

THE RIDDLE OF THE RANGOON RUBY

Walter B. Gibson

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THE RIDDLE OF THE RANGOON RUBY

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CHAPTER I

A bluish light shone down upon the surface of a polished table, amid surrounding blackness. Two long-fingered hands moved into the glow like living things. One hand drew a pad and pen from the darkness; the other stretched into the gloom and pressed an unseen switch that gave an audible click. A tiny yellow light glimmered in the dark beyond the bluish ray. A quiet voice came over an amplifier: "Burbank speaking."

The response was whispered: "Report."

"Final report on Rangoon Ruby. Revised list of probable or potential purchasers..."

As Burbank recited the names, the long-fingered hand wrote them deftly, swiftly on the pad. This black-walled room was the secret sanctum of The Shadow, master of darkness, who used reports that came through Burbank to plan campaigns against coming crimes. When Burbank finished, The Shadow again responded:

"Report received. Await instructions."

This time, the whisper had a sibilant, almost sinister touch. The bluish light clicked off. A cloaked figure stirred amid the thickened gloom; then all lay silent within the blacked-out sanctum.

When The Shadow next appeared, it was in the broad daylight of high noon on an obscure side street in Manhattan. No longer a cloaked figure, he was in his favorite guise of Lamont Cranston, a casual, well-attired man-about-town who sauntered up to a parked cab topped by a sign that said "OFF DUTY." Cranston entered the cab and roused the dozing driver with the order, "Club Piazza, Shrevvy."

"OK, boss." A dozen minutes later, Shrevvy pulled up beside an East Side cafe, where Cranston went through the pretense of paying the fare, which wasn't really necessary, since he owned the cab and kept Shrevvy on a full-time salary. Inside the Club Piazza, an attractive, keen-eyed brunette greeted Cranston with a smile, and he joined Margo Lane at her corner table, carefully leaving space for another guest. That action brought a quizzical look from Margo, and noting it, Cranston asked smilingly:

"How would you like to meet the unluckiest man in the world?"

"You certainly can't mean yourself, Lamont –"

"Naturally, not. Just run your eye down this column" – Cranston handed Margo the list from Burbank – "and tell me if you recognize any names."

Near the bottom of the list, Margo looked up suddenly.

"Carter Mycroft!" she exclaimed. "Why, I know his niece Zelda very well. I've promised to visit her at her uncle's estate, but it's a good three hours' drive from here, maybe more." With a side glance, Margo added the query, "You mean Carter Mycroft is joining us here for lunch?"

"No, no. I just left space for Police Commissioner Weston and here he is now. We'll get back to that list during lunch."

Commissioner Ralph Weston, middle-aged and self-important, even to his close-clipped military mustache, had just entered the cafe; now, spying Cranston's table, he came over and sat down, giving Margo an affable nod, which he followed with the brisk demand:

"Now, tell me, Cranston. What's this you've learned about the Rangoon Ruby that brings bad luck to anyone who owns it? I thought it was safely put away in the International Museum."

"So it was," returned Cranston, "but it brought them bad luck, too. So they sold it for six hundred thousand dollars to the highest bidder on this list, only they won't say which was the unlucky buyer."

Avidly, Weston checked the list, then commented:

"More than half of these men live here in New York City, so I can understand your worry, Cranston. If one of those becomes known as the buyer, he will automatically be a target for robbery – or perhaps kidnapping – or even murder! It is my duty to alert every one of these estimable citizens" – Weston was checking the New Yorkers – "in order to protect them. To be forewarned is to be forearmed."

Weston read the names aloud after he had checked them, which gave Cranston the opportunity to sidetone to

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Margo:

"He isn't including Carter Mycroft. Why don't you slide out and make a long-distance call to Zelda, arranging to go up there?"

Margo slid out from the other end of the alcove seat. Ten minutes later, she returned to find that Lamont had already ordered her favorite dish. With a thankful nod, Margo informed in a bored tone:

"My friend Zelda is driving in for a dinner this evening and wants me to go back upstate with her and stay over for a few days –"

"So I suppose you will have to do it," interposed Cranston. "Meanwhile, I have been telling the commissioner that there is one way we might learn who bought the Rangoon Ruby, or Thebaw's Star, as it is sometimes called, in honor of King Thebaw of Burma, who was the first to suffer from its curse. It is the finest of all star rubies, a term applied to gems that have streaks that radiate out from their center, forming a six-pointed star.

"Modern science learned that rubies were a corundum gem and therefore could be reproduced synthetically. Several years ago, the International Museum allowed Jon Tolliver, a noted New York jeweler, to make a perfect – or almost perfect – replica of Thebaw's Star, so that it could be exhibited at conventions all over the world. Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – nobody wanted to see the jinx gem.

"So Tolliver offered it in his exclusive catalog for twelve thousand dollars, about what it cost him. Now, I have been telling Commissioner Weston that whoever bought the Rangoon Ruby would also buy the Tolliver replica, if only to keep it out of other hands. So after lunch, we are all going to Tolliver's where I hope to buy it as a gift for your next birthday –"

"Which was three months ago," reminded Margo, "but I don't mind pushing it four months ahead."

All bantering aside, they went to Tolliver's; not in Shrevvy's cab, as they should have, but in the commissioner's big car, which naturally could have created comment among onlookers who saw it pull up beside Tolliver's rather fastidious place. Also, it was Weston who insisted upon a private meeting with Jon Tolliver himself, which took place in a beautifully paneled office that had belonged to three generations of Tollivers.

Also, Commissioner Weston insisted upon telling why his friend Cranston wanted to buy the replica of the star ruby, which caused Mr. Tolliver to raise his eyebrows and say, "Of course! Of course!" as though he did understand all that Weston was saying. By then, Tolliver was opening a small safe built into the exquisite wall paneling. From among a few dozen jewel boxes he brought out one that was elegantly inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Laying it on the table, Tolliver placed a finger against the catch and announced:

"The Rangoon Ruby! How beautiful it looks against the golden velvet which causes its crimson hue to shine in full glory!"

Tolliver pressed the catch; the inlaid box popped open. All eyes were fascinated by a wealth of golden velvet; but there wasn't any contrast. The replica of the Rangoon Ruby wasn't there!

CHAPTER II

Finding the replica of the Rangoon Ruby gone, old Tolliver pawed frantically among the other jewel boxes in his safe, fearful that they, too, had been rifled. All proved intact, but he still forgot his visitors while he shrieked wildly for someone named Cobby, who proved to be a solemn, baldish clerk who came from the outer office. Gesturing to the safe, Tolliver regained his voice:

"The replica – the synthetic Rangoon Ruby! It's gone!"

"Why – why – of course," stammered Cobby. "I – I sold it only a few days ago. Didn't you see my memo, Mr. Tolliver?"

"Sold it! Without waiting until I returned! To whom?"

"To a customer who asked for it. I had never seen him before, but it was in the catalog. He gave me cash, all in hundred-dollar bills, but I kept him here while I sent Marcia around to the bank with the money, to make sure it wasn't counterfeit."

"And you didn't even ask his name?"

"Oh, yes. It's Henry Yomer. I put that on the memo, too, along with his address in Greenwich Village."

Somewhat mollified, Tolliver found the memo and gave it to Commissioner Weston along with his apology for becoming so excited. Cranston and Margo left with the commissioner, and while riding in the official car, Cranston summarized the situation.

"Whoever bought the original Rangoon Ruby from the International Museum could have sent someone to buy the replica, too," stated Cranston, "just as a safeguard against someone else buying it in the hope of stealing the original and leaving the replica in its place."

Grimly, Weston agreed on both counts and suggested that Cranston check with some of the wealthy New Yorkers listed among those who might have bought the original ruby. They dropped Margo Lane off to do some shopping before she met Zelda Mycroft for dinner; and a few hours later, she called Cranston at the Cobalt Club to check any new developments.

"No results with New York men," Cranston told her, "so it's still likely that Carter Mycroft bought the original, so learn all you can out there. By the way, the police checked the name and address of the man who bought the replica from Tolliver's clerk."

"What did they learn?"

"Nobody by that name lives there. In fact, nobody lives there at all. The address is a parking lot."

Margo enjoyed the dinner party with Zelda and her friends, so it was well into the evening when Zelda summoned her limousine and they started the three-hour trip out to Mycroft's. Zelda, a vivacious blonde, was in a chatty mood, telling Margo what went on there. Carter Mycroft had been buying up hundreds of acres of abandoned farms and woodland, much to the annoyance of another large landowner named Peter Darcy, who, in Zelda's frank opinion, was almost as grasping and self-willed as her uncle. To confirm that opinion, Zelda put a query to the limousine's chauffeur, a quiet, competent driver named Tilson.

"It began when Uncle Carter bought the Homestead Dairy," Zelda told Margo, "which Darcy could have bought just as cheap – or cheaper." Here, she leaned forward and said, "Couldn't he have, Tilson? Or could he have?"

"Quite right," agreed Tilson, "he could have."

"Anyway," continued Zelda, "Uncle Carter cut off the right-of-way that Darcy used for horseback riders to go through to the dude ranch he had started. So Darcy dug up some old deeds – or maybe titles – which were they, Tilson? Deeds or titles?"

"Deeds, I believe, Miss Mycroft."

"And the deeds," continued Zelda, "gave Darcy the right-of-way. So Darcy sued Uncle Carter to get it, which was the wrong thing to do."

"Why wrong?" asked Margo. "Darcy was right, wasn't he?"

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"From his standpoint, yes," agreed Zelda, "but from Uncle Carter's, no. Anybody who crosses up Uncle Carter is wrong in his book. Right, Tilson?"

"Right, Miss Mycroft."

"Fortunately," Zelda told Margo, "a man named Donald Keswick is buying the old Homestead Dairy from Uncle Carter. He and Darcy have come to the house to discuss it and they're coming again tomorrow. But Uncle Carter won't talk to Darcy except through a lawyer, so I guess it will be up to Keswick to settle it."

It was near midnight when the limousine swung in through the main gate of Mycroft Manor, as the extensive estate was called. Traversing woods and shrub-studded lawn, the car approached a sprawling mansion that was barely outlined in the pale moonlight. Then, suddenly, a mammoth glow immersed the entire building, with spotlights gleaming from every corner and rotary searchlights sweeping from along the roof.

"It all works automatically," explained Zelda, laughing at Margo's surprised gasp, "whenever a car drives in at night. If any prowler should happen to be about, he would be spotted instantly." With that, Zelda added a gasp of her own and pointed toward the portico that fronted the mansion. "Why, there's one now!"

Margo saw a streaky shape emerge beyond the shrubbery, and the car's headlights showed it to be a human form as they came beneath the portico. There, a burly man in knickers and parka waved a welcome.

"Brent Huling," introduced Zelda as she and Margo alighted. "One of my uncle's oldest friends. He likes to take late strolls."

"And smoke my pipe afterward," added Huling, with a broad smile, "if I can only find it."

He was bringing a tobacco pouch from one pocket, but the other proved empty. Then, as they entered the front door into a large living room with a broad stairway beyond, Huling spied his pipe on an ash stand and promptly reclaimed it. Zelda, meanwhile, was introducing Margo to a tall, slightly stoutish woman named Pauline Dotha, who proved to be Mycroft's housekeeper and took the title as a definite compliment.

Also present was a dapper, thin-haired man whose worried expression was relieved by a twitchy smile. Margo took it that he was Mycroft's secretary and her guess was right. His name was Ray Cragmore and he happened to be working late as usual. Carter Mycroft had retired early, being an early riser, so Margo wouldn't meet him until tomorrow.

For that Margo was just as glad. When Pauline showed her to her room and Tilson brought her bags from the car, Margo bowed a good-night to the others and Huling waved cheerily through a cloud of pipe smoke. Alone in a lavishly furnished second-floor room, Margo gazed from the window and studied the shadowy shapes that wavered across the moonlit lawn. Somehow, she had an ominous feeling that all was not well at Mycroft Manor.

CHAPTER III

Margo Lane met Carter Mycroft at breakfast the next morning, and the experience was a shocker. She had expected Zelda's uncle to be robust and pleasant mannered, like his pipe-smoking friend Brent Huling. Instead, Mycroft was scrawny, with a cadaverous expression that accentuated a wide, lipless grimace that was anything but the smile he meant it to be, though it could all have been pretense on his part. His tone, polite in an oily way when he spoke to Margo, became an off-guard snarl when he called for his secretary, Cragmore, to bring memos, letters, and contracts. All during breakfast, Cragmore was bobbing in and out; and after gulping his food between times, Mycroft gave a curt nod with a toothy wince that was supposed to be a parting smile and headed for his upstairs study to continue his day's work.

Margo was skilled at maintaining her poise under such circumstances, so all during breakfast, she had chatted casually with the other persons present whenever Mycroft was snarling for Cragmore or had his mouth too full to talk. Margo noted that Zelda had a quick way of smiling and saying, "Oh, yes!" to almost anything, and it was evident that she had cultivated that habit in order to humor her irascible uncle. It was plain, too, how Pauline Dotha, the housekeeper, had acquired her self-important, almost pompous air. Whenever Carter Mycroft glanced her way, the housekeeper gave an admiring, approving nod, to certify whatever he had to say. Finally, Brent Huling was all smiles, all the time. It was plain that all three were flattering Mycroft to further their individual interests, which obviously centered around Mycroft's wealth.

All three relaxed as soon as Mycroft went upstairs, which further confirmed Margo's opinion, and in their discussion of the day's plans, Margo gained a good idea of how Mycroft Manor operated. It was plain that Pauline Dotha had full charge of everything about the house and that the others were glad to let her have it. It left Zelda free to drive anywhere she wanted in her own car, while Huling was equally free to ramble over the estate. As for Cragmore, Mycroft kept him continually on the go, and when he wasn't upstairs in the study, he sat like a watchdog in the living room to prevent unwanted visitors from intruding on Mycroft's private domain.

Tilson, the chauffeur, was always on call except when he went to New York or some other destination with the limousine. If kitchen appliances failed, Pauline would call for Tilson to fix them or drive a station wagon to the nearest town to get new parts. Cragmore called on him for minor duties, and occasionally, Carter Mycroft personally summoned the chauffeur for some special purpose. Margo saw a few examples of this and learned more from Zelda as they strolled about the grounds. Mycroft Manor also had a gardener, a gamekeeper, and some stable hands who took care of the horses, but none of them ever came to the mansion.

Lunch proved a pleasant event, as Carter Mycroft was too busy to come down from his study. During the meal, Zelda decided to do some shopping in the nearby town of Hilldale, so she and Margo drove over there in one of the Mycroft cars. That gave Margo a chance to get to a pay phone and put in a call to Cranston at an unlisted number which she thought was a room in the Cobalt Club, but which actually connected with The Shadow's sanctum. However, it was Cranston's voice that answered.

Tersely, Margo reported all that she had learned, adding that she and Zelda were going horseback riding later but would be back at the mansion by dinner time. That brought a concluding response from Cranston:

"Good enough, Margo. I might be dropping by myself, if I can get clear of the commissioner, so be on the lookout."

It took Cranston most of the afternoon to check out the last of the New Yorkers who might have bought the Rangoon Ruby and make sure that none of them had. Again in the sanctum as The Shadow, he spread a large-scale map beneath the bluish light and checked the location of Mycroft Manor in relation to the Hilldale Airfield. Calling Burbank, The Shadow told him to contact Harry Vincent, an agent who happened to be in another upstate town, and tell him to have his car at the Hilldale Airfield within an hour and a half.

Later, a swift private plane took off from a New Jersey field with ample time to keep the appointed meeting. Piloted by The Shadow, it changed course just enough to fly directly over Mycroft Manor as the sun was setting above the hills beyond. The visibility was good enough for The Shadow to note the curving driveways leading

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outward from the mansion, with two cars moving like tiny toys along one, and another, which looked like a station wagon, pulling up beside the portico. From behind the mansion, two figures on horseback were halting to look upward as they came along a bridle path. With a low, pleased laugh, the cloaked pilot veered his craft toward the airfield.

Back at the mansion, Zelda Mycroft was voicing indignation as she and Margo dismounted from their horses and started in through a back door.

"Those hedge-hopping scatterbrains ought to be stopped!" stormed Zelda. "It's an invasion of privacy to fly that low –"

Zelda was interrupted as they reached a hallway leading to the living room. Their path was blocked by Pauline Dotha, who spread her hands imperiously and raised a finger to her lips for silence. Then:

"Donald Keswick came this afternoon," undertoned Pauline, "and while he was talking to your uncle, Peter Darcy arrived, but Cragmore made him stay downstairs. When Keswick came down, Cragmore put them in that little alcove off the library, so they could look at the old deeds and plans. They are still there. Come!"

Pauline led the girls past the living room, where Margo caught a brief glimpse of Tilson talking earnestly to Cragmore. Continuing along the narrow hall, Pauline motioned Zelda into a small storage closet and nodded for Margo to follow. In a hushed tone, the housekeeper told them:

"Keep your ears to the wall. It's thin enough to hear everything. So listen!"

As they listened, they heard a squeamish voice exclaim in a high falsetto:

"I've had enough of this! I've won my case, but Mycroft keeps appealing it. He doesn't care if he loses fifty thousand dollars if it costs me five thousand I can't afford. I could kill the man, I tell you, and I will!"

In a shocked tone, Zelda confided to Margo:

"That's Peter Darcy, who owns the dude ranch!"

A harsh, forceful voice came through the wall:

"Calm yourself, Darcy. I've told you I'll take care of Mycroft when the time comes."

"That," whispered Zelda, "is Donald Keswick."

"You'd kill him?" came Darcy's scream. "Like I would?"

"Like you wouldn't," responded Keswick's tone, "because you don't have the guts to do it, Darcy."

"I'll show you I have the guts, Keswick. Look at the way Mycroft wants to cheat me. If that was happening to you, Keswick –"

"It is happening to me, Darcy. I have double the reason to get rid of him. He's using me to cancel you out."

"So you'll take care of Mycroft?"

"If you won't, yes."

The discussion cut off suddenly, leaving Margo and Zelda staring at each other, totally aghast.

CHAPTER IV

For a few tense minutes, Margo and Zelda debated what to do; then, with one accord, they left the closet that had served as listening post and went back along the passage to look for Pauline Dotha and tell her what they had heard. The housekeeper was nowhere in sight.

"She's probably gone to the kitchen to arrange for dinner," decided Zelda. "Let's go into the living room and talk to Cragmore and Tilson instead."

Neither the secretary nor the chauffeur was in the living room, but Brent Huling was there, wearing his usual walking attire. The broad-faced houseguest gave the girls his customary smile.

"It's getting dark out," remarked Huling, "so I thought I'd stroll in and have a smoke before dinner." He clapped the pocket of his parka and gave a puzzled glance toward the ash stand. "I wonder where I mislaid my pipe this time!"

"I wonder where Cragmore and Tilson are," said Zelda. "We saw them in here only five or ten minutes ago."

"They're out under the portico," informed Huling, turning from a bookshelf where he was looking for his pipe. "They're unloading something from the station wagon. Here they are now."

Cragmore and Tilson were coming in through the front door, carrying a large steel filing cabinet between them. They set their burden in the corner and turned with puzzled expressions when Zelda exclaimed:

"How long ago did Darcy and Keswick go into the library?"

"Darcy was there while Keswick was up talking to Mr. Mycroft," stated Cragmore. "I guess Keswick came down and joined him over a half-hour ago. Wouldn't you say so, Tilson?"

"Maybe less," rejoined Tilson. "They were both in there when I brought the file cabinets from the express office."

"That's right," agreed Cragmore. "You wanted to speak to Mr. Mycroft, so I went upstairs and told him. He said to send you up –"

"And when I went up, he said to tell you to help bring in the cabinets," added Tilson. "So we're bringing them in now."

"And so!" exclaimed Zelda. "Neither of you saw them come out of the library!"

"Naturally not," returned Cragmore, "because they went out by the side door. They'd parked their cars around by the garage, as most visitors do."

Cragmore crossed the living room, opened the door to the library, and gestured toward the side door in the far wall. A light was burning in a corner alcove, so the secretary went over and pressed the switch that turned it off. When he returned, Zelda was telling Tilson and Huling what she and Margo had overheard. When Cragmore heard it, his twitchy lips became twitchier than ever. He pounced for the living room telephone, dialed a number, and exclaimed:

"I'm calling Sheriff Blassingame! Mr. Mycroft ordered me to do so in case of an emergency."

The call was brief. Cragmore finished it by announcing that the sheriff would arrive within a quarter-hour. Tilson decided that would just allow time to bring in the remaining file cabinets, and Huling volunteered to help. That brought an excited nod from Cragmore, as he exclaimed:

"Then I'll go right up and tell Mr. Mycroft –"

"In your present shape," interposed Huling, "you'd better stay right here. Carter hates to have people become hysterical."

"You're right, Mr. Huling," agreed Tilson. Turning to Zelda, the chauffeur suggested politely: "Why don't you go up, Miss Mycroft? If your uncle wants details, you're the one person who can give them."

By now, Zelda had become quite calm, so she willingly agreed and went up to the study. When she returned, the men were bringing in the last cabinet and Margo Lane was talking to Pauline Dotha, who had arrived from the kitchen. Noting Zelda's expression, the housekeeper asked:

"What is it, Miss Mycroft?"

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"The door is locked, as usual," said Zelda, shakily, "only when I rapped and called repeatedly, my uncle didn't answer."

"Tell the others," decided Pauline. "Then wait for the sheriff."

Margo Lane was almost in agreement, only she would have phrased it: "Wait for The Shadow."

At that precise moment, a darkened car was stopping on a little-used driveway beyond the Mycroft Mansion. The sky was still light, but the ground was well streaked with blackness that obscured even the shrubbery. Within the car, a cloaked passenger spoke to the driver in a whispered tone:

"Wait here, Vincent. You will be beyond the radius of the automatic floodlights, if they begin to function."

The car door closed softly, proving that the cloaked passenger was gone. From behind the wheel, Harry Vincent studied the streaky lawn intently, as he always did when The Shadow was on the rove, but not once did he discern a moving form that could have represented solid blackness.

There was a lighted window on the second floor that marked Mycroft's study, and when it momentarily blinked from view, Harry gained his only clue to his chief's whereabouts. He knew that The Shadow had scaled the sheer wall and entered the study window. With that, Harry leaned back and relaxed, though he might not have if he had been there with his chief.

The Shadow had seen Carter Mycroft leaning forward on his desk with his back toward the window, apparently asleep, so the cloaked visitor had eased in through the window and edged toward one side for a view from a better angle. That view proved that Mycroft was not just dozing; he was dead. Beside his outspread left hand was a revolver that accounted for a gaping death wound in his left temple. His right hand, closed in clawlike fashion, was about to clutch a thin golden chain which terminated in a magnificent ruby, streaked with rays of white that spread starlike amid its depths.

Some unsigned letters lay beneath the revolver; a desk drawer was open on the left. The door of the study had a latch-type lock, but no inner bolt; and a man's pipe was lying on a file cabinet in the corner. Before The Shadow had time to survey the scene further, a hammering came from the door, punctuated by a raucous voice:

"Are you there, Mycroft? This is Sheriff Blassingame! Open up! You hear me, Mycroft? I'm the sheriff!"

Wheeling, The Shadow reached the window and was over the sill in one long sweep, just as the sheriff ceased his pounding and issued new orders:

"Break the door down, boys! And get somebody to those floodlights. Turn them on and fan out everywhere!"

From the parked car, Harry Vincent saw The Shadow emerge like a living blot. Half a minute later, other figures moved back and forth within the window, momentarily cutting off the light. Another half-minute and the entire mansion was bathed in a huge glow that carried well out on the lawn, with sweeping floodlights that stretched their probing glint still farther.

The Shadow was right; they had parked the car well beyond the range as estimated by Margo Lane. But where was The Shadow? Shrubs and trees were now outlined in bare detail; and Harry caught only momentary glimpses of what could have been a living figure scudding from one to another. Then, as Harry gave a hopeless, helpless shrug, he heard the car door close on the right as a quiet voice ordered:

"Drive to the mansion, Vincent. We have an appointment there with Mr. Carter Mycroft."

As Harry swung the car along the driveway into the full glare of the light, he glanced to the right to find that The Shadow was no longer beside him. His companion was Lamont Cranston.

CHAPTER V

Sheriff Blassingame, big, bold, and bluff, faced the solemn group in the living room of Mycroft Manor and came right to the point. First, he introduced Lamont Cranston as a man who had flown out to Hilldale with credentials from Police Commissioner Weston of New York City and been brought over in a car by his friend Harry Vincent, who had met him at the airfield. A deputy had stopped them near the mansion, and learning their mission, had brought them to meet the sheriff.

Cranston took it up from there, as he told the group:

"We have just learned that Carter Mycroft was the purchaser of the famous Rangoon Ruby, valued at six hundred thousand dollars. The pendant found on Mycroft's desk is either the actual ruby or the only known replica of the famous gem.

"And the replica is worth a lot less," put in the sheriff. "So whichever this is" – he dangled the pendant as he spoke – "it's murder we're dealing with; not suicide, like somebody fixed it to look. He was shot with his own gun from his desk drawer by somebody he trusted. So who was the last person to see him alive?"

Nobody wanted that distinction, as whoever admitted it might be automatically tabbed as murderer. So the sheriff took them one by one.

"You first," he said to Cragmore. "You were Mycroft's secretary, always going in and out of his study. Who could have seen Mycroft last, if you didn't?"

"I wouldn't know," returned Cragmore nervously, "but I can tell you who did see him after I did. Tilson here" – he gestured to the chauffeur – "because Mr. Mycroft said to send him up to the study and I did."

"I don't go with that, Cragmore," countered Tilson. "When I told you Mr. Mycroft wanted you to help me bring in the cabinets, I said you should go up and ask him yourself, to make sure."

"Only I took your word for it," argued Cragmore, "but I had some papers to gather, so I didn't come out right away. But I didn't go up to the study, either. I didn't want to bother Mr. Mycroft."

The sheriff turned to Brent Huling with the query:

"Was Cragmore here in the living room when you came in?"

"Why, no," replied Huling. "He was out front, helping Tilson unload the cabinets. I suppose he could have gone up to the study, but so could I. Only I didn't. I wanted a smoke, so I was looking for my pipe."

Triumphantly, Blassingame brought the pipe from his pocket.

"Would this be it, Huling? We found it in Mycroft's study."

Only briefly, Huling's self-assurance faded. Then:

"I stopped up to see Mycroft right after lunch," he recalled. "Cragmore will confirm that fact." Then, as Cragmore nodded, Huling added with full composure, "That's when I must have left my pipe there."

Before the sheriff could quiz Huling further, two deputies came in with a baldish, scared-looking man who was trying to stammer explanations.

"He says he drove out from New York to see Carter Mycroft," stated a deputy, "and when we told him Mycroft was dead and maybe murdered, he tried to turn around and go back. So we brought him in."

"I only wanted to warn Mr. Mycroft," pleaded the scared man. "Only today I heard he'd bought the original Rangoon Ruby –"

"Does anybody here know this man?"

As the interruption came from Sheriff Blassingame, Margo Lane looked quickly toward Lamont Cranston, who gave her a slight nod.

"Why, his name is Cobley!" exclaimed Margo. "He works for Tolliver, the jeweler, who sold the replica of the Rangoon Ruby!"

Cobley gave a grateful nod, and as the sheriff raised the jeweled pendant, the baldish man grasped it and raised it into the light, where he studied it with the eye of an expert, finally bringing a jeweler's lens from his pocket for a closer look.

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"It's the replica," defined Cobley. "I can tell it by the tiny bubbles found in all synthetic sapphires and rubies." He paused, his eyes brightening, then added: "And there's the man who bought it!"

Cobley was pointing straight at Huling, who gave a shrug and spread his hands in acknowledgment.

"I bought it for Carter Mycroft," asserted Huling, "and I gave a false name and address because he told me to. I cashed his check at his New York bank and brought back the replica. Tilson drove me into New York that day. I'm sure he remembers that trip."

"Sure," acknowledged Tilson. "I remember it."

Sheriff Blassingame pondered what came next. Then:

"Tell me, Miss Mycroft," he asked, "weren't you actually the last person to go up to your uncle's study?"

"Yes," admitted Zelda, "but the door was locked and all I could do was knock. I'm sure he must have been dead by then."

"And you, Miss Dotha." The sheriff turned to the housekeeper. "Where were you while all this was going on?"

"I was looking into the kitchen," said Pauline, "to see how dinner was coming along, but the servants were too busy to notice me. It was the same when I looked into the living room. They were too busy here."

Two new suspects had just arrived, both summoned by the sheriff. They were Peter Darcy, a squeamish man with a sly look; and Donald Keswick, who was long-jawed and argumentative. Each became indignant in his own way when Zelda and Margo gave a detailed account of the conversation they had overheard, with its threats against Carter Mycroft.

"Maybe I did say I'd like to kill Mycroft," admitted Darcy, "but that was when I was here the last time, before Keswick closed his deal with Mycroft. Today we just decided it had all worked out, so we didn't stay long enough to say very much at all."

"And the last time I said some things just to humor Darcy," declared Keswick. "I didn't want the deal to fall through."

Sheriff Blassingame studied the two men, then glanced toward Margo and Zelda. He stroked his chin, as though sure that one pair must be lying; but which pair was the question. Still nonplussed, he asked:

"What do you think, Mr. Cranston?"

"I think we should go into the library," decided Cranston, "and reenact the full scene."

In the library, Cranston put the two men in the alcove and had them talk while Zelda and Margo went around through the hallway to listen from the storage closet. He pressed the switch that turned on the alcove light. On sudden inspiration, he said, "Listen!"

As witnesses listened, hushed, two voices came from a loudspeaker – Darcy's voice and Keswick's – repeating the very dialog that Margo and Zelda had described in accurate detail. From an alcove shelf Cranston brought down a volume that didn't quite match the others there. When he opened it, the witnesses saw a revolving tape recorder, with a wire connecting it to a wall socket actuated by the alcove light switch.

Darcy and Keswick were on their feet storming at each other.

"You fixed this up to fix me," accused Darcy. "You taped that talk we had the other day and played it again today, so people would hear me threaten to kill Carter Mycroft and take it seriously!"

"You're the one who framed it!" countered Keswick. "Run it over again, Mr. Cranston, and hear Darcy bait me when I only tried to humor him."

Margo Lane arrived with Zelda Mycroft to listen with the other witnesses, while Lamont Cranston gave his answer.

"No more evidence is needed," declared Cranston, calmly. "All we need is to give the name of the murderer."

As Cranston spoke it, the same thought ran through the minds of Harry Vincent and Margo Lane:

"The Shadow knows!"

Who was the killer that The Shadow named?

CHAPTER VI

Nothing in Cranston's impassive manner gave the slightest clue to the name he was about to utter, so when he gave it, it came like a bombshell: "Tilson!"

Even the chauffeur was caught off guard so completely that when Sheriff Blassingame swung in his direction, Tilson was still staring wide-mouthed and flat-footed, unable to comprehend how his efforts to establish an alibi had failed. He could even have regarded it as a lucky guess on Cranston's part, but there were reasons why Tilson couldn't afford to stay around and bluff it out. Instead, he made a break for it, too late.

As the chauffeur dashed out through the living room, the sheriff was close behind him drawing a gun and bellowing "Stop him!" so loudly that a pair of outside deputies rallied to the call and flagged Tilson forcibly as he came out through the front door. By the time they were dragging him back to the library, Sheriff Blassingame had gone through Tilson's pockets, and from one he brought out a golden chain with a ruddy pendant. It was the original Rangoon Ruby, which the replica matched almost to perfection.

Tilson had found both the original and the replica in Mycroft's desk. He had taken the original, thinking that people generally were still unaware that Mycroft had purchased it. He had left the replica, because he knew that Huling had bought it for Mycroft and therefore would wonder why it wasn't in Mycroft's desk. Also, its presence there helped to support the suicide theory. But instead of hiding the genuine Rangoon Ruby in some place where he could come back and pick it up later, he kept it with him, so that he could take off for parts unknown after giving the sheriff smart answers to routine questions.

All that and more came out in Tilson's confession, which followed as a matter of course. One of Tilson's various duties was to carry the mail to and from the nearest post office. That had enabled him to open outgoing letters, read them, and type new envelopes for them. Often, he could open incoming letters and reseal them. Through this mishandling of Mycroft's correspondence, he had learned about his employer's secret purchase of the Rangoon Ruby and had even been sent to an airport to meet the men who brought the gem and closed the deal with Mycroft.

Tilson had also intercepted Tolliver's confidential catalog long enough to note that it listed the replica of the famous ruby, so when he took Brent Huling into New York, stopping first at Mycroft's bank and then at Tolliver's store, it was easy for Tilson to guess what the trip was about. He admitted, too, that while driving the limousine, he had picked up unguarded conversations between passengers to supplement facts he already knew; and that his willingness to do odd jobs about the mansion had helped him gain still more information.

All that fell into line once Tilson was actually proved to be the murderer, but how The Shadow had called the turn from the beginning and thereby built up a solid case against Tilson was still something of a puzzle. It was not until he was riding into New York with Harry Vincent and Margo Lane that The Shadow analyzed his findings for their benefit. Still in the guise of Lamont Cranston, he proceeded thus:

"The whole key to Tilson's guilt was that he was admittedly the last person to go up to the study while Carter Mycroft was still alive. Knowing that Cragmore would confirm that fact, Tilson suggested that Cragmore go up and ask Mycroft about whether he was to help unload the file cabinets. That proved that Cragmore could have gone up and seen Mycroft alive after Tilson had; but Tilson was sure that Cragmore wouldn't bother Mycroft over such a minor matter.

"Next, Tilson later induced Zelda to go up and knock at Mycroft's door after he was dead. Since she went up alone, her story that her uncle hadn't answered was unsubstantiated, making her a suspect. Very neat of Tilson, pitting one against the other, for in weighing the two, people who believed one were apt to discredit the other, which made them forget Tilson and overlook the fact that he was the person who had instigated both."

As The Shadow paused, both Harry and Margo agreed that they, too, had overlooked the sly but subtle part that Tilson had played. But there was another angle that had helped sway Margo.

"Looking back on it, Lamont," she said, "I can't see how Tilson dared to take the risk of murdering Mycroft, with only Cragmore to pin it on. Sending Zelda up to the study was a lucky afterthought on his part."

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"But he had a lucky forethought, too," came Cranston's reminder. "Tilson, like every calculating murderer, had been watching for a clincher that would make it safe to strike. He saw Huling's pipe lying somewhere in the living room and that was his inspiration. He took it upstairs with him, found his chance to snatch the gun from the desk drawer, and shot Mycroft in a manner that he had often rehearsed. Then he left the pipe to incriminate Huling."

"Which it practically did, in my opinion," put in Harry. "Huling's claim that he might have left the pipe in the study sounded very ridiculous to me."

"It would have been more ridiculous for Huling to take the pipe along with him if he intended to commit a murder," stated Cranston. "Huling simply wanted to avoid further questions, knowing that his position might be shaky if we learned that he bought the replica for Mycroft."

That analysis brought a nod from Harry, who promptly voiced another question:

"How did Tilson happen to draw Darcy and Keswick into it?"

"In fixing things around the house," came Cranston's answer, "he obviously saw a chance to plant the hidden recorder in the alcove, a place where visitors often chatted together. When he heard that incriminating tape, he had his chance to run it as a playback for the benefit of Pauline Dotha, or any other snoopers. That brought two more suspects into the case and was another reason why Tilson struck when he did. But from one viewpoint, that clinched the case against Tilson."

"From whose viewpoint?" queried Margo.

"From mine." Cranston's tone had just the slightest trace of The Shadow's. "When I was flying over Mycroft Manor, I saw two cars driving out by one driveway while a station wagon was coming up to the portico. And I saw you, Margo, finishing your horseback ride with Zelda. Remembering all that, I realized later that you couldn't have overheard Darcy and Keswick talking together, because both had already left. So I looked for a recorder, knowing that Tilson couldn't have found time to remove it. What's more, I knew he had lied about Darcy and Keswick having talked that long."

Harry Vincent had a sudden idea and broached it:

"I guess we all felt that Pauline Dotha didn't know enough to be incriminated; but what about that chap Cobley? He might have been around the place much earlier; and knowing that Mycroft had both the genuine ruby and the replica, he might by some wild chance have blundered up to the study –"

"And murdered Mycroft while pretending to warn him?" came Cranston's interruption. "And then try to make it look like suicide? No chance at all."

"And why not?" put in Margo.

"Because Cobley would have shot Mycroft in the right temple before planting the gun. Never having met Mycroft before, Cobley was the only suspect who wouldn't have known that Mycroft was left-handed!"

THE END