You've been on it a week. The day after you were assigned, the crook waltzed in here and left with one of John F. Murray's model locomotives worth a fast five thousand dollars!"

There was Murray's name again. Cranston could understand why Weston was being so cruel to his man. To have Murray on his neck about a theft was bad enough, but now that murder had been added... Well, Cranston could see why Weston was at the boiling point.

Weston snapped, "What are you doing here, anyhow? Why aren't you down keeping an eye on those lockers if you think they can help us."

"Chee, Commissioner, I ain't entirely a dope. I got my sidekick covering it now."

"Well get back there. I don't want to see you till you have the crook."

As detective Dockerty, a considerably crestfallen man, turned to leave, Cranston said, "Hold it, Dockerty. I'll go along with you."

"But Lamont, I need you here." Weston looked helpless.

"You have all the men you need here. It's going to be a long laborious job getting the names and addresses of all the people here. I can't see what function I would fulfill here. By the way..."

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"Yes?" Weston was clutching at straws.

"Keep that machine shop under strict observation. Get a complete report from the man who was in the machine shop when Ira died under the band saw."

"I'd do that of course, anyway."

"Make your observation of that room perfect. Don't put any sleepers on the job. The killer may try to get back a black box that is there."

"Black box?"

"Yes. It's facing the lathe and the band saw. It's in with a lot of odds and ends. It's about two foot square. There's an electrical lead coming from it. It is the murder weapon."

Leaving Weston to grapple with the problem of how a black box could lead a man to his death under the spinning blade of a band saw, Cranston left with the detective.

Down on the street Dockerty said, "Phew, the Commissioner is in a hassle, isn't he?"

"I'll say. There's a reason for it, though. He's got a lapful of trouble."

"Yare? Political?"

Cranston nodded. "Political. Yes, you could call it that. But Murray's power was even stronger than that of the machine politicians. Stronger because even if the machine went out of power, Murray's position would not shift. He would simply transfer to the new political machine and continue as before.

"That can be a real threat to a democracy when men of power put themselves above the ordinary processes of law and order and how often they had."

Dockerty said: "The commissioner can lose his job over a deal like this, can't he?"

"Yes, indeed. It wouldn't be the first time that an appointee lost out because of some deal like this," Cranston said.

"It's a shame. He's a good guy. Even if he didn't come up from the ranks, he has the interests of us cops at heart."

That was true. Not many men called in from the outside the way Weston had been would have been able to manage things as gracefully as had Cranston's friend. There are so many angles that an outsider has to learn the hard way.

They walked along together, the detective and Cranston, two men as far apart as the poles, as far as background was concerned and yet driven by the same force, a desire to see right and justice triumph.

Dockerty started to say something and then evidently thought better of it. He closed his mouth grimly. He had come to some kind of decision that was obvious.

Cranston involved in his own thoughts said nothing. They were silent as they walked the blocks that separated the hobby show from Times Square. Coming from the West as they were, they could see the

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crowds begin to pack up as they came closer to the heart of Broadway, if Broadway has a heart.

Up above their heads the Times Building's flashing lights spelled out the news good and bad. The flickering bulbs that ran interminably around the building were saying something about a brawl in the Balkans as they looked up. This message trailed its way around the building to be succeeded by "Killer of Model Man Still At Large."

They turned away, as the message continued to tell all who could see the details of the model murder. Dockerty said, "Here we are. Down here."

They went down into the subway. Ahead of them the lockers made a silent parade down into the distance. The bulbs above the fly-specked walls made the scene gloomy at best.

Even there, at a distance of fifty feet, Cranston spotted Dockerty's partner. He had copper all over him from his bulbous toed shoes up.

He looked casually around and said, "No sign of anyone that seems any good to us, Dockerty."

"I suppose," said Dockerty, "it was too much to hope for..."

Cranston walked forward with his arms out as though greeting a pair of long lost brothers. He grabbed the detectives by the arms and pushed them back away. He said, "Brighten it up, talk a little louder than usual."

The detectives looked a little confused as Cranston said, "Johnny and Franky! If this isn't a break. I haven't seen you guys in ages!"

But despite the big grin on Cranston's face his eyes were fastened coldly on a man who had opened a locker near by. He was taking a package out of the locker. The package was about three feet long and seemed heavy. It was long and narrow.

The detectives took his cue and there were a lot of loud noises about how long it had been since they had all seen each other. It wound up when the man, if it was a man, they couldn't quite tell at the distance for the figure was slender, whether it was a man or a boy – walked away bent over under the weight of the package he carried.

Cranston pitched his voice low and said, "That package is about the right size. Did you see anyone else with a package the right size?"

"Not one. All the others were the wrong shape or the wrong size. I think we got somethin' here."

Walking leisurely, still acting like long lost brothers, the trio followed in the other's tracks. Dockerty said, "In case this is a blind lead, you better get back and cover our tails."

"Right," the man said. And shaking hands all around, he went back to his boring post.

Dockerty and Cranston followed the figure with the package. It was a long and boring chase, for all they knew it might be a complete waste of time. They had no right to go up to the person and demand to see what was in the package. Not that the detective might not have if conditions were different. But a crowded subway car is hardly the place for abrogation of civil liberties.

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The subway car rattled along underground like some prehistoric monster with two brains, one in its head and the other in its tail. Cranston at the rear of the last car was looking into the control booth there. If anything were to happen to the train, he thought idly, it could be controlled from here.

The train rumbled on deep in the bowels of New York. The crowd swayed and shifted with the lurching of the subway. Packed close together it was astounding that they could be as cheerful as they were. Stubbed toes, aching feet were ground under the many-footed animal that was man in a crowd.

Packages held aloft, papers curling in other people's faces; it was surprising that there were not more fights. People, tired people, going home from a day's work with nerves on edge, still managed a smile or a grunt as their feelings were assaulted.

Pretty girls, astoundingly well dressed when you remembered that most of them were low-salaried clerks of one kind or another, gave proof of New York's women's ability to look expensive on little money.

Tired, middle-aged men and women showed the strain that living in the greatest metropolis caused. The deep lines bitten in their faces looked as though they had been eaten in by acid. The endless struggle did take a toll.

Still it was not an uninspiring sight, for these were the faces of America, varied as had no people's been since time began. Here were the first and second generation members of every country on the face of the globe. And America had put something in those faces that could not be gotten anywhere else. Good food, and lots of it, freedom from fear, these had eased burdens that had seemed unfeasible.

Cranston smiled to himself and relaxed a trifle. It was good to be here. Good to be part of such a country.

The train lurched on. They had left Manhattan behind and now were passing stations that Cranston had barely heard of.

At the middle of the Bronx, the figure they were pursuing got off the train and with no backward look walked off. They were sure he had no idea he was being tailed.

"There," said Dockerty, "goes someone with a clear conscience; or a guy so dopey he hasn't even thought of the fact that he might be tailed."

Cranston agreed. Up in this part of the Bronx, the subway was an elevated structure out in the open. All around them, on the platform were hard-working, conscientious people on their way home from work or from shopping.

They had no trouble in tracking their man. It was when they were about twenty feet behind the figure that Cranston saw the one they were interested in was about nineteen or twenty. Just a boy. The package had evidently become heavy with the trip. The boy kept shifting it from arm to arm.

Through crowded streets, overrun with children, with baby carriages and with mothers, they made their way. The boy eel'd his way through the people with the ease of long practice.

He spared no glances at windows crowded with dry goods, or with meats that were not even put up for sale in the butcher shops downtown.

Through streets, originally wide, now narrowed by parked cars, the boy led, and his pursuers were more interested in the streets through which they walked than was their quarry.

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It was like stepping into a different world, Cranston thought not very originally. Here were the folkways and customs of scores of different kinds of cultures, all living in harmony, refuting the liars who batten on tales of racial friction.

Even the cooking smells which eeled out of the doorways they passed were different, intriguing. Ahead of them the boy paused for the first time in his almost arrow-like progress. He looked up and down the street but not at them; rather as though he were making sure no friends of his were lounging on the street corners.

Satisfied, he stopped looking and turned on his heel. They must be almost there, Cranston thought. The buildings looked tired and old, as though they had outlived their natural span and were now propped up by little but the accumulated accretion of time.

He turned on another corner and they could tell from his bearing that his home was in sight, He hurried even more with a slight burst of energy.

They turned the corner in pursuit. There, down the block, he was entering the house. They followed cautiously.

The house, when they came to it, was even in that depressed and depressing neighborhood, an eye sore. It was by far the worst in the entire row. The scaling paint in the halls was like some leprous beggar. From the street they saw their quarry lift the flap on a mail box, look at the box for a second and then go on into the hallway.

It was a break for they had no idea of the boy's name. Cranston had spotted the mail box as the tenth in from the front.

As soon as they could hear only the pounding heels of the climbing boy, they went into the hallway. The tenth box read, "Tommy Lasser." The apartment number was next to the name. It was 4 B.

Dockerty groaned. "Do they always have to live way up? Can't I ever have a case in an apartment house where they have elevators?"

Cranston grinned, but said nothing. They made their way up the stairs. Their noses were assailed by a conglomeration of odors that ranged from stale grease to downright dirt.

At the fourth floor, it was almost pitch dark. Dockerty swore and took out his flashlight. He probed the semi-darkness with the finger of light. A greasy card read, 4 B.

"Here we are. And what do we do now?" he asked.

Cranston said nothing. Crouched over, he applied his eye to the keyhole. The house was so old and badly run that they still had locks you could see through. Cumbersome and large, a ten cent master key would open any of them.

Framed in the keyway of the lock, Cranston saw just a segment of the room.

"What do you see?" Dockerty asked.

Standing up, Cranston replied, "Trains."

"Then this is the character we want. Stand aside and I'll get into this dump."

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"Wait just a second. I saw trains; but all the ones I could see were tin toys that you can buy in a corner store. Five dollars would buy what I saw."

"But they're trains. That's all I care about!" Dockerty smashed his big fist against the door. "Open up in there or I'll knock the door down!"

This was no time for Cranston to display the delicate picks that controlled locks with such a nicety. He stood to one side and let Dockerty grapple with the problem.

Dockerty was not one for finesse. He took a deep breath and stepped back from the door. He hunched one shoulder forward and before assailing it, called out one more time, "Open up in there! In the name of the law!"

CHAPTER V

THERE was no response. Snorting, Dockerty leaned his considerable weight on the door. It creaked and gave.

The door slipped from his hand and smashed back against the wall. Dockerty lost his balance and made an ungraceful entrance into the room.

It was a kitchen of sorts. Narrowing his nostrils in dismay Cranston wondered how anyone could live in such conditions. A frying pan on the stove was filled with some substance. As Cranston looked, the contents of the pan heaved and stirred. The brown mass disintegrated into individual segments. Each of them was a roach. Under their bodies could be dimly discerned the greyish rancid fat they had been feasting on.

The rest of the room was as filthy as the stove, but curiously enough above the stove about four feet from the floor was some white planking, probably pine. This was scrupulously clean. The boards made a path all around the room. They lead from the kitchen into another room.

Dockerty looked at the platform and scratched his head. "Tracks! And trains!"

On the boards which made a support was a train layout. The tracks were nailed in place on the boards. But, and this was completely insane, all kinds of trains rubbed elbows one with the other. Cheap, tin, hand wound locomotives were next to fabulously expensive ones. A four dollar locomotive was facing one that must have cost five thousand.

From the other room they heard a whimpering sound. They paced each other through the door. In the next room, which served as bedroom, the boards wound all around. They made a coffin like cover over the bed, a sort of cot. In order to get into bed the boy had to slide like the ham in a sandwich, between the boards and the bed.

He was sitting on a spindling chair with the package they had seen him get from the locker in his lap. He had it half unwrapped. Showing through the torn wrappings was an exquisite model, perfect in every detail. It was a 4-6-2 locomotive. It seemed to be about standard gauge.

The boy's fingers with the nails bitten far down into the quick almost to the tiny half moons at the base clutched the locomotive to his chest and said, "Don't hit me... don't hit me. I didn't mean to do bad. Honest I didn't mean to..."

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"Stop that whimpering before..." Dockerty waved his hand in a menacing gesture.

The boy cowered down covering the locomotive with his frail body. Cranston looked around. In harsh contrast to the grey black of the once white sheets, the boards and the trains were scrupulously clean.

Some books were piled helter-skelter to one side on a soap box. Dockerty went over to them and picked some out at random. He read titles: "Kraft Ebbing, Stekel, Ellis. What kind of reading is this for a punk?"

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" Cranston asked. "The boy was trying to find out what was wrong with him, why he had the compulsion to steal and specifically why he had the compulsion to steal trains."

Dockerty threw a copy of Zola's *The Human Beast* to the floor and said, "Now don't tell me I'm gonna have to listen to some kind of a pitch about how the kid don't know what he's doin' on accounta he's a kleptomaniac!"

Not answering, Cranston stooped over and looked at a toy on the floor. It was a cute replica of a robot. It was about fifteen inches high.

Cranston asked, "Where did this come from?"

The boy looked down at it in fright and said, "That's the only thing I ever took that wasn't a train. It's cute isn't it?" His face lit up in a pathetic attempt to be friendly.

"Yes, it's very cute. Where did you get it?"

"The same place I got these pretty trains."

"The kid's a feeb," Dockerty snorted.

"Feeble minded people don't read the kind of books this kid has been reading. Now, son, relax. Where did this toy come from?"

"The same place as this train." He held up the one in his arms.

"I see. From the hobby and model show. Where did the other trains and toys come from?"

"Department stores. Gee, they're easy to take things from. I had to be much more careful at the hobby show."

"You mean," Dockerty asked incredulously, "that you been at this for a long time and you never got a rumble from the department store dicks?"

The boy shook his head. Cranston could see the fear of the police crawl across the lad's face like a live thing.

He interjected, "Why did you drop the stolen things off in the lockers at Times Square?"

"They're heavy... I'm not very strong." The boy looked down at his narrow chest. "Sometimes I stole more than I could carry all the way home!"

Dockerty laughed. "That kid's a scream! If he'd had the strength he'd probably lifted Saint Paddy's Cathedral!"

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"No..." The boy said seriously. "I only like trains."

It was quite pathetic. Whatever the twist in the boy's brain was it certainly was monomaniacal, Cranston thought. Aloud he said, "How long have you been at this?"

The boy considered the question. "On and off, maybe two years. You see..." He looked to Cranston for understanding, "I don't always have to steal them... it only comes on me in waves... Like for about six months I stayed home and played with them... and then... all of a sudden I got the yen and I had to go out and steal some more! It doesn't make sense... I got enough trains here to play with... I don't need any more."

A compulsion which could not be denied. Strange. Cranston said: "Then as far as you know, if we hadn't caught you, you would have gone on being forced to steal till there was no more room in this apartment for you to live gone on till there was nothing but stacks of trains!"

The boy nodded miserably, "I'm afraid so..."

It seemed quite clear to Cranston that the boy belonged in an asylum where he could be cared for and given what therapeutic aid there is for insanity. However, his disposition would be up to a judge and a dozen of his peers. If the jury took the attitude that detective Dockerty had, then the boy would go to jail and there probably become completely mad.

That was out of Cranston's control. He looked around the room a last time. Looked at the bizarre collection of magpie odds and ends that the boy had piled into it. Shook his head over the disposition of the expensive scale models, there contiguity to the cheap toys and wished that a picture of the boy's room could be given in evidence at the trial. But it probably wouldn't.

"What will you do with him?" Cranston asked.

"Book him, what else?" Dockerty said. "The kid's a crook, let's face it. He goes to headquarters and gets booked and printed. That's all."

Sighing, Cranston nodded. This was the result of man's laws not keeping up with his medical science. The time lag between the sciences and mores became more and more pronounced as time went by.

Dockerty picked up a tin toy and looked at it consideringly.

"Better take the expensive models along with you, Dockerty. Something might happen to them here."

"Sure. Which ones are they?"

Cranston sighed. Even a 'feeb' should have been able to tell the difference between a model and a toy. But saying nothing, he pointed out the five model locomotives.

"I can't take the kid downtown. He'll have to be booked where he lives, right here in the Bronx," Dockerty said regretfully.

"Don't push him around, please. I may want to speak to him again," Cranston said and picked up the little robot. Picking it up he set it in motion.

Fascinated, Dockerty released his hold on the boy's arm and watched. Cranston was watching too. The robot walked halfway across the floor with its arms in motion, just like a person.

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"Stop!" the boy said.

"Who you talkin' to?" Dockerty's voice trailed off as the robot stopped in its tracks seemingly in obedience to the boy's command.

"Start walking!" the boy said and the robot marched off again.

"Well; if that isn't the cutest thing I ever saw!" Dockerty was lost in admiration. "I'd like to get a couple of them for my kids." Cranston bent over and picked up the little robot. This time he saw the switch on the side that started and stopped it. He turned the switch off.

Engraved on the base of the toy was, "I am Rodney Robot. I will obey your commands. Please be kind to my battery. Turn me off once in a while and my battery will last longer."

So it was a commercial toy, not a model made by some handy hobbyist.

He put the robot in his pocket carefully. He watched as the boy, shivering with fright, walked along with the detective. On the street once more, Cranston waved good-bye to Dockerty and walked in the opposite direction.

As soon as he could find one, he grabbed a cab and told the hackie to take him to Times Square. In the cab he looked out the window unseeingly. That poor miserable boy... what were his motivations... why did he shop lift from department stores... what drove him to creep into the hobby show in the dark of night, risking he knew not what, just to steal trains? He wondered if science would ever really be able to get to the root of human complexities. If only psychology were as exact a science as mathematics then there would not be these square pegs in the round holes of society.

Sighing, Cranston leaned back in the cab. He was tired. At least there were some things he did have the answers for... things like murders. For in murder there were motives that he could fathom greed, revenge, sex the real basic motives were comparatively simple.

But if the killer had in some way been able to get that little black box out of the machine shop then he would have been as much in the dark as to the murder motive as he was in the dark about the boy's psychopathic drives.

Back downtown, the cab came to a halt in front of the Times Building. Cranston looked up at the news flashes as he got out of the cab. For all the difference there was in the headlines time might have stood still. The same headlines about the Model Murder were still flashing.

Sighing, Cranston turned away. Weston was probably fit to be tied by now. There was a lot of background information that was still needed. There was only one way to get it.

Lamont Cranston walked into a cigar store. He dropped a nickel in a pay phone. Burbank answered the call. Burbank was in all probabilities Cranston's most astute agent. Making his headquarters in a phone answering service, he had at his finger tips more dope about the world, both under and upper, than any other man alive.

"Burbank speaking."

"Glad to catch you. I'm going to give you a list of names. I want you to check on all of them. Put all our men on the case at once. Speed is of the essence."

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"I catch. Carry on."

"John F. Murray. Bruce Bedrick. Got them?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Richard Brodder, Harry Owen and two dead men, Ira Downs, and a fellow named Don Darry. Get right on it, will you?"

The phone clicked. Cranston could relax a bit knowing that Burbank would do all that could be done. His sources were invariably of the best.

Deep in thought, Cranston was barely aware of the people whom he was passing. From the size of the crowds that jam the Times Square area it is understandable why there is such a housing shortage in New York.

He walked through the streaming crowds, making his way back to the office building where the hobby show had been held. A newsboy hawking papers in front of the building snapped him out of the haze he was in. He grabbed a paper and read it in the elevator going upstairs.

A thin trickle of people were coming from the Hobby rooms. Having been checked by the police they were now en route to their homes. On the surface they seemed annoyed at being held up from their normal affairs. Underneath though, they were quite excited by this break in the normal humdrumness of life.

After all, they were practically eye witnesses to an exciting affair. It wasn't everyone who was in on a murder! In a way it was sad that people were so saddled with the humdrum that they would clutch at straws for something to relieve the monotony of existence.

So much of living today is done by substitutes. Instead of man having the adventure, he finds it in books or on the screen. Even a horrid thing like this investigation of a cold-blooded and ruthless murder was closer to adventure than was their normal lot.

It was a chance, too, for henpecked husbands to have a good alibi for not having arrived for dinner on time. How could even the worst termagant of a nagging wife take exception to the fact that the police had been questioning a man?

Inside the door, the same pretty girl still guarded the tickets like Cerberus, but considerably more attractive.

Weston waved for Cranston to join him.

"Lamont," he said firmly, "my mind is made up."

"Ah?"

"Yes. Don Darry, was killed by Ira Downs. The instrument was a chisel which belonged to Richard Brodder. This was just a feeble attempt to cast suspicion on Brodder. When he saw the weakness of his position he killed himself! That's the way it adds up and that's the way I am going to give it to the papers! Got anything to say about it?"

"Me? No. I'm not the police commissioner. Do what you think best. As a matter of fact, I rather like the idea. It will lull the real killer into a position of false security. It may even make catching him a bit easier!"

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"Ulp... Then you don't agree?"

"Hardly. I can't imagine a man committing suicide under the conditions that this was supposed to have happened. You know as well as I do how careful the suicidal are of their tender skins. The times I have seen a suicide by hanging with a silken pad under the rope to protect the skin from bruising... Sorry, I can't go along with you!"

"But if I announce that the case is closed and then later you show that I was all wrong, I am going to look like quite a fool!"

"Yes, aren't you?" Cranston turned on his heel and walked away.

CHAPTER VI

HIS feet suddenly made him aware that he had been standing on them almost all day. Cranston sat down and let the blood circulate around in his aching members.

He pushed the chair back and just sat. Drifting through his mind came the images of the people in the case. Bruce Bedrick young, good-looking with his black curling hair drooping down over his forehead he looked more like a romantic poet than a man who enjoyed puttering with tools. Richard Brodder pompous and pigeon breasted, foolish in his urge for petty power, face lined with discontent. Life had disappointed him, played him false.

The pleasant almost jovially round face of Harry Owen said life had treated him more kindly. The only lines in his face were laugh wrinkles. Getting along in years, a bulging waist line showed he rarely exercised the restraint of pushing himself away from the table before he was full.

The pathetic, triangularly shaped elfin face of the boy thief came before him. What was there to think about the boy? He was a victim of the fates in one of their most sadistic practical joking moods.

And over all, brooding and powerful, the unknown face of the man who owned a piece of America, John F. Murray.

The face of the man they had called jokingly Dolly Dimples. Don Darry dead there was so little to learn from a dead countenance. More relaxed than in sleep, death unlines a face, leaves it blank and unknowing...

Then that thing that had rolled across the floor... what could be learned from that? Distorted, lineaments hidden by the hideous red that dyed it there had been no resemblance to humanity in that. Ira Downs, what had he been like in life?

"Come, come, nothing can be as bad as all that!" Bruce's voice broke in on his thoughts.

"No? I didn't think my poker face was that bad," Cranston smiled.

"Don't you ever eat?" Bruce asked.

"Now that you mention it, I seem to be starving." Cranston got to his feet.

"Where'll we go?"

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"I'll let you pick the place. But I want a good meal. It occurs to me that I had no lunch."

"Why don't we drag Harry Owen along?"

"Why not?"

In a restaurant in the neighborhood, Cranston hung his coat up.

Owen and Bruce were busy in a discussion of block signaling that left Cranston in the dark. It was only when he saw his coat hanging awkwardly on the clothesrack, that he remembered the robot.

He took it out of his pocket and placed it on the table. Owen and Bruce stopped talking. Owen said, "What the... where did that come from?"

Cranston explained rapidly. He finished by asking, "Why?"

"Oh, don't you know? I manufacture Rodney the Robot," Owen said.

"I hear tell it's selling so fast that the trade calls it Ruthless Rodney!" Bruce said, smiling.

"It is going like hotcakes. But why not? It's the most ingenious toy that's come out in ages." Owen turned to Cranston. "You know who invented it, don't you?"

Cranston shook his head.

"I thought you did. Don Darry. He was a most ingenious fellow. Not so much inventing the toy, but his ideas on the set-up for manufacturing... astounding! I, a toy manufacturer all my life, would have sworn it would have had to retail at about ten or fifteen dollars. But Don got my production costs down, so we can sell it at four.

"That's the reason it's outselling every other toy. In this inflationary period finding a reasonably priced toy is like seeing the Statue of Liberty jitterbugging," Bruce said.

"You know how it works?" Owen asked Cranston.

"I'm afraid I'm out of my element. What makes it respond to spoken commands?"

"That's the cutest part. It's an electronic gadget. You don't really tell it to start and stop. It depends on what the toy is doing when you address it. The sound waves of your voice throw a switch which makes it do the opposite of what it is doing. If it's walking and you tell it to stop, it does. But if it was walking and you said start, it would stop too."

"That is clever. I wondered how complex it would have to be." Cranston ran his finger down the menu and then ordered. The waiter had been getting impatient while they spoke.

"Can you recommend something?" Cranston asked Owen and Bruce.

"Almost anything is safe. It's a nice place," Bruce said.

"Try the stuffed oysters and the Vichyssoise," Owen said.

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"Okay. What for the entree?" Cranston asked. He was willing to be guided by the bulging belt line of Owen.

"Umm, I like the capon with the cheese sauce."

"Good enough for me," Cranston said. "And by the way, I'd like my coffee with the entree." The waiter took the other orders and left. Cranston thought, maybe coffee will give me a shot in the arm. He was tired. Bone weary.

"Looks like it's going to be a miserable night out," Owen said. "Foggy."

"Let's not be so obvious about not talking about the case," Bruce smiled.

"I don't approve of getting ulcers," Owen said.

"Hear, hear!" Cranston seconded. Not that he really thought they'd be able to refrain from talking about that which was uppermost in their minds.

The soup was good. Owen did have a good palate. They ate and talked desultorily. The restaurant had a right to be proud of its chef, Cranston thought. Cranston picked up the robot. "So this was the kind of thing that Darry fooled around with."

"Contrariwise," said Owen, "that was just a hobby with him. His real forte was big machine set ups. He sold an invention to John F. Murray a while back that astounded Murray. It took the place of about a hundred highly paid technicians."

"Some kind of lathe set up wasn't it?" Bruce asked.

"Uh, huh." Owen nodded. "Murray was amazed. After all, he has some of the best brains in the world on his payroll and along came an unknown and showed him something that saved him a big lump every year. He was glad to pay off."

Bruce played with his silverware thoughtfully. "You know... a guy like Murray can be pretty ruthless when he puts his mind to it. You don't suppose that..."

"You mean," said Cranston, "that Murray might have had Don killed rather than pay off on Don's invention?"

"That's silly," Owen said. "I know Murray paid off. It was part of that money that Don invested with me when, I began to put out the robot."

"I know Don got paid off for that job, but how can we know whether or not he cooked up something new? Something so big that it was cheaper to kill than pay?"

"Umm... that could be," Owen said grudgingly. "But I can't see it really happening somehow."

"It has happened," Cranston said.

"Oh sure, but you don't know Murray. He's really a swell guy," Owen assured Cranston.

"That is true," Bruce agreed. "Murray is really fine."

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"Of course you two know the man and I don't. But..." Cranston rubbed his chin thoughtfully. In one case he had investigated a man had invented a new welding process that had made obsolete almost all the machinery in use. The man had been killed. Murdered to keep his process off the market by a manufacturer who would have gone broke re-tooling for the new process.

The coffee was being served now. Owen said, "Let's forget the blasted mess for a while. I hate to get upset while I'm eating. You get ulcers that way."

"Okay by me," Bruce said as he stirred his coffee. "But one final thing. Why in the world did this boy you told us about steal the fabulously expensive models that he did?"

"I wish I knew," Cranston said. "As long as he stuck to plain shoplifting why he couldn't get into really serious trouble. But these thefts are grand larceny."

"Strange," Owen said and ate his rich dessert.

"More than strange. I'll have nightmares about that kid sleeping in a coffin just so he could have a train lay-out in his rooms," Bruce said.

"He belongs in an asylum. But he'll go to jail, I suppose. Our penal code is about three hundred years behind our social discoveries," Cranston said.

"Unfortunately that's true of just about everything," Bruce replied. "Here we are with atomic fission ready to sweep through the skies. We have been given by science a means to a real utopia: The cheap power that atomic energy grants us can be the beginning of real civilization. So what do we do? We use it as a devastating instrument of war!"

"It's as though a bunch of monkeys had discovered the machine gun!" Bruce sounded bitter as must any thinking person, about the gap between our scientific progress and our lack of mental progress. Cranston nodded. Owen said, "That's just dandy. We decide to forget about the murders and talk about something a little cheerier, so we wind up brooding about atomic war. Come, come... that's a direct route to ulcers."

Cranston and Bruce laughed.

"Okay, let's dig our heads in the sand like ostriches and pretend this is the best of all possible worlds." Bruce said.

From there on they talked of lighter matters. The dinner broke up about ten-thirty. Cranston waved good-bye to the two men and walked away. He was going back to the model show, but it would be just as well if no one knew it.

Everyone would be gone now but the police who had been left on guard. First, however, he must check and see what Burbank had been able to discover. Then and only then it would be time for Cranston to vanish, for the darker part of his person to show itself. In the brief case, without which he never went anywhere, were the accouterments of a nightmare figure of darkness... of that other self which was known as The Shadow!

It was a nasty night. Fog, rare in New York, had descended. It wasn't of the pea soup consistency of a London fog, but was instead a murky wet mess that saturated ones clothes and made one's breath hard to catch.

In a doorway made dark by the dimmed street lights Lamont Cranston opened his briefcase. Out of the recesses popped that black cape that covered him with the night.

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His regular slouch hat went into the briefcase and he pulled out the black broad brimmed hat which hid his face like a mask. Lamont Cranston had vanished. In his place was that implacable figure of the night that was known far and wide as The Shadow!

The fog twirled and seemed to pull on his cape as he walked out into the dark streets. He was unseen by the few people still walking around in this now deserted neighborhood.

From black splotch to black splotch he made his way with the ease that years had given him. It almost seemed as though his feet took the path of least light. He just never walked into the brash glare that seeped from occasional stores.

There, ahead was an alley way. He went into it. There must be a fire escape above him, but he couldn't see it yet. It was dark as sin, he thought as he eased along. The bottom of the fire escape made an eerie pattern in the night.

The Shadow used the same route that the boy crook must have. He went up the fire escape outside the building. Darkness on darkness made for invisibility.

At the right floor he paused and looked around to get his bearings. There, two feet away was the window that lead into the Hobby Show. Looking closely, he saw jimmy marks on the window.

The lock had been broken so that while seeming still in good working order, it would not really clasp into the projecting prong. He lifted the window carefully.

Surely the cops on guard must have heard that shrill whine... But there was no flurry of feet... unless they were waiting, guns on the ready for any interloper.

He poked his head in carefully, ready to withdraw it at the slightest sign of movement. Down on the floor a blur, a blob. What was it? Waste? Or a body...

It was a body, no denying that. The unconscious form of a policeman lay there. Then there was trouble afoot... now if only he were not too late!

He dropped to the floor as quietly as a feather on a pillow. There was no sound but that of the stertorous breathing of the man on the floor. Looking closely, The Shadow saw a lump the size of a duck's egg on the man's temple.

How many more cops were on guard? Not more than three, surely. One down... were the other two hors de combat? It was hard to see with all the ceiling lights off and no illumination but that of some sick twenty-five watters over the doors.

He looked into the other room. This room he was in was the machine shop which abutted onto the big exhibition room. There, across the long room was another recumbent form. And at the door, he saw an arm raised. The arm was too long, made elongated by an extension it whipped down onto the head of the unsuspecting cop.

The extension was a blackjack. It happened too fast for even the lightning reflexes of The Shadow. Now the form of the attacker faded back into the shadows along the wall. The man who had knocked out the three cops was making his way back towards the machine shop.

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The Shadow oozed that's the only word back into the machine shop and became almost completely invisible in the black shadows cast by the machines.

The object of all this must be the black box. Nothing else made any sense. He waited, a creature of the night, dark and motionless, brooding like some eldritch representation of fate. His wait was rewarded. The man entered the room.

He went directly to the black box. He threw a switch of some kind. A dart of light came out. The man laughed and it was a horrid sound. Vengeful and triumphant, it told a story of successful murder!

But right on the heels of that dreadful laugh came another one. A laugh that curdled the blood of the man in his veins. The humorless dry cachinnation of the master manhunter...The Shadow!

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS an impasse. Laugh canceled laugh. The man did not move. All The Shadow could see of him was a gloved hand pressing down on the switch that had flashed the light across the room. The light, luckily, was about three feet away from where The Shadow lurked. Otherwise he'd have been pinned by it like a moth on a collector's needle.

The man pushed against the black box from which the lance of light poured. The light flickered and flashed across the room. The Shadow dropped soundlessly to his knees. The light cut right through where his head had been a moment before.

Reaching under the stygian cloak. The Shadow drew a .45. Heavy in his hand, it was a solacing addition to the scene. Eyes narrowed, The Shadow watched as the man pressed a dial on the side of the box.

The quality of the light changed. From a constant stream it became a pulsing light that flicked on and off, something like a lighthouse but with the intervals from light to dark, spaced about a tenth of a second apart.

Eerie enough on its own, the flickering light added something even more outre to the scene. For the menacing shadows cast by the machinery now became flickering moving spots of blackness. This couldn't go on. The Shadow moved restlessly. The light was sure to catch him sooner or later.

Better take the bull by the horns. The Shadow stood up. The man across the room gasped when the light flickered across the black form. There was something so weird about the man hunter's silhouette that it was frightened of itself, even if the figure had not been loaded with menace because of the reputation that The Shadow had made in the underworld.

But the man recovered fast. His arm came up with the blackjack whirling at the end of it. The Shadow slashed out at the hand with the muzzle of his gun.

In old vaudeville you could see a dance act climaxed by a slow motion run across the stage. A flickering spotlight with a shutter in front of it accounted for the slow motion quality. The dancers would deliberately slow down their actions so that the effect of the flickering spotlight was enhanced.

This was exactly what happened here in this room where death had struck such a short time before. The vaudevillians achieved their effect by the slowness of their actions and the slow flickering of the light.

Here in this room where two men were fighting to the death, the light flickered faster than the vaudevillian's

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which in turn slowed down their lightning fast motions.

It was as though the scene were being shown in a theatre by a slow motion camera. An arm would rise, as though weighted down by tons of water. The response, although in reality fast as could be, seemed to be insanely slow in coming. The grunts of the men as they parried and fought seemed silly. There didn't seem to be anything in the quality of what they were doing to cause any exertion.

The Shadow blinked his eyes to try to destroy the illusion which was baffling and unsteady to him as it would have been to an observer.

Seeing an opening, The Shadow whipped down with his gun hand. The weight of that mass of steel ripped the blackjack out of the other's hand. He groaned and put his injured hand to his mouth in that instinctive gesture that man has. It was only then, because of the bizarre circumstances under which he had been fighting that The Shadow saw that his opponent was masked.

A handkerchief drawn down from his felt hat obscured his features completely. He drew himself together rapidly and shaking his hurt hand whipped his other hand up to his chest. It was obvious he was going for his gun.

The Shadow spoke for the first time. He said, "I wouldn't!"

The man froze, hand half under the lapel of his jacket. Behind him there was a stir of motion. It made both of them stand stock still. The Shadow realized that it must be the unconscious policeman struggling back to consciousness.

The man stepped backwards over the cop. He said, "I'm not doing anything."

Sighting along the bead of his gun, The Shadow said, and his voice was soft and menacing, "Don't."

The man froze again and then he got the break he'd been praying for. The cop staggered up onto his feet. He spoke in a blurry voice, "What's goin' on?"

Covered just for a second by the policeman's body, the man took his chance. He threw himself backwards through the glass of the closed window.

The Shadow flew forward, bumping into the still foggy cop as he did so. The shards of glass were still falling to the floor when he got to the window.

Careful always, The Shadow ripped his hat from his head and hung it over the muzzle of his .45. He extended it out the window. Instantly, the man fired. A bullet whipped through the black cloth and pinged into the metal of the fire escape up which the man had raced.

Before The Shadow could do anything else, the groggy cop grabbed him by the shoulder. "What the hell's goin' on here? What'd you clout me for?"

Realizing it would be dangerous to dash out onto the fire escape which the enemy was able to enfilade, knowing that it would take quite a while to explain things to the still punchy policeman, he whirled around.

The force of his spin threw the cop away from him. The cop landed against a projecting part of the lathe and swore. By the time he had pulled his scattered wits together, the black form that was The Shadow was gone from the room.

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Running like the wind, The Shadow beat a hasty retreat. But not so fast that he didn't take the black box with him. Ripping the wires out of the wall from which the box had drawn its power, he kept right on running.

Out through the big room where the other two policemen were just coming to, past them and out the front door, flew The Shadow. As he slammed the door behind him, he saw the first cop finally stagger out of the machine shop with his gun in his hand. The last thing The Shadow saw was the cop waving the gun foolishly as he looked around.

Violence seemed completely out of place in those surroundings. The backdrop was, of course, the exhibits, the models, the ships, the trains which men had made in their spare time. For these leisure occupations to be part of the scene seemed all wrong.

Down on the street, after a lightning run down the stairs, The Shadow glanced up and down. It was futile as he had feared. There were too many places for the masked man to go.

Stepping into an alley between two old buildings The Shadow doffed his cloak and hat. They went into the inevitable briefcase and it was the debonair well-dressed figure of Lamont Cranston who came back out of the alley. Briefcase in one hand, the black box in the other, he strode off uptown.

He still had to check with Burbank before he could even do much thinking about the whole affair. Knowing the machinery of the kill, the motive was still a blank. He had an idea of what was behind all this. But it was a tenuous idea at best.

Given that he recognized his masked assailant, the mystery of the whys and wherefores still remained.

On the corner a cigar store was still open. Inside the store he entered a booth and dialed his man of all work. He said, "Hello."

"Am I ever glad you called" Burbank said. "Listen, this case of yours is a lulu!"

"Yes, I've been getting that idea."

"John F. Murray is popping mad. He's throwing a lot of heat on the police to get a wiggle on. He's been calling long distance."

"Long distance?"

"Well, ship to shore anyway. He's on his yacht."

"I see. But where is the yacht?"

"As far as I can find out it's up in the East River."

Cranston thought, not much of a problem to get from the East River downtown. Aloud he said, "What else?"

"Murray bought an idea from one of the dead men, Don Darry."

"I know that."

"Ummm did you know that there were negotiations underway for still another idea of Darry's? Murray was all set to buy it."

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"No, I didn't know that." Cranston put that away in the back of his mind. "What else?"

"This character Brodder, whom you asked about, is a bit of a bad actor. He's been hauled into court more than once for popping off with his fists. He took a punch at this Ira Downs a week ago. Downs brought him up in court on assault charges."

"So. What was the disposition of the case?"

"A fine which Brodder paid. But he made some threatening sounds under his breath and the judge slammed another fine on him for contempt of court."

"That sounds in character. Anything else on Brodder?"

"His wife holds the purse strings and he seems to resent it. I got some dope about this model club that the affair took place in. It seems Brodder at one time or another has had a run-in with practically everyone in the club. He operates by using his business connections to stay in power."

"Nasty way to run a hobby outfit."

"Yes, but he seems to be a pretty nasty piece of work all around."

"Next?"

"Harry Owen. Business man, well liked, good modeler, good business man. At least he is now. He was in a bit of a hole when he reconverted over from war work back to peace time toy production, but he came up with a toy robot that's been outselling most other toys."

"I knew about that."

"I guess I'm not telling you much then. That only leaves Bruce Bedrick. He's just out of the Army and seemingly having a bit of trouble getting re-adjusted. He's been moping around for about six months. He's in the 52-20 club."

"I see."

"I don't know whether all this has helped any or not?" It was a question.

"It has. Don't worry about it. Have Shrevvie pick me up in front of the Times Building as soon as he can."

"Right."

Waiting on a street corner, Cranston had time again to think of the power that was brooding behind the scene John F. Murray pulling strings, causing the police to bear down harder than they would ordinarily, using his strength to do... what?

CHAPTER VIII

THE cab whirled to a grinding stop next to Cranston. Shrevvie's grinning face looked out. He said, "I thought ya wasn't gonna call on me. Wassamatter, don't ya love me no more?"

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"Sure I love you," Cranston smiled. "Just haven't had much occasion for fanning around. This is going to be a hard one, Shrevvie. Think you can find me a yacht out in the East River?"

"It's a cinch."

The car drove off. But it was no cinch. They cruised up and down the East River drive for a long time, comparing notes. All they had to go on was the fact that Cranston knew the name of the yacht in question.

It was called the Moby Dick. When they did find it, it was up near Spuyten Duyvil. There was a wharf nearby. Cranston bounced out of the cab and said, "Wait for me, Shrevvie. I shouldn't be long."

He walked down to the end of the wharf. There was a sort of watchman's shanty there. Cranston looked in. A rather dilapidated old man leaned back in a chair. In front of him was a pot bellied stove. He was smoking a corncob pipe.

Cranston said, "Hullo, there."

The old man shifted the pipe from one side of his mouth to the other. "What do you want?"

"I want to get out to the Moby Dick."

"Can't do it." He turned away and went on sucking the pipe. The pipe gurgled.

"Why can't I?"

"Mr. Murray don't like his sleep interrupted."

"I see. Despite the fact that it is important?" Cranston opened his wallet and idly riffled some bills.

"Ya can put that away. I get paid a good salary and I like my work."

Cranston turned on his heel and walked away. But not far. He had tried to do it the nice way. He, Cranston, could not get out to the moored yacht. But that didn't mean that The Shadow could not.

It was The Shadow who made his way to the end of the dock. As he thought, there was a speedboat tied to the wharf. The figure of night looked around. The watchman was still safely inside his booth. There was no one around but Shrevvie and he was about two hundred yards away.

The jet figure dropped casually from the end of the wharf into the waiting boat. Once in it, he looked around carefully. No one had noticed.

The controls looked familiar. The river was black and cold looking. The surface of it was defaced by an oily scum. In the light the oil would have reflected rainbows. As it was, the scum just made the water look even more uninviting.

He kicked the motor into life and a soft purr responded. The water behind the stern roiled into life. He held the boat there for a moment while his eyes, adjusting to the night peered out into the river to where the yacht lay at anchor.

It was cold and the wetness of the fog cut into his flesh. The boat skimmed out from the wharf. It was a pleasure to drive. He must remember that the water of the East River is a snare for the unwary, refuse of

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every kind can foul a prop, sunken debris can rip the bottom out of a boat. It was dangerous at the best of times, but now in the dark a hundred times worse.

Nothing happened to arouse his instant reaction. He guided the boat carefully. He was still quite a way from the yacht. On shore Shrevvie was probably starting to get nervous.

He'd have to act fast once he got there. No sense in wasting any time in this case where time was such a vital element.

The Shadow had the speedboat out in the center of the river, racing across the black water in the even blacker night before the watchman realized that something was up.

He came running out of the shanty with a gun out. He called, "Come back here, or I'll shoot."

He was just wasting his time. It would have taken a much better marksman than he to hit a black blob in a black boat on a black river.

The Shadow paid no attention at all. Ahead was the sleek black yacht. No one on board seemed to have noticed that a visitor was en route. He curved the small boat in under the overhang at the stern.

The anchor chain hung down invitingly close. He cut the gas off and let the momentum carry him into the chain. He bent a hawser around it and went up hand over hand.

Near the deck he paused. He could hear running feet on deck. The watchman had obviously phoned the yacht to let them know that an interloper was in the offing. Voices brought him to a halt.

One said, "Brady says someone copped the speedboat. What do we do?"

Another voice said, "Cripes, I dunno. With Murray on shore, I don't know what to say."

There was no need for The Shadow to go any further. He slid back down the chain. So Murray was not on board... he filed that away with the other odds and ends of information he had been collecting. In the speedboat he knew he was unseen. The overhang of the stern protected him.

Once he sped out into view the men on the ship would have a chance at him. He gave the boat the gun.

Out into view, a spotlight hit him amidships. He spun the wheel and the boat cavorted the way a dolphin does. For a moment he thought it was going to spill him in the water. But it was built to be fool proof. It shuddered, the motor cavitated for a second and the prop dug deep into the water and he was off again, this time headed down river away from where Shrevvie waited.

On the deck of the yacht there was confusion. The mate looked down river and said, "If we shoot..."

The captain said, "But who are we shooting? We'd better not!"

In that instant of indecision, the boat was out of range. The Shadow cut the wheel over hard and headed back upstream. On the wharf, the old watchman waited with gun poised. He saw the speedboat close to the shore speeding towards him.

He waited. Then he shook his head. Were his old eyes getting befuddled? He couldn't see anyone at the wheel. There was a shadow there, but it didn't seem substantial enough to be cast by a human.

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The Shadow ducked down low, cut the engine and eased in next to the wharf. He tied up and scrambling under the wharf made his way in to shore.

The watchman looked down at the now really empty boat and scratched his head. Maybe that last glass of beer had been too much. How could a boat, unattended, make a landing?

It was too much for him. Still shaking his head he went back into the shanty. It was too preposterous. He'd better just pretend the whole thing had never happened.

In the cab, Shrevvie waited. There was a whisper of sound. He looked around. Sure enough, The Shadow had made another of his fantastic entrances. He was sitting back seemingly completely relaxed.

"Where to?"

"Back downtown."

Seeming to be on board a yacht could be a perfect alibi. After all, not many people would have the nerve to question John F. Murray. But... there might be other reasons why he was on shore while pretending to be on the ship.

It was too early to make any definite inferences. The night was wearing on. Something had to be done... and fast.

With a cause celebre like this, the sooner it was solved and out of the newspapers, the better off Weston and the police would be.

"Whereabouts? Back at Times Square?" Shrevvie asked.

"Near there. I have to go to an office building and look over some books."

The cab slithered through what little traffic there was with the accomplished ease that only New York hackies seem to have. They were off the East River drive and back in midtown before The Shadow spoke again. He said, "Down 43rd Street."

"Copasetic."

The cab came to a halt in front of a twenty-five story building. The Shadow said, "Keep the motor running, I have to indulge in a bit of burglary."

Shrevvie nodded. The Shadow was gone like a wisp of smoke. Looking up at the building Shrevvie wondered as he had often before, what in the world went on in office buildings in the middle of the night.

There were lights on in scattered sections of the building. Of course, there were the cleaning women, but would they turn on so many lights? The question was unanswerable. He sighed and shifted in his seat. The Shadow was upset. He was in a hurry. Anything could happen. Shrevvie waited for something to pop.

In the building, the dark sinister-seeming shadow of The Shadow was a long narrow bar across the floor. He was at a door. He slid a pick in the key way. That done, he inserted a pressure tool and exerted some push on it. He jerked the pick up and down delicately.

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The tumblers of the lock lined up in a manner that the manufacturer of the lock had meant only the key to do. Easing the door open, The Shadow cast a glance over his shoulder. He was not likely to be interrupted, except accidentally by a cleaning woman busy with her chores.

There was no one in sight. He went into the office. It was ghostly with that empty feeling that untenanted desks can give in the middle of the night. Long shadow's criss-crossed across the floor.

There was an inner sanctum ahead. The Shadow smiled as he visualized the way the door to the sanctum was probably guarded in the daytime.

He walked through the door. Inside the inner office he looked around. There were confidential files lining one wall. He went directly to them.

It was a time-wasting job. He had to work quickly, but efficiently. He went through drawer after drawer with no luck at all. He showed signs of impatience, but continued as he had started, carefully.

He finally, at long last, opened a drawer that looked hopeful. Easing it open he paused. Was that... yes, it was a creaking sound. Someone had opened the outer door. The Shadow looked around the office quickly. When his eyes landed on the big desk in the center of the room, a grim smile creased his saturnine face.

Outside in the outer office a man was covering the same path that The Shadow had just traversed. He was walking with exaggerated caution.

He opened the door to the inner office. He flipped the switch of a flashlight on. The light would have revealed the presence of anyone if they were there. But look as he might, cover as much of the room as he could with the light, he saw no one.

Some of the strain eased out of his bearing. He relaxed a bit and walked towards the same filing cabinets that The Shadow had just been looking at.

He went directly to them and leaving the flash on a corner of the desk he bent over the ailing cabinet. He almost died of shock when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. There had been no sound; no warning.

He gasped with fear and spun around. A grim sight faced him, The Shadow had hidden in the knee hole of the desk and waited till the man was sure of himself before stepping out. It was as magical as the stage production of a human by a prestidigitator.

His mouth literally opened with surprise. He tried to plumb the blackness that hung across the face of the man who had appeared from nowhere. It was futile. He could not make out a feature of the face under that broad brimmed hat. The light from his flash revealed his face to the black cloaked one, but not vice versa.

The Shadow said, "This is quite a surprise meeting you here, Mr. Brodger. Or is it a surprise?"

The little man deflated. It was as though someone had stuck a pin in an over-inflated balloon. His fat hung on him in folds instead of pouting out like a pigeon.

His eyes shifted wildly looking for an exit that was not there. He said nothing. But it wasn't till The Shadow laughed, that real fear grasped the little man and wrenched his features out of shape.

Alive, pulsating with menace, the laugh echoed away in a whisper that seemed to fill every nook and cranny of the room.

The Shadow knew!

CHAPTER IX

THE little man puffed his cheeks and said, "One has a surprise, does one not?"

The Shadow was silent. He watched Brodder try to recover his equanimity. The little man huffed and puffed and finally said, "One has a right to ask what you are doing here?"

"One doesn't."

"Well really! After all, you are in no position to point an accusing finger at one. Your position here is suspect, as well as one's own."

He was trying to brazen it out. Trying to bluff, but it was a pretty weak bluff. The Shadow said, "Stand over to one side and don't move."

Bustling, the little pompous man got out of The Shadow's way and watched popeyed with surprise as The Shadow went through the papers in the drawer which he had finally located. When The Shadow was done he said, "Walk out ahead of me, slowly."

When they got to the outside door The Shadow said unexpectedly, "Give me the key to the door."

Brodder's reflexes moved before his brain. His hand was half way to his pocket before he spluttered, "Bbbut... I don't have a key for this office."

"Stop the nonsense and give it to me." The Shadow took the key from the man's trembling hand and closed the door. Out in the hall the Shadow said, "Where'd you get the key?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but one saw it quite by accident down at the club room. If someone left it carelessly exposed in the locker room one can't be blamed for not taking advantage of a stroke of luck."

"Can't one?" The Shadow's voice was grim. He had placed Brodder into the proper pigeon hole in the case and it was an unpleasant one. He said, "Brodder, beat it. Don't try to leave town. I may call you in the morning and you'd better be at home."

Looking behind him as he went, the little man nervously made his exit. The Shadow waited long enough for Brodder to get downstairs and then followed.

Out in the street, The Shadow slipped in the cab and Shrevvie got into gear and pulled away. "Who," asked Shrevvie, "was that little weasel who just sneaked out of the building? He got mad when I told him the cab was not for hire."

"I don't suppose he threatened to call a cop though, did he?"

"Nah, he took it on the lam when I said I'd call a copper."

"He's one of the more unpleasant aspects of the case in hand," The Shadow said. He was changing back into his Lamont Cranston role as he spoke.

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Shrevvie drove aimlessly for a while, waiting for a command. When none was forthcoming he asked, "Now where?"

"Down to Weston's house. I have to discuss strategy with him."

Silently they made their way through the quiet sleeping city. Cranston got out of the cab in front of Weston's house. He was bone weary, he realized. He'd been on the go since early in the morning. He'd intended to finish up his day at the model show, and then fall into bed. Instead here he was at four o'clock in the morning still on the prowl.

Weston was asleep when he got there. Cranston made himself comfortable while the butler went up to wake his master. Filling a glass from the brandy bottle on the server, Cranston sat down and looked into the amber fluid. He had finished his first and was pouring a second when Weston, still sleepy eyed, came into the room knotting the cord on his bathrobe.

"Lamont! What in the world are you doing out at this time of night?"

"Tying some loose threads together. If you want this model murder to end it has to be done my way."

"Your way? But..." Weston slumped into a chair and just sat. He looked at the hawk-like face of his friend. Something was going on behind that high forehead. He'd better listen and see what was up.

"Look," Cranston said, "this is a mess."

"I'll say it is. Murray has been calling me up on the hour from that yacht of his, wanting to know what I'm doing."

Cranston let that lay and said, "I'm afraid we're going to have to pull one of those stunts out of a grade B movie in the morning. We'll have to get all the suspects together at the scene of the crime. I can't see any other way to handle the matter!"

Outside on the street, Shrevvie slanted his eyes as he squinted up at the rear view mirror. What the hell? How long had that guy been on the corner?

He shifted into gear and started off slowly to see what the man would do. The man did nothing. Shrevvie circumnavigated the block. When he parked again in front of Weston's residence, the man was still there. The only difference was that he had lit a cigarette.

Shrevvie was undecided. This might be important. Should he butt in on the conference that was going on behind those walls or wait? He shrugged. Might as well wait. He could take care of any trouble should the man become over ambitious. He reached down to the floor where he always kept a wrench handy. He closed his hand around the handle and cuddled it in his lap, as he sat and waited to see what would transpire.

It was anti-climactic. Nothing happened. When Cranston came down the stairs of the old brownstone house, Shrevvie was still waiting with the wrench. The man had not moved.

As soon as Cranston came within earshot Shrevvie whispered, "That guy over there holding up the building has been tailing you!"

Without a word, Cranston took the bull by the horns and walked over to the man. He looked him in the eye and said, "What do you want?"

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"What makes it your business?"

"Been seeing a lot of hard guy movies?" Cranston reached forward and grasping the man by the lapels of the coat, lifted and shook at the same time. The man's head rolled.

Cranston said again, mildly, "What do you want?"

"Ccccuttt it outttt!" The man's teeth were chattering.

Cranston released him and waited. The man put his hand into his breast pocket. Cranston said, "That hand better not come out with a gun or I'll shove your teeth down your throat."

When the man's hand came out it held a wallet. He flipped it open and Cranston ran his eyes down the credentials under the celluloid window.

"I see." Cranston turned on his heel and walked away. He got into the cab and Shrevvie drove off. In the rear view mirror he saw the man dive for a car parked across the street. "Should I ditch the tail?"

"Don't bother. He's a private eye. If he'd been a little more pleasant I would have told him where I was going. After all, he's just doing his job."

"A shamus? What's a private detective doing on your tail?"

"I think I know, and it's amusing." Cranston said nothing more for a few seconds and then he said, "Back to the house. I'm going to shower and change my clothes. Then we'll head back for the Model Show. I'll wind this thing up before Weston has apoplexy."

"On the home stretch, huh?"

Cranston nodded.

It was six o'clock in the morning by the time he came back to the cab, a little refreshed by his bath and by the clean clothes.

Shrevvie said, "How about tying the feed bag on?"

"By all means, I'm starving." Along with the brief case on the seat of the car next to him was the black box which The Shadow had saved from being stolen the night before.

They ate in one of the one-arm joints where the eggs always seem to be better than at the fanciest of restaurants. The coffee was hot as the devil and as black as Satan's conscience. Cranston felt a lot more human when they had finished.

"Wanna talk about the case, boss?" Shrevvie asked.

"Not yet. There are too many slips possible. I'm walking on the thinnest of thin ice."

"One of them aggravatin' ones, huh?"

Aggravating was hardly the word for it. Fiendish would be closer. Somehow Cranston would have found the killer more appetizing if he had killed for some passionate reason. But these two murders had been

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committed in cold blood for the coldest of motives money!

It was a different detective that trailed them this morning. Either he was a relief man or they thought that Cranston might not spot this new one.

He followed Shrevvie and Lamont out of the restaurant. He tried to be casual and completely unsuspecting. Shrevvie laughed behind his hand and said, "Get a load of that creep. He thinks he ain't spotted."

"We may as well let him continue thinking that. Straight downtown now, Shrevvie." Cranston watched the detective trailing them. The man was good, but not quite good enough.

"If he was a real bright character," Shrevvie said disapprovingly, "he'd a parked his car ahead of us and stayed a block or so ahead all the way, keeping pace with us, turnin' when we do."

Cranston nodded. That's what Hawkeye, their friend, would have done. At their destination, Cranston bounced out of the cab as though he'd had a full night's sleep. He waved a good bye to Shrevvie. "When I see you again, the case will be all wrapped up, or we'll never catch the murderer."

"Luck." Shrevvie called as Cranston entered the office building that housed the fatal hobby and model show.

Inside the building Cranston shifted the black box to a more comfortable position. He was a little early; but by the time he got set up, the suspects, the innocent and the guilty, Weston and his boys would be all ready. The end was but an hour away. It was a sink or swim attempt that Cranston was going to make. But so canny had the killer been, that there was just no other way to attack. Cranston believed that attack was the best defense. It was on this premise that he was proceeding.

CHAPTER X

HE WAS the first to arrive at the show. The police, looking a little sheepish still from the bouncing around they had taken, looked at him in surprise when he entered the exhibit room.

Putting his brief case at his feet, he placed the black box to one side and took the toy robot out of his pocket. A cop asked, "Playin' Santa Claus, Mr. Cranston?"

Cranston shook his head. Hardly that. He found an electric outlet and connected the wire from the black box. That done, he placed the box behind some papier mache scenery so that the model railroad hid the box. Allowing the lens in the side of the box to project, he eyed it carefully. There it was hidden.

Because of the background scenery that the members had built for the show, the windows in this room were covered. For all the light that entered, it might as well have been night. The ceiling lights threw everything into harsh relief.

Now that he was all set, Cranston thought, he might as well do what he had originally come to the show for. He went around looking at the models, at the exhibits. It was fascinating to see a plane, a B-29 in miniature, so perfect that one had to adjust one's eyes to realize that it was not a real one made small by distance.

From the plane section he walked to where the model cars stood in proud array. Tiny, gas powered miniatures, not more than two feet long, they shone with work that their makers had spent on them.

Cranston knew that these miniatures were capable of up to one hundred miles an hour and that was real

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speed, not scale speed. He turned from the cars and looked at the scale model speed boats. They could plane through the water at up to seventy miles an hour. It just didn't seem possible. They were so small...

The models of sailboats didn't interest him as much. They were as perfect as the other models, but the fact that they were not designed to work, somehow made them less appealing to Cranston. To his way of thinking they were just dust collectors to be placed on a mantel piece and be admired for their craftsmanship.

He felt his taut nerves relaxing. That wasn't too good. He had to be at top form if he was to catch a killer this morning. Time for relaxation would have to come later.

Weston was about due now in any event. Cranston left the fascinating displays and went to a chair and sat down. He was tired all right. No use kidding himself about that. As soon as this mess was over he was going to go to bed for a fast forty-eight hours or know the reason why.

There were footsteps out in the hall. Cranston looked up. The door opened and Commissioner Weston entered. He didn't look as if he'd slept much after Cranston left him.

"Mornin'," he said dolefully. "I've had about ten more calls from Murray. He said that if the police haven't cleaned up the case by night fall, that he'd expose the murderer!"

"Really?" Cranston was dryly amused. "How interesting."

"If I never see another model as long as I live, I'll be a happy man," Weston said looking around at the various models: the boats, the trains, the stationary engines, that filled the room.

"Come, come, we mustn't be bitter," Cranston kidded. "It's not the fault of the models that you're in a jam."

"No, but it's the fault of the men who built them!"

The cops pretended to get very busy. No use getting the old man on the war path when he was in a mood like this. They milled around busily doing nothing till that got on Weston's nerves. He barked, "Stop it. What are you fools doing?" With hangdog looks they scuttled to him. He scowled at them, but before he could say what was on his mind the door opened and a parade started.

Bruce was the first one to enter. He looked around curiously, smiled a hello at Cranston and receded into the background as Brodder and Owen entered.

They were followed by some of the other members of the Board of Directors of the model club. Then came a surprise. The boy crook, the one who had been stealing the models, came in handcuffed to a huge burly policeman. They stood at one side.

Finally the door opened and a stranger came in. Weston looked at him curiously and the man went to him and took his wallet out. He showed Weston the contents and Weston nodded unhappily. The man walked past Cranston and leaned against a glass cased model of a side wheel Mississippi steamboat. He watched what went on through curious eyes.

Brodder drew himself up to his full height which wasn't too impressive and said stiffly, "I hope you blundering fools realize that one is a busy man and that coming here necessitated one's leaving one's place of business!"

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"Relax," Bruce said. "And why don't you cut out that impossibly pompous business of referring to yourself as one?"

"One came here as a good citizen to help the police not to be insulted!" He stalked as far away from the group as he could get and visibly steaming, stared at what followed.

Cranston sighed, "We may as well get things started. I assume the mysterious stranger behind me, leaning against the steamboat, is a representative from Murray?"

Weston nodded.

"Then we are all set. I suppose it would have been too much to expect the great man to come himself."

The man said, "He'll be here later. He's been trying to get free for a day now. He's a busy man."

"No doubt. So are we; all of us, busy men," Cranston said. "However, let's hold off the baffling and ingenious murder of Ira Downs for a while. Let's start at the beginning with the death of Don Darry inside a model mountain. You remember, he was stabbed with a chisel. That chisel had a man's initials on it."

"Of course, it would be absurd to assume that the man who owned the chisel did the stabbing?" Weston said hopelessly.

"I'm afraid so," Cranston said. "We are not dealing with a lunatic who would lead us straight to him with such a stupid mistake."

"I was afraid of that." Weston did not look any happier.

"No," Cranston repeated, "this was not the purposeless attack of a lunatic. It was the canny and shrewd machination of a cold blooded killer. A money killer."

"I don't even think that the killer wanted to really implicate Richard Brodder whose initials were on the murder weapon. I think he just wanted to embarrass Brodder."

"Brodder put himself in an anomalous position last night, however. He showed up in an office where he had no right to be. His motive for being there would not stand very close analysis."

"I don't know how you could know that," Brodder spluttered. "One went there in an attempt to help the police catch the murderer."

"Really? Do you generally burgle in an attempt to be helpful?" Cranston asked. He knew he was being unfair, but the little man rubbed his hair the wrong way.

Brodder squirmed. That aspect evidently hadn't occurred to him.

"I don't know whether it was just malice that made Brodder go to the office or whether he has some real lead to the killer. But..." Cranston waited.

"Uh..." Brodder was sweating. "Well..." The room was quiet. The surroundings, certainly the most bizarre in which an attempt to find a killer had ever been held, was tight with suspense. The cold blue lights on the steel of the models, the harsh overhead light, the heavy faces of the police, all combined to make the atmosphere electric.

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Cranston thought tiredly that if this was in the movies, the camera at this point would come in for a close up for each of the people. The innocent would look very guilty and the guilty would look as innocent as hell.

As it was, all the men in the room looked very tired, very nervous and that was about all. This was foreign to everything in their experience. They were in a limelight which each would have been happy to escape and that was all there was to it.

If Murray was en route, he might enter at any moment. This made Cranston even more tired. He was a little fed up with the mystery man lurking just outside the threshold all through the case. He was a voice on the phone to Weston, the employer of private detectives, the wielder of enormous power. And he had been invisible all along.

Making some kind of peace with his conscience, Brodder broke the silence. He said, "One wouldn't want to have one's motives misinterpreted, but Ira, just before he had that terrible accident with the band saw, said something about having seen someone take my chisel."

There was a united sigh that whispered through the room. If Brodder knew who had taken his chisel to bury in Don's chest, then...

Barking with impatience, Weston said, "Well, man, speak up! Who took it?"

Brodder wilted. "I don't know. Ira said someone had. But he didn't want to be a tale teller. He knew I resented it bitterly when someone used my tools."

There, Cranston thought, he's upset enough to have forgotten to call himself "one." That was a relief.

"Then you went to that office looking for evidence just because you hated the man whose office it was and hoped he'd be implicated!"

It was a quite nauseating sight to see Brodder wilt on having his motives brought out into the light. He squeaked, "But you're making me sound like a monster. I'm not. I just wanted to help the police."

Bruce said harshly, "Why don't you shut up, little man, before you make everyone sick at their stomachs!" He made a bitter face. "We know how spiteful you can be to anyone who stands in your way."

The anonymous members of the Board of Directors, the men whose names Cranston didn't even know, nodded. They had seen Brodder in action trying to steam roller some motion through on the floor at a general meeting. Brodder was not very popular at that moment... or any moment.

When a man gets the power urge, he sacrifices something of essential humanity. At that moment, Brodder seemed to everyone there like a slug, a thing which crawls out from under a rock... only to scuttle back at the sight of light.

"I think," said Cranston, "that all the names and addresses of the visitors to the show, which the police so painfully gathered, can be forgotten. From the beginning, the murders were quite clearly spark plugged by someone in the club."

"I suppose so," Weston said. "But we could not fail to follow police procedure."

"Of course not. I'm not criticizing you, or your men for that matter." Cranston looked down at the toy robot at his feet and then at the spot where he had the black box hidden. Aloud he said, "You men, the members, may

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be able to help me by answering this question. Was anyone in the club having trouble with one of his models?" He paused, literally holding his breath. A lot depended on this wild guess.

"Yes, I was. One of my locos, a real honey of an o-4-o, a little yard engine was acting up. I couldn't find out what was wrong with it."

"And..." Cranston cued.

"Ummm... I don't think I know who it was that suggested a stroboscope might help," Bruce said.

Brodder jumped as if he'd been stabbed with a pin. Cranston saw it and said, "We know you make stroboscopes among other things at your factories, Brodder."

"Bbbut..."

"It was suggested then, Bruce," Cranston said, "that a stroboscope might find out the secret of what was wrong with your locomotive?"

Bruce nodded. "Yeah, it sounded like a good idea too, for the loco had a lot of cavitation. You know, shimmy. And whoever it was who thought of the stroboscope said that they used the instrument on full sized machines to find out their faults."

"That's perfectly true. You can make fine time-action studies with one of them."

Weston had taken about all he could. "What the hell is a stroboscope?"

Answering without words, Cranston flipped a switch. The pulsing light emanated from the concealed black box. The light came and went with a steady beat.

All in the room eyed the flickering light without saying anything. Cranston moved into the beam and waved his arm rapidly as though he were semaphoring a message.

There was a gasp from the police and from Weston. "Why... you can hardly see your arm move at all! It seems to be moving in slow motion!"

"Precisely the function of a stroboscope. If the pulsations of the light were properly attuned to the regularity of the movement of my arm, you would not be able to see my arm moving at all! It would seem to be frozen completely stock still!"

"The band saw..." Bruce breathed. "Ira thought it was turned off. He couldn't see the blade moving!"

"Exactly," Cranston said. "The most horrible murder device I have seen or heard of. Ira killed himself, but it was murder!"

The gathering silence was broken by the door opening. A man entered. He was in no way remarkable. Just a guy. He was well dressed of course, but not noticeably so.

The man whose name no one knew said, "Boss!"

Cranston said, "John F. Murray? I have been wanting to meet you for some time now."

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The man said, "Boss, this is Lamont Cranston and he's quite an operator!"

Shaking hands, Murray said, "Please go on, Mr. Cranston. I heard you say as I entered that someone killed themselves but that it was murder?"

Cranston nodded. "It was quite diabolical." The words struck off images in the men's minds. They were picturing the blade silent, motionless and deadly.

CHAPTER XI

AGAIN there was no sound, no movement. They were picturing a man going into the machine shop on some errand. Going in and seeing the band saw seemingly still, the sound of its motor covered by the sound of the other power tools in the room which were in motion. Then seeing what he wanted, he bends over the band saw table to get it and suddenly, with no warning... the seemingly motionless machine bites into his throat.

"We are getting far afield," Cranston said, deliberately breaking the mood. "You know now that the killer set the stroboscope in motion and committed murder merely by asking Ira to get him something from the machine shop, something which he had left there ahead of time..."

Cranston reached into his pocket and threw a pipe onto a table near him. "A pipe, perhaps. A nice anonymous pipe... a pipe that looks just like a million others... except for one thing. It was held in the murderer's teeth."

"And teeth," said Weston excitedly, "leave an identifiable pattern on the bit of a pipe! The killer slipped up there!"

"Yes, he did," Cranston said heavily. "It was just about his only slip too."

They all looked at the pipe in the center of the table. It was such an ordinary briar pipe. You can buy one like it in any corner cigar store for a dollar. The black hard rubber of the bit was chewed a little as is inevitable when you hold a pipe in your mouth.

The only difference between this pipe and any of the others was that little bitten area.

"This is all getting out of the proper chronology, however," Cranston said. "We were discussing the original murder what we may call the real murder. You see the real motive lies there. Ira's death was secondary; it was a cover-up kill. For, once the killer found out that Ira had seen him take Brodner's chisel that signed his death warrant! But if we are to get to the root of this we must get to the bottom of Don Darry's death."

This simplified things, Weston thought. Leave it to Lamont to pull the rabbit out of the hat. He smiled a little for the first time since murder went to the Model Show.

"Without establishing a complex time table, we still are in a more fortunate position in examining this murder than we usually are. For rare as it is for a killer to tell us when he committed a murder, this considerate killer did.

"If you remember, Don Darry was killed precisely at four o'clock, in the afternoon."

"How in the world can you know that?" Weston asked.

"Because, as I say, the killer was considerate. I have checked. Don Darry went into the death room at about

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five to four. Ordinarily I would suspect anyone who, after the event, said that such and such happened at precisely such a time. But we have the knowledge very neatly. You see, Darry went into the room five minutes before the regular hour for the flights of the model airplanes around that ring!" Cranston pointed to the ring in the center of the room where the stake that the planes were strung to projected up in the air like a pylon.

"The man who told me when Darry left this room remembered the time so precisely because he was about to fly his plane and he was having a little trouble with the gas engine. However, for the honor of the plane members of the club, he succeeded and his plane took off at the minute."

"Now..." Cranston looked around, "Darry went into the room by himself. It must have taken him a minute or two to get under that table on which the model trains ride, allow him a couple more seconds to get to work and then some minutes for the killer to crawl in under there after him and then out again. That gets us to four o'clock on the button, because I entered there just as the model plane took off."

"Neat is the word for it," Weston said. "Now where does that get us?"

"It allows us to do some rapid elimination. We can check on the alibis of who was where at precisely that time. And remember, this is not the ordinary case where nobody knows where anyone is. Bruce, for instance, had a regular schedule for the model trains that he was controlling. He finished his shift right at the hour and was relieved."

Brodder gasped and said, "But he was relieved early that afternoon. At least a couple of minutes early, I know that because I saw..."

"You're really a cute package, aren't you?" Bruce said to Brodder. "Yeah, I got off a little early, but for a good reason. I had to see a man about a dog."

The feeling was back in the room. The feeling that Cain first bequeathed us... the knowledge that there was murder in the air, that one man had struck a brother man down.

Owen said, "But is all this getting us anywhere?" He paused. "I was with you, Lamont, if you remember."

"Yes, all but for a couple of minutes when you ducked off to be a trouble shooter. Remember you had to fix a short circuit?"

"That's right. So much has happened that I'd almost forgotten that. Then I'm right in the soup with Bruce. I have no real alibi."

"I'm afraid not. Bruce's and your alibi are pretty much on a par with John F. Murray's alibi... about being on a yacht when he isn't!"

That got a little action. The man who represented Murray said, "Whoa, hold on. What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that last night when the whole world was led to think Murray was on his yacht, he wasn't. That's a neat set up if you want to get some secret things accomplished. After all, the men on the yacht are all Murray's all in his employ. I think they might be prevailed on to tell a few fibs if they were told to."

John F. Murray stiffened, but that was all. He looked at his employee.

"I can explain that," the man said anxiously.

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"Good. I'd like to hear an explanation."

The man cleared his throat. "I've been with Mr. Murray for quite a while. I don't know if you understand the peculiar position that his holdings put him in. If he's seen looking at a hotel a rumor is likely to start that he's buying it. Some smart operators will buy the hotel on the off chance that they can hold him up for a steep price, because it's known that when he sets his heart on something he will rarely change his mind.

"A whispered rumor that he's invested in a certain stock will start a wild buying spree. My main job is tracking these rumors down, trying to prevent insane speculation, protecting people against their own idiocies.

"The only way he can travel freely is like a king who goes about incognito. He gets a big bang out of dressing up like a poor man without a shave, in beat-up clothes, and passing himself off as anything that comes to his mind.

"That's what he has been doing for the last two weeks, while pretending to be working on his yacht. You've got to understand his position before you can..."

"I see," said Cranston. "He goes about like a modern Caliph of Baghdad. I can see where great wealth exacts a toll."

"Sure," the man said, "he pays a price. He pays a big price in lack of privacy and in lack of real friends."

"Stop," said Bruce cynically, "you're breaking my heart. The poor rich man. Nothing between him and happiness but a few lousy billion bucks. Rich or poor, I always say it's nice to have money."

"Let's not side-track," Weston said. "Please go on, Lamont."

"Right." Cranston looked down at the toy robot at his feet. He picked it up and held it so all could see it. "I give you the murder motive."

He set it down at his feet again and switched the lever on the back of the tiny toy so that it was set in motion. They all looked down at the silly little toy. This, this toy... a murder motive? The question was unspoken, but vivid.

Cranston gestured to the boy kleptomaniac. "You stole this from these rooms, did you not?"

The boy nodded miserably.

"It was fortunate that he did, otherwise its relevance might not have occurred to me... at least not as rapidly."

The men in the room looked at Cranston. Then they looked down at the toy again. It just didn't add up. But they waited.

"I don't like to pontificate," Cranston said, "but I feel a lecture coming on, a lecture about economics."

That puzzled them even more.

"Given that you have two inventions. One an invention that will save a big company a lot of money a year, but that necessitates a lot of rebuilding and retooling. And on the other hand, a simple little invention, oh, something like a paper clip... or putting an eraser on the end of a pencil... or simply a little toy novelty.

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Without much thinking, you'd imagine the inventor of the big gadget would make a bigger pile of money than the man who invented let's say a paper clip."

Some of them nodded. That seemed clear.

"You'd be wrong, of course," Cranston said to the men who had nodded. "The big invention would be bought for a lump sum. The inventor would get his price and that would be that. The inventor of the cheap novelty, on the other hand, would be able to get a lump sum, plus some tiny amount on each of the articles produced. The man who invented the pencil eraser, I assure you, made a lot more money than the man who invented the helicopter.

"You can see why. Mass production is the answer. A mil, a tenth part of a cent on each paper clip or eraser, adds up to a lot more than five hundred dollars on each helicopter put in production.

"This toy at my feet is such an invention." On the heels of his words, Cranston reached down and flipped the switch on the back of the toy mechanical man. The toy teetered from foot to foot and then stepped out across the room.

Cranston said: "The robot can do at least one thing that is really man-like. It can point out the murderer."

That really did it. All eyes focused, on the silly tin toy which, aping manhood, strode precariously across the floor. Watching it was like waiting for the finger of fate to twitch and grab a person to damnation.

The only sound in the room was that of the tinplate feet of the robot as they tap danced their way across the cement of the floor. It was leaving Cranston behind now, weaving and wavering a path towards the only man who could be its and the law's objective.

If the circumstances had been any different the scene would have been funny. Adult men standing and sitting, all frozen in their positions, eyes glued to the almost random progress of the robot.

Bruce said, "The Ruthless Robot seems to have in it the blood of Frankenstein..."

There were no other words as the toy walked up to the killer. Cranston said in command, "Stop." The toy came to a halt before the murderer. In some strange way it almost came to attention as it finished its task.

The silence hung heavy in the room. Each person was doing a sum in mental arithmetic and coming up with the answer in the form of the name of the murderer.

The killer got to his feet slowly. He said, "All right. I suppose anyone who thinks they can get away with murder is a fool. It seemed so easy... so easy." His voice was tired.

He stepped back from the people. They withdrew from him with loathing manifest on their faces. "Here, don't worry. I'm not going to get violent. Don't look at me that way... don't! I'm just the same man you've all known and liked... or..."

His face contorted: "Maybe, I'm not."

They all looked at his face and it was as though a mask had been removed.

"I guess," he said, "the successful murderer doesn't really get away with anything. For if he does get away with it, he is no longer the person he was before he killed. There is some change that comes about without his

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even realizing it."

He covered his face with his hands. "It's a case of the winner losing. I have felt a change coming over me. I can justify my killing of Don Darry... I really can." He pleaded with the unconvinced faces of his friends. "But even if I convinced you... I could never make you see why I thought I had to kill Ira..."

"Ira... my friend. When I saw his decapitated head I wanted to call it quits then. Somehow when you think of murder in the abstract as a game, a chess game, where you're trying to outwit the combined forces of society and law and order, it all seems exciting. A battle of wits..."

"But when you see the victim of your violence..." He retched. "I hadn't taken that into account. I never pictured it that way."

"Blood changes the game from paper and ink," Cranston said. "Changes it fast."

"So fast... if I'd felt I had the right, I would have prayed for the clock to be turned back." The killer held out his hands to the nearest policeman. "Put the cuffs on. I'll sign a confession whenever you want me to."

The metallic clink of the handcuffs fastening around the murderer's wrists was the only sound. He walked heavily towards the door along with the cop he was fastened to by steel links.

At the door he threw his shoulders back with pretended bravado and twisting his lips said, "Nevertheless, Lamont, if you hadn't been here, I think I could have outwitted the cops!"

The door closed on him.

CHAPTER XII

THE man who represented John F. Murray said, "Wow! You saved the necks of a lot of my men, Mr. Cranston!"

"Oh? How's that? You mean Mr. Murray was having his secret police try to track down the killer before the regular police?"

The man nodded meekly. "And were we wrong! I had all our facts ready. I had the facts but they pointed in the wrong direction. I was going to accuse that young lad, Bruce Bedrick, of the crime."

"Me? How'd you figure that?" Bruce asked. "I had it all wrong too. I thought it was Brodder."

Brodder was past protesting. He said, "But I was right all along. I was right in going to Harry Owen's office to look for some proof."

"Sure, you picked the killer but for the wrong reasons," Cranston said. "The odds were pretty good in your favor. There weren't many potential suspects."

The man said: "I never spotted Owen as the killer, at all. I thought he was a good friend of Don Darry's and Ira Downs."

"He was a good friend of Ira's," Bruce said. "But how'd you figure me for the hot squat?"

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"We found out it was you who really invented that thing before you went into the army." The man pointed to the toy robot on the floor.

"Sure, it was my original idea. Don worked on it while I was away and sold it to Owen. But I could never have proved it in court. He had me by the short hairs."

Weston said, "Lamont, you mean Owen killed Don Darry just so he wouldn't have to pay him ten cents royalty on each of the toys?"

Cranston nodded. "That was the point I was trying to make before. Owen had all the production headaches, took all the risks, wound up with perhaps a twenty cent net profit on the toy and then had to give Darry half of each of the twenty centses he made. It was a tough spot for him."

"But Don put up the money for Owen to go into business," Bruce said.

"I don't think so. I have no way to prove it without going through Owen's books," Cranston said. "I think Owen told us Don had put up the money he had gotten from the invention he sold to Murray as a cover up, so we wouldn't see the clear money motive he had."

"Could be," Bruce agreed.

Weston looked around, rubbed his hands and said, "That cleans that up. We can allow the reporters in now. I am deeply indebted to you, Lamont, for helping me the way you have."

Bruce said, "Let's see if I have this straight in my mind. Owen followed Don into the other room, crawled under the scenery under the guise of helping Don with whatever he was doing and stabbed him with the chisel."

"Right," said Cranston, getting up and gathering the brief case and the robot together. He walked over to disconnect the stroboscope.

"Then he came out and overheard Ira telling Brodder that someone had taken his chisel."

Cranston nodded.

"He had bought the stroboscope down to help me find what was wrong with my loco."

"Yes, it was all connected up in the machine shop for you," Cranston said. "It was a stroke of evil genius that showed him how to use the stroboscope to kill Ira. He turned it on, geared the flashing of the light to the speed of the band saw, left his pipe behind the band saw, came out, spoke to me, turned to Ira and asked him to get his pipe while my attention was on something else."

"Ira went in, thought the band saw was still because of the pulsation of the light and reached down for the pipe. That's all."

"Right, once more," Cranston said. "Owen was with me while he was murdering Ira in the other room by remote control!"

Bruce said, "I still can't believe it. Harry Owen a killer!"

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"Don't forget," Cranston said as he watched Murray get up from his chair where he had been sitting quietly all through the denouement, "that all, or most killers, have families, friends; that they are human beings like the rest of us; until, that split second when they kill... and step apart from us."

Murray was near now. He said, "You realize, Mr. Cranston, why I was so interested in the case?"

"Because you thought you might become embroiled?"

"More than embroiled. There are plenty of papers which would like to see me in the shadow of the chair. It looked for a while as if I were being framed for the role of murderer."

Nodding, Bruce turned to leave. He turned back when he heard John F. Murray say, "Just between us, Mr. Cranston, I am more than a little interested in criminology. I never heard about the identifiability of pipe stems." He smiled. "I imagine that if a person had something peculiarly wrong with their teeth, you might be able, to prove that a certain pipe was theirs... but..." His voice trailed off.

Cranston looked over to where Weston was busy with the reporters and said, "I thought Weston played his role perfectly, didn't you? I had to rehearse him in it early this morning.

"Of course, you're right; the business with the pipe stem and the murderer's teeth was bluff... all bluff!"

THE END